

## OVERVIEW

You will facilitate, along with a few of your classmates, a book group with a small group of middle or high school students who have also read *Inside Out & Back Again*. The purpose of this assignment is to help you think about how people engage socially around books in non-academic settings, and what some of the differences are between conversations in those settings and those that take place in college classrooms.

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 1) Program and plan a public humanities project.
- 2) Gain deeper understanding of humanities through interaction with readers outside of academic context.
- 3) Consider critically the differing ways in which people engage with humanities texts.

## RATIONALE

Reading is often a solitary act—except in school, where you are often asked to read a book that you did not choose and respond in a variety of academic ways (class discussions, analytical essays, reports, projects, research, etc.). Book clubs or book groups, on the other hand, usually involve people reading books that they have chosen and then meeting to talk about them in whatever way they wish. Such gatherings move reading from a solitary act to a social one, creating a type of community that many people find rewarding.

The purpose of this assignment is to help you think about how people engage socially around books in non-academic settings, and what some of the differences are between conversations in those settings and those that take place in college classrooms. We also hope that this assignment will help you think about what it means to engage in the public humanities programming.

## REQUIRED ELEMENTS

1) **Group Plan:** Your group will submit a detailed plan (2-3 pages) for a book club meeting with middle or high school students. Your group plan should include the logistics of your meeting—where and when you will meet, how will you arrange the space, etc.— and a detailed description of how you will use the time. Will your session be discussion based or activity based? If discussion-based, how do you plan to get students talking? What kinds of questions will you ask? What aspects of the book do you most hope to draw students' attention to? If activity-based, what kind of activity? How will it deepen the students' experience of the book? If you need supplies, how do you plan to get them? Your plan should also reflect some of the key ideas and best practices of the public humanities (see below).

2) **Individual Reflection Essay:** After holding your meeting, you will explore your experience in an individual reflection essay (2-3 pages). For this essay, we'd like you to tell us about the actual book group experience. How did it align or not align with your expectations? What did you learn? Here are a few things you should make sure to include:

- An overall narrative of your meeting.
- Specifics: what was difficult? what was successful? where did the plans you made go well? where did they fall short?

- What you learned about talking about literature and ideas outside of a traditional academic setting.
- Any new insights or understandings about the novel you gained from the conversations you had during the book group. Did the conversation alter your understanding of the book?
- Details about a particular student (or a few students). How did they react, participate, engage (or not)? What did you learn from watching them engage (or not)?
- Details about a particular moment or part of the meeting that was illuminating for you in some way. Describe the moment, and then your thoughts about it. Why was it noteworthy or interesting?

## **PUBLIC HUMANITIES**

As you know, the New Commons Project is a “public humanities initiative.” This means part of its mission is to find ways to think and talk about the humanities with others in our communities outside of a school (or at least traditional classroom) setting. The public humanities involves a couple of key ideas:

First, **cultural works** (books, music, art, film, ideas) **belong to everyone**. Part of this project’s goal is to facilitate and enable public access to the kind of stuff UMF students learn about in their humanities classes. Another part of it is to bring cultural works, ideas, energy, and approaches that typically reside *outside* the university *into it*. The idea here is to solidify our sense of culture as something public that includes but extends beyond the university, and also to begin to break down some of the barriers that often exist between the college and the wider community.

Second, public conversations are different from academic conversations, and the ways that they differ will depend on the particular community you are talking to. A good public humanities project is geared specifically towards its particular audience. Some good questions to ask are: **how is a public conversation different from a class or a lecture in a university setting? Who will participate in this conversation? How do the set up and goals of the project reflect the people who will participate in it?**

Third, part of the ethos of the New Commons Project (and, in our view an important aspect of public humanities work) is that the conversations that emerge from it are a **two-way street**: this shouldn’t only be about people inside the university (ie, you) bringing the humanities to the public, it should be about creating a dialogue. **How can we make sure everyone’s voice is heard?** You might think, for example, about how the way a room is set up can create, on the one hand, the impression that one person or group of people have expertise and authority while others are there only to receive knowledge or information. How can you, as facilitators, provide helpful structure and starting points without closing down to what the students bring to the dialogue? How can you ensure that no one dominates the conversation?