



Canada's Teen Reading Club

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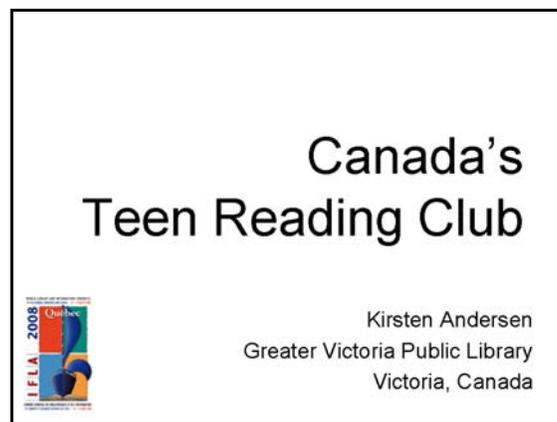
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Abstract:

Canada's Teen Reading Club is a library-based national online reading program for teenagers that promotes reading and libraries. The site features peer-to-peer book recommendations, discussion forums, scheduled chat times, and a creative writing section. The program is sponsored and administrated jointly by government, professional association and library partners. Librarian moderators from across Canada contribute to the site by previewing book reviews and moderating discussion forums. This presentation gives an overview of the site features, budget, privacy and safety concerns, and overall administration of the program.

Full Text:

Introduction:



Hello! It is very exciting to be here and I would like to thank the Libraries for Children and Young Adults Section of IFLA for giving me the opportunity to tell you about Canada's Teen Reading Club. My name is Kirsten Andersen and I am the Teen Services Librarian at the Greater Victoria Public Library in Victoria, on the west coast of Canada. Together with Sabina Iseli-Otto, a librarian at the Public Library Services Branch of our provincial government, I coordinate an online reading program for teens. We refer to the club as "TRC" for Teen Reading Club, and I'll use that acronym throughout this presentation. In short, TRC is a library-based online social network that connects teenagers who enjoy reading.



I am here on behalf of three major partners who make the TRC possible: The Ministry of Education, Province of British Columbia; the British Columbia Library Association, a provincial-level professional association, and my home library in Victoria.

The provincial Ministry of Education has a division called the Public Library Services Branch, which is the body that coordinates and oversees all provincial library initiatives including TRC. The Public Library Services Branch provides staff support and funding for the program.

Overview:

Overview

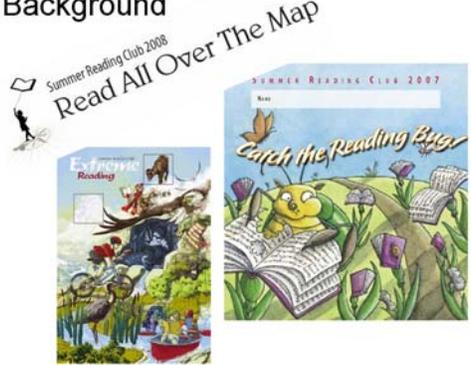
- Background leading to Teen Reading Club "TRC"
- Introduction to TRC site features
- Cross-country cooperation
- Privacy and safety
- Looking back
- Looking forward
- Conclusion



Today I'd like to give you some background on how and why TRC got started and then I'll take you on a tour of the TRC website and what it offers. I will highlight the cooperation of librarians from many provinces of Canada and tell about how we all work together. I'll talk about how privacy and safety concerns are addressed in the online environment. After that, I'll show you some of the themes for the club we've had in the past and then talk about some of the challenges we have and our hopes for the future.

Background:

Background



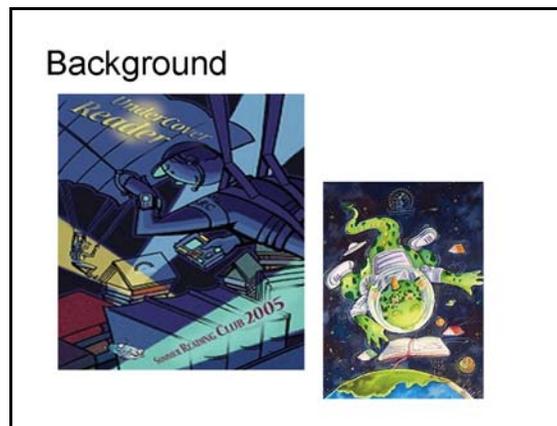
Libraries in the province of British Columbia has run a very successful summer reading club for children since 1991. Before that time, many public libraries offered locally-developed summer reading programs. It was decided that by working together, these libraries could create a better program and not perform redundant work in each library. As well, it created an opportunity to highlight original artwork from a children's book illustrator from British Columbia.

The club has grown immensely in the past 18 years, with a higher percentage of participation among children than in any other summer reading program in other

parts of Canada. By 1993, over 50,000 children participated in the province, and by 2006, that number had grown to over 82,000.

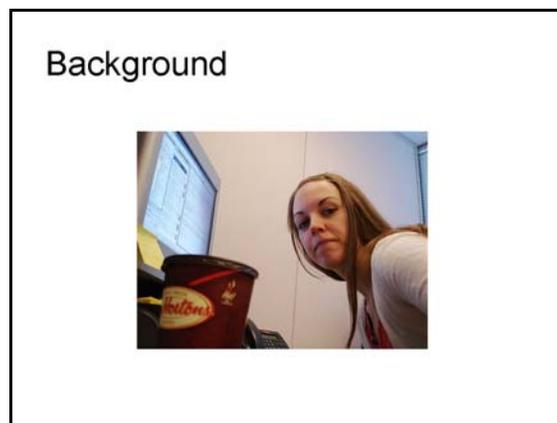
Each summer there is a different theme, and a different BC illustrator is contracted to create the club materials. Children enrol at their local public libraries, where the program can be adapted to local needs.

School-aged children maintain their reading skills throughout the eight weeks of summer and are better prepared to return to school in the fall. They enjoy the small incentives provided and may participate in special programs organized by their local libraries. Here you can see some samples of the materials from the past few years.



Here are some more examples of the reading materials from past years. Each child receives a “reading record”, a folder to record all the books he or she reads during the summer. There are matching stickers to collect each week and prizes to win.

The club has now been extended to pre-schoolers as a “Read to Me” club, encouraging parents to read aloud to their young children. This is all a part of the continuum of reading promotion programs offered.



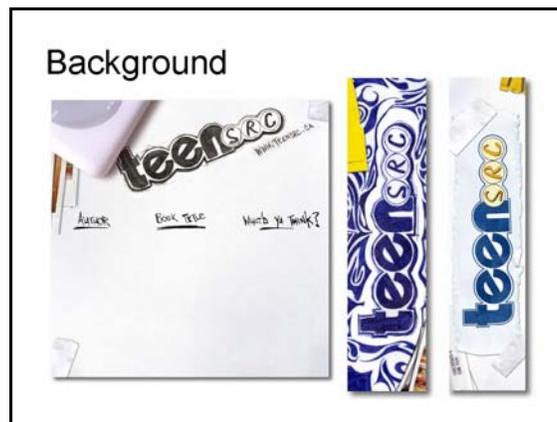
Despite the enormous popularity of the children's Summer Reading Club, we were aware that interest waned among older children, and we needed to offer something appropriate for teenagers.

We know that teenagers spend a lot of time online, and Statistics Canada research shows that about 95% of teenagers have access to the Internet either at home or at school (Statistics Canada 2001 7). In a poll of 15-year-olds, most said they use computers for accessing information on the Internet, communicating electronically using chat or email, word processing, and playing computer games (Statistics Canada 2003 20). 71% use the Internet at least a few times each week (Statistics Canada 2003 20).

Just by observing how teenagers use library computers, and as parents of teenagers, most librarians in Canada would agree that teens are online. We decided to go where they are and deliver library service that meets their needs in an online format that is familiar to them.

Similarly to the inception of the children's reading club, we wanted to avoid the necessity of individual libraries each preparing a program for teens. We knew that if we pooled our resources, the overall program would be better. As well, we wanted to create something online that smaller libraries could point their teen patrons to, even if they did not have financial or staff resources to offer teen programs or services themselves. Moreover, we knew that many teenagers in Canada are isolated by geography and may not find a reading community of other teens in their small towns and rural locations.

Jacqueline van Dyk, now the Director of the Public Library Services Branch, Province of British Columbia, and long-time coordinator of the children's program, began to look for support to create the online club for teens.



In 2005, the first Teen Summer Reading Club was launched. The initial funding came through the Province of British Columbia's Public Libraries Services

Branch and InterLINK, a co-operative federation of seventeen autonomous public libraries in the Lower Mainland region of British Columbia.

The total start up budget for the program was about \$20,000. \$10,000 was spent on the development of the website, contracted to a private web-development company. \$5,200 was spent on printing costs, \$1,500 for prizes and \$3,000 to contract a coordinator for the program.

The goal was to involve 1,000 teenagers that summer. More than double the expected number joined: 2,150 signed up across the province! They posted 5,200 book reviews and 14,900 threads about teen literature were posted to the discussion forums.

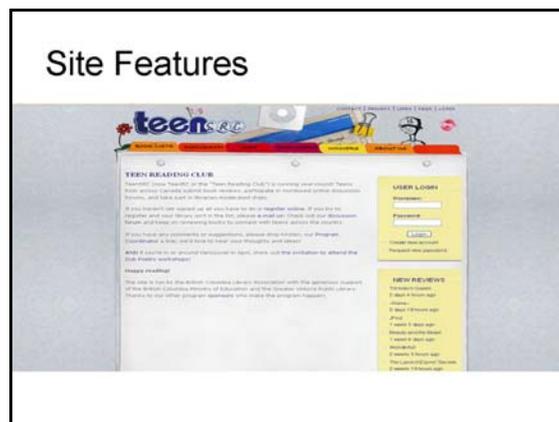
Here are some testimonials from teenagers who participated in the first year:

Kerri L., a teen who signed up through the Richmond Public Library wrote, "I just wanted to write a note and say that I absolutely love your program! I find it extremely helpful to pass the long days of summer and lots of fun too! It's always a joy to read opinions of others and new books to add to my "list"...Anyway...just a letter to express what I think of the TeenSRC program –IT’S AWESOME!—and thank-you for doing everything...keep up the great work!!"

Shazya S. from Burnaby Public Library wrote, "Yeah, I liked the Teen SRC because it's online so it is easier to do, because we spend a lot of time on the computer. I would like to have it again next year. Thanks for creating it."

Diana S. from Vancouver Public Library wrote, "I thought the TeenSRC was great since I still wanted to do it but was too old for the SRC for younger children and those books were too childish. I love to read, especially in the summer and now I can read and get a prize for it, definitely do it again. Thanks."

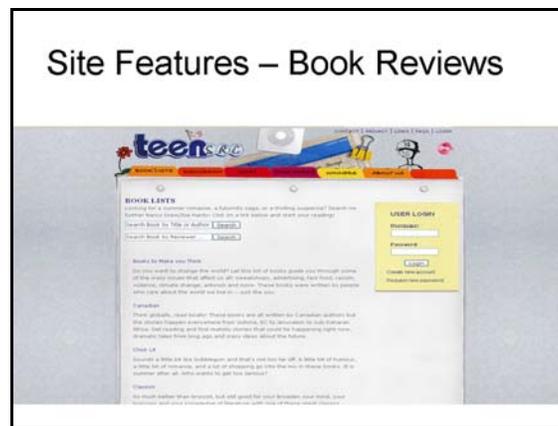
Site Features:



The Teen Summer Reading Club was held again in 2006 and 2007. Since fall 2007, the club has become a year-round project. Now we call it Teen Reading Club and it runs all year. Each summer there will be a special theme and new programs and prizes, while we continue to offer the site all throughout the school year as well.

The annual cost of offering TRC is about \$30,000. This includes coordinator staff time, the contract to a web development company, prizes and printing.

This is what the site looked like throughout the 2007-2008 school year (September to June). I will show you some of the features of the site and how the teens use it.



Because we know that peer relationships are paramount at this age, we wanted to create an opportunity for teenagers to recommend books to each other. We also know from research on reading preferences that teenagers don't really enlist librarians for book recommendations very often (librarians' recommendations were rated behind choosing a book based on personal interest, peer recommendations, author reputation, reviews, movie or tv tie-ins, and cover art) (Howard 39). Rather than fight this reality, we created a space for teens to find out about new books to read in a way that suits them.

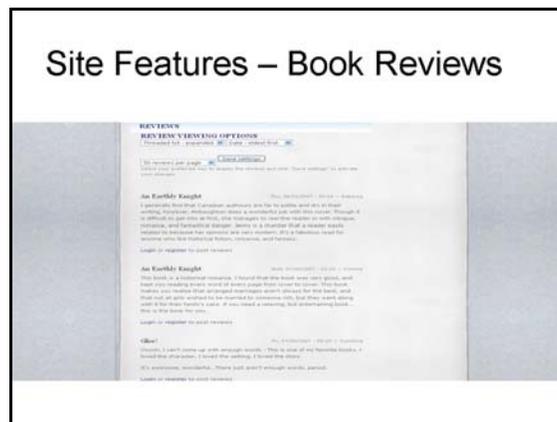
For the first year, librarians created initial booklists of reading suggestions in various categories. We expected the teens to read those books and offer their opinions. In fact, most teenagers wanted to talk about books they had found on their own and we had not planned for that. We quickly created a category called "Other Stuff I Read this Summer." This became the largest list of books, showing that teens are avid readers and they don't rely on us for readers' advisory. What we do well is create a library-based space for them to talk about books and reading.

We now organize the site so that teens can tag their book reviews under any of the many headings we provide such as "Classics", "Humour", "Goth" "Diaries and

Letter” and “Weepers”. Teens can search for reviews of books or browse the ever-growing category lists. Librarians still provide a starter list of titles in each category, and we know that teens will add hundreds more.



For example, if you click on the Canadian list, you get a big list of Canadian titles that have been suggested by teens, in addition to the ten originally posted by a librarian.



If you click on a specific book, you can read what teens have said about it. This is part of the peer-to-peer book recommendation that seems to really work. Each time a teen submits a book review, he or she is eligible to win a prize. These prizes are also very popular with the teens. Librarian moderators preview all the reviews posted by teens to ensure that they are descriptive, offer an opinion and do no spoil the plot.

Site Features – Discussion Forums



The next feature of the site is the discussion forums. These are asynchronous discussion threads where teens can discuss books and reading. Teens sign up for an account with a username and many add an avatar. For Internet safety reasons, we do not allow teens to use their real names online. The teens create screen names, many reflecting their passion for reading such as “book_worm”, “MangalsMyBoyfriend” and “Tom Clancy for Prime Minister (TC4PM)”. The librarians appear with “library” in their screen names so that teens know who the adults are.

The discussion forums are lively and well-used. Many teens use them occasionally and a smaller number of teens use them daily. The teens that frequent the forums seem to be different teens than the ones posting a lot of book reviews. This shows that we are effectively serving different teens in different ways.

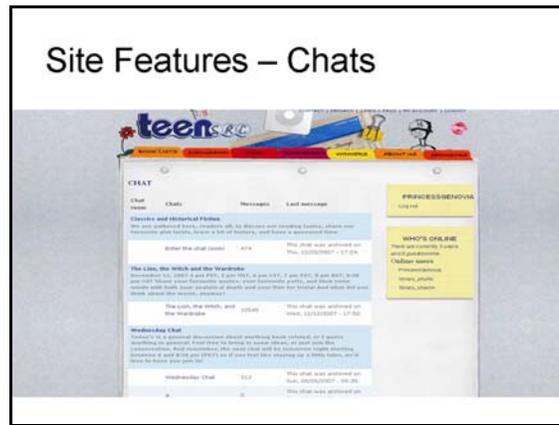
Site Features – Discussion Forums



Here is an example of the discussion forum, “Books to Make You Think”. Teens can start a conversation on any relevant subject here.

“Did you hear about the controversy about The Golden Compass?”. One librarian posted some book suggestions for the Chick Lit genre that subsequently got 280 views by teens. The moderators act in the online environment the same way they do in a physical library. They are not leading the discussion, but they are visible in the space and teens know they are safe there. The teens also know that the librarian moderators are there as resource people.

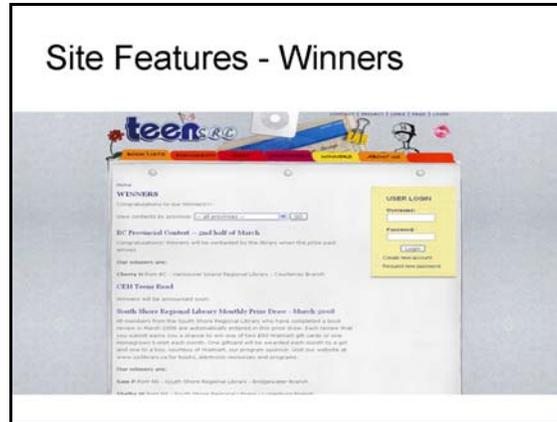
The interaction of the moderators and the teens keeps the librarians in touch with youth, what they are reading and watching, and reminds us how fabulous the teens are. The teens often thank us for our efforts, showing they appreciate us too.



Another feature of the site is chats. Chat is very popular among teenagers who use it to communicate with their friends. TRC offers chats focused on specific topics such as a book or genre, and the chats take place at a designated time. Librarians are present in the chats and enjoy interacting with the teens. In the summer of 2008, the first author chats will take place. Seven Canadian authors of books for teens have been contracted to appear for a 2-hour chat each. The teens will be invited to interact with these authors and ask questions. This program is the virtual version of an author visit to a classroom that enables rural teens to participate.



The Your Words section of the site is for teens to post their creative writing. Teens who wish to invite comments on their writing can post to the forums as well, and get constructive feedback from their peers.



Prize draws are conducted weekly throughout the summer and less frequently throughout the school year. Prizes are administered at the provincial level and mailed to winners' local libraries for pick up. Individual participating libraries can also conduct prize draws in addition to the provincial prizes.



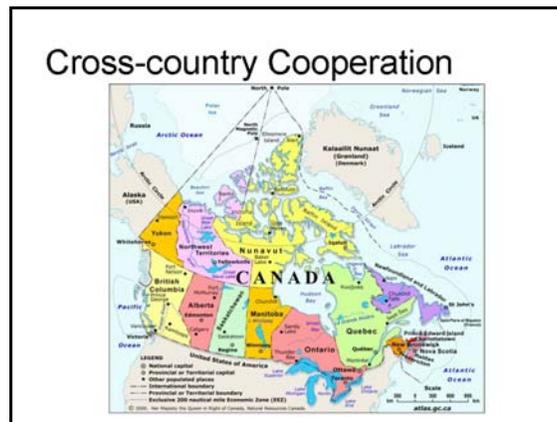
Prizes include Teen Reading Club themed items, and of course, books! Grand prizes have included ipods. While enjoyment is probably their primary motivation for reading, the teens report that they look forward to the prizes as well. In a recent informal survey of active TRC users, about 40% said they would post reviews anyhow, 28% said they post the reviews in order to be entered in the prize draws, and 25% lived outside of areas where prize draws were currently being conducted and said they would write reviews if it meant they could win a prize.



Like all good librarians, we could not resist including an annotated bibliography, so the “links” page offers external links to other websites that might be of interest to this community of teens.

The site also offers FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions), the ability for teens to update their own accounts, and a page to highlight the program sponsors.

Cross-country Cooperation:



The club started on the west coast, in British Columbia, and continues to be funded and administered by BC partners. However, libraries in other provinces have been eager to join. Provinces with some participating libraries include British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and the Yukon Territory.

Any library system or individual library in Canada is welcome to promote TRC, although program expansion has not yet been systematic or comprehensive. Teens anywhere in Canada are welcome to join, even if their local libraries are not currently affiliated with TRC.

Recognizing that many library systems do not have the resources to offer programming or services to this sometimes hard-to-reach age-group, TRC was created to meet the needs of teens in any area of Canada at no cost to individual libraries and with flexible demands on staff time.

Over 590 libraries are currently involved with the program in some way. Their levels of involvement vary. Some libraries may simply promote the club to their teen patrons. Other libraries may run in-house programs to complement the online club and conduct local-level prize draws.

Over 30 librarians are involved as the moderators. As described, these librarians preview the book reviews, and moderate the discussion forums. During the summer months when traffic on the site is much higher, a greater number of moderators are involved. During this time some libraries also hire students to assist with summer programming, and these professionals-in-training are also involved as moderators.

The cooperation of these professionals builds relationships between far-flung people in a sparsely populated country.



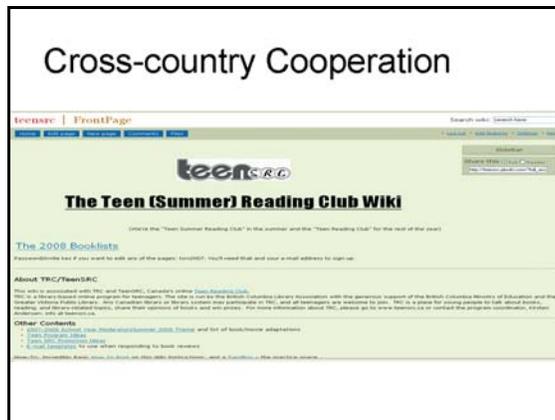
The Public Library Services Branch hosts a resource page for librarians. This site offers a manual for the moderators, downloadable logos, program statistics from past years and other information relevant to librarians.

Cross-country Cooperation



The teens' site's discussion forum also has two forums that appear when librarians log on, but remain invisible to teens. One forum is a place for librarians to discuss the ins and outs of moderating. The second is a "sandbox", or a place where the moderators can practice deleting threads, moving conversations to another forum, posting announcements and so on.

Cross-country Cooperation



Lastly, part of the librarians' resource page uses a wiki format so that librarians can easily edit, update, and contribute. This is a place where librarians can post their program or promotion ideas and exchange information.

Privacy and Safety:



The TRC privacy policy was developed at the provincial level and conforms to British Columbia's Freedom of Information and Privacy Act.

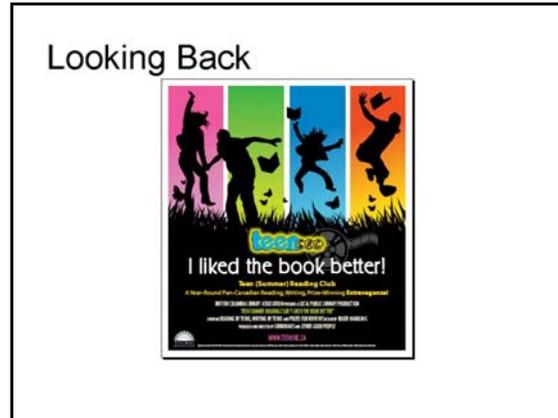
As mentioned, teens do not give out personal information online, and moderators alert teens if they are giving too much information, such as where they live or their real names.

Moderators also make sure that the site is not used for commercial activities. The teens are very good at reporting spamming or posts selling goods, and the moderators make sure this misuse is not tolerated and such postings are deleted promptly.

A terms of use statement is in development so that any teen creating a user account will agree to some basic terms of use for the site.

In our recent poll of the active users, 70% of the teens said they feel "very safe" on TRC, 24% said they feel "safer than other sites I visit", 6% said "as safe as other sites I visit" and none of the respondents said that they feel "less safe" or "not safe at all". In fact, one of the teens commended the moderators, writing, "There are library moderators who are active in the forums, and that is very helpful. Knowing that there are younger students here who are being looked out for is a good sign."

Looking Back:



Now I will show you some of the different summer themes that inspire activities, contests, prizes and library programs, as well as being a focal point for discussion in the club. This summer's theme is "I Liked the Book Better" referring to the plethora of recent films adapted from novels such as The Chronicles of Narnia, Harry Potter, The Lord of the Rings, The Golden Compass and Gossip Girl. The cheeky slogan invites conversations about how different texts appear in different formats and can be extended to manga, television, video games and many other formats.



These are some of the prizes offered in 2008: microwave popcorn, carabiners and lip balm. The images of the teens are used for bookmarks, with program information printed on the backs.

Looking Back



In 2007, the summer site had a travel theme with “Book Yourself A Trip”. This theme also lent itself well to promoting and discussing multilingual and multicultural activities and reading.

Looking Back



The summer of 2006 featured a beachy theme, “Kick Back with a Book”.

Looking Back



The first website ever was called “Summer Scrapbook” and looked like a messy desk with lots of doodles and the kinds of things a teenager would have around.



Looking forward, we hope to eventually see TRC serve all regions of Canada. To expand we will need to continue to recruit, train and support the librarian moderators. We also need to remember that high-speed Internet access is not available to everyone and plan our site accordingly.

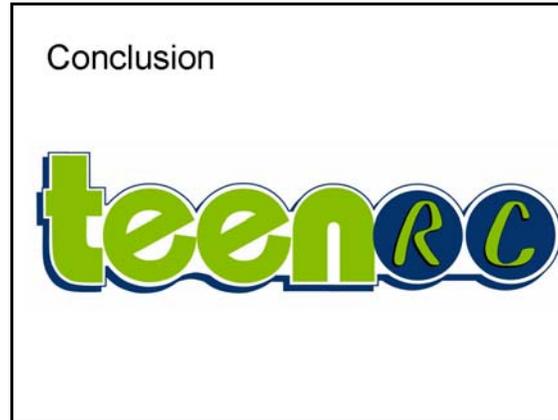
Another significant consideration is bilingualism for Canada's official languages, as well as the possibility of offering service in the numerous other languages such as Mandarin, Punjabi and Arabic, spoken daily by Canada's teenagers.

In 2008 we plan to include some teenagers as moderators in order to offer service that is by teens, for teens and recognize the enormous contributions youth can bring to the program.

Another future consideration may be creating a parallel or similar service for tweens, those aged 10-12. Currently this age group tends to outgrow the children's reading club before they are old enough to join TRC at age 13. We find that this age group tends to have different reading tastes than older teens and we believe that their participation in TRC will be a deterrent to older teens who enjoy TRC as a teen space. The needs of tweens may be quite different than teenagers, so a reading program for them would need to be tailored and developmentally appropriate.

In addition to constantly improving the basic functionality of the site, enriching content and revamping the design, these are all considerations for the future of TRC.

Conclusion:



The Teen Reading Club has grown and changed considerably since its inception in 2005. We now have over 3,000 teens who have signed up and they have made over 30,000 posts to the discussion forums. The most users ever online at once was 170 on September 8, 2007. This would be considered excellent turn out for any library program! Last summer 704 different teenagers posted book reviews and a total of 2,968 teens registered overall. Many small libraries had only one teenager registered, while the West Vancouver Memorial Library had 107 teens enrolled. Ages ranged from 13 to 18, but a majority of the site's users are younger teens. The most reviewed books were the Harry Potter books, *Twilight* by Stephenie Meyer, and *The Sisterhood of the Travelling Pants* by Ann Brashares. However, hundreds of different books were reviewed in over 4,000 reviews.

TRC is an example of a how libraries can offer services that build adolescent literacy using the tools that are most familiar to teens themselves. It shows how coordinated cooperation among many organizations can maximize resources and support the provision of library services to a target group in many areas. There is endless possibility for adaptations and additions to this online reading program.

Thank you very much!

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