**Defending Discussions: 1619 Project**

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Banned Books Symposium

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**Origin**

Heights Libraries’ 1619 Project Discussion group originated with the publication of the New York Times Magazine’s The 1619 Project on August 14, 2019.

The community was interested in both reading and discussing the Project. The library provided 600 printouts of the magazine, of which 200 were donated. The library provided these printouts free of charge, absorbing all printing costs. Local bookstores, churches and civic groups informed the community about copies available at the library. The idea of 1619 Project discussion group was proposed.

**Flexibility**

Typically, programs at Heights Libraries are scheduled 3-6 months in advance. The 1619 Project Discussion Group went from idea to program in about 3 weeks. It was therefore not included in the library’s quarterly program booklet, instead relying on flyers and word of mouth to promote the program. Expected 30 participants and 1 moderator. 98 people attended and a circulation staff member was brought in to help facilitate the large group.

**Challenges**

The programs attracted national attention on Facebook. Staff in the library’s marketing department were able to address comments objectively and without emotion. Only comments with inflammatory language directed at the library were deleted.

A participant also launched a challenge about the 1619 program, specifically focusing on John as discussion leader and advocating for the 1776 Unites materials, which did not meet the library’s Materials Evaluation and Selection Policy.

Library director and board were very supportive of the 1619 Project. The May 2021 discussion was titled ‘1619 Project vs 1776 Project’ and focused on critiques of the project.

As the Library promoted the 1619 Interviews that John’s done with articles in the community newspaper, additional letters continue to appear. These letters are focused more on the various debates around the 1619 Project and less around Library’s program. Though each mention in some passing fashion tax payers.

**Adaptation**

*Best Practices for Zoom Discussion Groups*(see appendix for full moderating guide)

* Schedule 1 discussion leader and 1 moderator
* Keep participants muted when not speaking and use settings so that they cannot unmute themselves
* Ask participants to raise their hand (or use other reaction) to be unmuted
* Chat messages sent to moderator only
* Share links relevant to the discussion with participants via chat
* **Establish ground rules ahead of time!**

**Lessons Learned**

**Return to the TEXT**. We are all skilled at book discussions and have experienced discussions that go off the rails. For instance, one discussion member wanted to talk about his legal work challenging school curriculum. I thanked him for his comment, but reminded him that school curriculum was not included in that month’s article packet and therefore would not be a topic we were prepared to discuss. This has worked with injections of Covid Conspiracies, January 6th, and elections.

**Diffuse**. There are various tactics to use to diffuse an emotional or personal attack. Identifying and acknowledging the situation then quickly jumping to a new topic. Having some language at the ready to use if another patron wants to engage after you’ve moved on – “we can circle back to this point if there is time at the end.”

**Redirect**. Restating and summarizing an off topic or problematic comment to bring the conversation back to the subject. Helpful to pick up on some small point they made and focus on that for instance a member once said in our discussion: “The Catholic Church started the Civil War.” I redirected by saying, “Yes, a lot of different religious organizations were active in Abolition movements.”

**Reestablish authority.** Mute quickly and mute often. Do no hesitate to boot someone from the Zoom. In person meetings, can be more difficult. But I have politely interrupted speakers, admonished disruptive behavior, and warned participants they may be asked to leave the discussion.

*Remain calm and professional – remember your reference training.*

**What about my library?**

The programming model Heights Libraries has used for the 1619 Project discussion group can be applied to a wide variety of programs. To apply it to you own library:

* Stay up-to-date
* Listen to community needs and interest
* Consider flexibility and nimbleness in programming – don’t just schedule 3-6 months out and utilize staff from a variety of departments
* Establish buy-in across departments and with your library’s administration and board.
* Go beyond the text, including reference curation, providing counterpoints, using other mediums, building partnerships
* Too controversial? Use another name or integrate into other programming.

**Contact**

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**Heights Libraries’ 1619 Discussion page:**[heightslibrary.org/services/1619-project/](https://heightslibrary.org/services/1619-project/)

This page houses all materials listed below, including discussion packets, links to interview videos, blog posts, and information about upcoming programs.