

The Impact of Reading Circles on University Identity and Community Cohesion: A case Study

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Abstract :

This study examines the contribution of reading circles to university identity and community cohesion at Universidad Tecnológica de Altamira (UTALT), Mexico. The research emerged from an institutional concern regarding fragmentation among academic programs, uneven interaction across student groups, and the need to strengthen a shared sense of belonging. A qualitative design was used. Data were obtained from a focus group involving 30 students from different academic programs and extracurricular contexts, together with semi-structured interviews with students who had participated in reading circles and students who had not. The material was analyzed thematically to identify recurrent patterns related to university identity, cohesion across programs, interpersonal communication, institutional practices, and perceptions of reading circles. Results indicate that students understand UTALT's identity as young, evolving, and strongly shaped by day-to-day experiences. They also report meaningful divisions between academic programs and limited opportunities for interdisciplinary interaction. Students who participated in reading circles described them as spaces for cultural enrichment, critical thinking, dialogue, and contact with peers from other programs. Non-participants viewed the initiative positively in principle but emphasized that greater dynamism, thematic variety, visibility, and links to contemporary culture would be necessary to broaden participation. The findings suggest that reading circles can function as small-scale spaces of belonging and dialogue, but their contribution to institutional cohesion depends on inclusive design, sustained promotion, interdisciplinary participation, and support from university administration. The study offers a context-sensitive framework for improving reading-circle initiatives and for integrating them into broader strategies aimed at strengthening university identity and student connection.

Keywords: reading circles, university identity, sense of belonging, community cohesion, student engagement, higher education.

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I. INTRODUCTION

University identity and community cohesion are central dimensions of the student experience because they shape whether students feel recognized, included, and connected to the institution. Recent research consistently associates a stronger sense of university belonging with greater motivation, enjoyment, engagement, persistence, and well-being [1]-[4]. Belonging is therefore not a peripheral outcome of university life; it is part of the social infrastructure through which students interpret their place in the institution and their relationship with peers, faculty, and institutional practices.

The development of belonging is also affected by what happens beyond formal classroom instruction. Extracurricular and co-curricular experiences can contribute to student identity and social connection by creating opportunities for participation, shared purpose, and interaction across otherwise separated groups [5], [6]. This is particularly relevant in institutions where academic programs may operate as relatively self-contained communities. In such contexts, initiatives that enable students from different programs to meet around a common activity may contribute to both interpersonal connection and a more inclusive institutional identity.

At UTALT, the present study arose from an institutional concern that university identity was still evolving and that students experienced noticeable divisions among academic programs. The original project therefore examined how students described the identity of the university, how they perceived cohesion and communication across programs, how administrative decisions influenced student life, and what actions might strengthen integration. The qualitative material collected during that initial stage pointed to the need for accessible, shared spaces in which students could interact outside their usual academic groups.

Reading circles were introduced as an initial response to that need. Rather than treating reading only as an individual academic task, the initiative was conceived as a collaborative cultural practice in which students

could encounter books, exchange interpretations, discuss philosophical and contemporary issues, and interact with peers from other areas. Such a design is consistent with evidence that students' sense of belonging is relational, context-sensitive, and shaped by meaningful interactions and institutional environments [7]. The intervention was therefore relevant not only as a literacy activity but also as a potential mechanism for social connection and the collective construction of institutional identity.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the perceived contribution of reading circles to university identity and community cohesion at UTALT. Specifically, the study seeks to: (1) characterize students' perceptions of university identity and cohesion; (2) identify barriers to interaction among students from different academic programs; (3) compare the views of reading-circle participants and non-participants; and (4) derive practical recommendations for strengthening the initiative as part of a broader institutional strategy for belonging, inclusion, and participation.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 University Identity, Belonging, and Cohesion

A sense of belonging in higher education can be understood as the extent to which students feel accepted, valued, connected, and able to participate meaningfully in the academic and social life of an institution. Contemporary reviews emphasize that belonging includes relationships with peers and staff, feelings of safety and recognition, identification with the institution, and the perception that one's presence matters [2], [3]. This perspective is especially useful for analyzing university identity because identity is not produced only by symbols, history, or official discourse; it is also constructed through repeated social experiences in which students interpret what the university represents and whether they see themselves as legitimate members of its community.

University cohesion refers here to the quality of connections across groups within the institution. Cohesion does not require the absence of difference. Rather, it involves the capacity of students from different programs, backgrounds, and interests to interact, collaborate, and recognize a shared institutional space. Evidence on extracurricular participation suggests that shared activities can support belonging and identity formation, although benefits may be uneven if activities are inaccessible, insufficiently promoted, or oriented toward only a narrow segment of the student population [5]. Consequently, the design of community-building activities should combine openness, diversity, and intentional opportunities for cross-group interaction.

Belonging is also dynamic. Qualitative syntheses show that students can experience connection differently across physical spaces, social relationships, stages of study, and institutional contexts [7]. This means that a university may simultaneously contain strong local communities and weak institution-wide cohesion. The distinction is relevant at UTALT because students in the source study frequently described close groups within their own programs while reporting limited interaction across programs.

2.2 Reading as a Social and Dialogic Practice

Reading in higher education is often framed as an individual academic skill; however, it can also operate as a social practice. Afdal, Spernes, and Hoff-Jenssen showed that academic reading seminars can create environments in which students negotiate meaning, connect texts to prior knowledge, and develop academic and professional engagement through interaction [8]. From this perspective, the educational value of a reading circle lies not only in completing a text but also in the dialogue that follows: students explain interpretations, encounter disagreement, compare viewpoints, and learn to articulate reasons for their positions.

Recent studies of reading circles in university contexts support this dialogic interpretation. Kang, Lim, and Murdoch found that reading circles in English-medium university classes were associated with engagement, collaborative learning, and reduced apprehension, while students perceived the activity as useful and socially supportive [9]. Teng et al. similarly reported close relationships between community-of-inquiry perceptions and attitudes toward reading circles, particularly where teaching, cognitive, and social presence were well developed [10]. These findings are relevant to community cohesion because they suggest that the quality of interaction around reading can influence whether students experience the activity as meaningful and socially connective.

Book-club and reading-circle research also links collaborative reading with critical thinking. Rusiana et al. reported that book-club participation can support the exchange of ideas and the development of critical-thinking skills through sustained peer dialogue [11]. Ament, Tort-Cots, and Pladevall-Ballester found that academic reading circles in higher education can improve reading outcomes and are perceived as supporting both higher- and lower-order thinking skills when students receive appropriate scaffolding [12]. At a broader level, an international systematic review by Álvarez-Álvarez and Pascual Díez confirms the diversity of contemporary book-club practices and their recurring emphasis on reading communities and dialogue [13].

Collaborative reading can also be extended through structured participation and social annotation. Zhu, Shui, and Chen found that assigned participation roles can facilitate interaction and knowledge construction in college social-reading environments [14]. In the Mexican context, Flores-González identified pedagogical and social benefits of literary circles for extensive reading in virtual environments, including motivation, confidence,

and a technology-mediated social dimension [15]. Together, these studies support the premise that reading circles may function simultaneously as literacy practices, critical-dialogue spaces, and social micro-communities.

2.3 Reading Circles as Micro-Spaces of Institutional Belonging

For the purposes of this study, reading circles are conceptualized as micro-spaces of institutional belonging: relatively small, recurring environments in which students can experience recognition, voice, intellectual exchange, and contact with peers outside their normal academic networks. Their contribution to university identity is therefore indirect but potentially important. A reading circle does not by itself create institution-wide cohesion; rather, it can provide repeated experiences of respectful participation that students may associate with the university as a whole.

This conceptualization also highlights a design challenge. If reading circles are perceived as overly formal, academically narrow, or socially exclusive, they may reproduce the same divisions they are intended to reduce. Conversely, if they combine intellectual purpose with thematic variety, student choice, and inclusive facilitation, they may offer a low-cost mechanism for connecting students across programs. The UTALT study is especially valuable because it includes both participants and non-participants, making it possible to analyze not only perceived benefits but also barriers to participation.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative research design aimed at understanding how students interpreted university identity, cohesion, communication, and the role of reading circles. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the research questions focused on meanings, experiences, perceptions, and recommendations rather than on estimating population parameters or testing a causal effect. The overall design followed contemporary guidance for qualitative inquiry and research design [16].

The analysis reported here is based on the empirical material documented in the original UTALT project: one focus group with 30 students and semi-structured interviews with students who had participated in reading circles and students who had not. The available project manuscript does not specify the number of interviewees; consequently, the present article does not introduce an unsupported numerical value for the interview sample.

3.2 Participants and Data Collection

The focus group included 30 students selected from different academic programs and extracurricular contexts in order to obtain a broad range of perspectives on university life. The discussion addressed five main domains: (1) perceptions of UTALT's university identity; (2) cohesion and division among students and academic programs; (3) communication and interpersonal relationships; (4) the role of university administration and institutional policies; and (5) suggestions for strengthening cohesion and identity. Focus groups are well suited to higher-education research because interaction among participants can surface shared concerns, differences, and collective interpretations that may not emerge in individual responses [17].

Semi-structured interviews were then used to explore reading-circle perceptions in greater depth. Non-participants were asked how they understood the purpose and dynamics of the circles, what would motivate future participation, which themes or activities would be attractive, how different knowledge areas could be integrated, and how the experience might be improved. Participants were asked which elements they valued most, how participation influenced their understanding of different disciplines and their critical-analysis skills, how it affected their sense of community and connection with others at UTALT, and what changes they would recommend.

The two interview perspectives served a complementary purpose. Participant accounts provided evidence about the experienced value of the initiative, whereas non-participant accounts helped identify barriers, expectations, and design features that may influence broader uptake. The study therefore treated participation not as a binary indicator of success but as a source of contrasting perspectives on accessibility, relevance, and community value.

3.3 Data Analysis

The qualitative material was organized using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is appropriate for identifying recurring patterns across interview and focus-group data while preserving the contextual meaning of participants' accounts [18]. The procedure followed a reflexive logic consistent with contemporary formulations of thematic analysis [19], [20]: familiarization with the material, initial coding, grouping related codes, development and review of candidate themes, definition of themes, and synthesis into an interpretive narrative.

For the focus-group material, codes were grouped around institutional identity, cross-program cohesion, communication, administrative influence, and student proposals. For the reading-circle interviews, codes were compared across participants and non-participants and organized around perceived value, critical thinking, social

connection, thematic diversity, dynamism, visibility, and inclusion. The results are presented at the thematic level because the source material does not provide verbatim transcripts suitable for quotation-based microanalysis.

3.4 Scope and Research Integrity

The study should be interpreted as an exploratory, context-specific qualitative investigation rather than as a causal evaluation of reading circles. The available source manuscript documents the focus-group size and the interview structure but does not provide a formal ethics-protocol identifier or a numerical interview sample. Those administrative details should be added by the authors before submission if they are available in the institutional research record. No quantitative effect sizes are inferred from the qualitative findings.

IV. RESULTS

4.1 Fragmentation Across Academic Programs

Students reported noticeable divisions among academic programs. These divisions were described not only in academic terms but also in social and extracurricular interaction. Some participants perceived differences in attention and access to resources across programs, a perception that may reinforce competition rather than shared institutional membership.

The tendency to form closed groups within the same program was another recurring theme. Students recognized that these groups provide local support, but they also limit opportunities for interdisciplinary contact. At the same time, examples of successful collaboration across programs were mentioned, suggesting that separation is not inevitable and can be reduced when shared activities create a concrete reason for students to work or interact together.

4.2 Communication, Interpersonal Relationships, and Institutional Mediation

Effective communication across programs was identified as an important condition for cohesion. Students reported that limited communication can reinforce stereotypes and misunderstandings, while shared extracurricular activities can create more natural opportunities for interaction. Events, interdisciplinary projects, common spaces, and cultural or sporting activities were repeatedly proposed as mechanisms for strengthening relationships.

The administration was also viewed as an important mediator of cohesion. Students expressed mixed perceptions: some recognized institutional efforts, while others felt that decisions did not always reflect student needs or were insufficiently transparent. Participants emphasized equitable resource allocation, open communication, student participation in decisions affecting campus life, and institutional support for events that bring different programs together.

4.3 Perceptions of Reading Circles: Participants and Non-Participants

Reading circles were generally perceived as a promising response to fragmentation, but the two groups emphasized different aspects. Students who had not participated viewed the initiative positively in principle yet often imagined it as calm, serious, or insufficiently dynamic. Their interest depended on the inclusion of a wider variety of genres and themes, including mystery, action, science fiction, film-related topics, current issues, and other materials connected to contemporary culture. They also recommended a more relaxed format, clear communication of the purpose of the activity, and stronger promotion through channels likely to reach students.

Students who had participated reported a more positive experiential assessment. They valued discovering new books and viewpoints, participating in philosophical discussions, listening to interpretations different from their own, and interacting with students from other academic programs. They associated the circles with stronger critical-analysis skills, greater confidence in expressing opinions, and an opportunity to socialize beyond their usual peer group.

Participants nevertheless identified areas for improvement similar to those raised by non-participants. They recommended broader promotion, outdoor or alternative settings, more literary genres, and more varied formats such as thematic debates and discussions connected to current events or cultural trends. Thus, the difference between groups was not a simple contrast between approval and rejection. Rather, participants confirmed the educational and social value of the circles, while both groups converged on the need for greater visibility, flexibility, and variety.

Table 1. *Synthesis of the main qualitative themes and institutional implications.*

Theme	Evidence from focus group/interviews	Implication	Recommended action
Emerging university identity	Identity is perceived as young, evolving, and unevenly understood.	Belonging depends strongly on lived student experience.	Link institutional identity to recurring shared experiences, not only formal messaging.
Cross-program fragmentation	Students report closed groups and limited interdisciplinary contact.	Local group cohesion does not automatically create university-wide cohesion.	Use interdisciplinary cultural, academic, and extracurricular activities.
Communication and administration	Students request more dialogue, transparency, equitable resources, and inclusive spaces.	Institutional practices can either enable or constrain cohesion.	Create regular communication channels and support shared student spaces/events.
Reading circles (participants)	Participants value new books, diverse viewpoints, critical thinking, and meeting peers from other programs.	Reading circles can operate as small-scale belonging and dialogue spaces.	Preserve discussion quality while expanding cross-program participation.
Reading circles (non-participants)	The initiative is seen as positive but potentially too serious or monotonous.	Perceived format and relevance influence participation.	Diversify genres, connect readings with current culture, and use stronger promotion.

V. FINDINGS AND COMMENTS

5.1 Reading Circles as Micro-Spaces of Belonging

The central finding is that reading circles appear capable of creating small but meaningful spaces of university belonging. Participant accounts emphasize three mechanisms: intellectual exchange, recognition of different viewpoints, and contact with students outside one's normal academic group. These mechanisms align with contemporary belonging research, which highlights connection, acceptance, participation, and valued membership as core dimensions of the university experience [2]-[4], [7].

The UTALT results also resemble recent reading-circle studies in which collaborative reading supports engagement, social presence, and peer learning [9], [10]. The distinctive contribution of the present study is that the circles were not examined only as a classroom method or literacy strategy; they were embedded in a wider institutional concern about identity and cohesion. Their relevance therefore lies in the combination of cultural, cognitive, and social functions.

5.2 The Tension Between Intellectual Depth and Accessibility

A second finding is the tension between the qualities valued by participants and the perceptions that discourage non-participants. Active members appreciate serious discussion, philosophical exchange, and exposure to new ideas. Some non-participants, however, interpret the same activity as potentially calm, formal, or monotonous. This tension should not be resolved by reducing intellectual depth. Instead, the design challenge is to make depth accessible through varied entry points.

Recent evidence supports this approach. Reading-circle and book-club studies show benefits when dialogue is scaffolded, participation roles are clear, and students have meaningful ways to contribute [11]-[14]. At UTALT, this could involve alternating short stories, essays, science fiction, contemporary nonfiction, film-text pairings, debates, and student-selected readings. The objective would be to preserve serious dialogue while broadening the cultural forms through which students enter the conversation.

5.3 From Activity to Institutional Strategy

The focus-group findings show that reading circles cannot be expected to compensate for all sources of fragmentation. Students also identified common spaces, interdisciplinary projects, equitable resource allocation, communication with administration, and inclusive cultural events as necessary conditions for cohesion. Reading circles should therefore be positioned as one component of a wider belonging strategy rather than as an isolated remedial activity.

One practical model would be to organize a network of reading circles across different schedules and programs, with periodic joint sessions that bring groups together. Themes could rotate among literature, science, ethics, technology, art, sustainability, local history, and contemporary social issues. Such a model would align with evidence that extracurricular activities are most effective for belonging when academic, social, and informal dimensions are intentionally connected [5], [6]. It would also help transform the reading circle from a niche activity into an institutional platform for interdisciplinary encounter.

5.4 Implications for Practice

Based on the combined findings, five practical principles are proposed. First, participation should be voluntary but actively promoted through multiple communication channels. Second, thematic selection should combine student choice with enough diversity to attract readers with different interests. Third, facilitation should protect respectful disagreement and ensure that quieter participants have opportunities to contribute. Fourth, groups should intentionally mix students from different academic programs whenever feasible. Fifth, the initiative should be connected with other community-building activities, including interdisciplinary projects, cultural events, and shared spaces.

Evaluation should also be strengthened in future iterations. A subsequent phase could combine qualitative interviews with pre/post measures of university belonging, participation records, and indicators of cross-program interaction. Recent reviews warn that belonging is measured inconsistently across higher education [3]; therefore, any quantitative extension should use a clearly defined construct and a validated instrument appropriate to the UTALT context rather than relying on an ad hoc satisfaction survey.

5.5 Limitations

The study has several limitations. It is based on a single institution and is exploratory, which limits transferability to other university contexts. The focus group included 30 students, but the available source manuscript does not document the number of semi-structured interviews, the distribution of participants by academic program, or a formal ethics approval identifier. The source material also summarizes responses rather than providing complete verbatim transcripts, preventing detailed quotation-based discourse analysis. Finally, because participation in reading circles was not randomly assigned and no baseline/post-intervention belonging measure was used, the study cannot establish a causal effect of the circles on institutional identity or cohesion. These limitations do not invalidate the qualitative contribution, but they clarify its scope. The results should be read as a structured account of student perceptions and reported experiences that can guide the design of a more rigorous second-stage evaluation.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

This study examined reading circles within a broader effort to rethink university identity and community cohesion at Universidad Tecnológica de Altamira. The findings show that students perceive UTALT's identity as dynamic and still under construction, with day-to-day experiences playing a major role in how that identity is understood. At the same time, students report divisions among academic programs, limited interdisciplinary interaction, communication barriers, and a need for more inclusive institutional spaces.

Within this context, reading circles have made a positive small-scale contribution. Students who participated valued cultural enrichment, critical discussion, exposure to different viewpoints, and interaction with peers from other programs. These experiences are directly relevant to the construction of belonging because they combine voice, recognition, dialogue, and social connection. However, non-participants' perceptions demonstrate that the initiative will not reach a broader student population unless it becomes more visible, dynamic, diverse, and connected to contemporary interests.

The principal conclusion is therefore not that reading circles are sufficient to create university cohesion, but that they can serve as effective micro-spaces from which cohesion can be cultivated. Their greatest potential lies in being integrated into an institution-wide strategy that includes interdisciplinary projects, inclusive cultural events, shared spaces, transparent communication, and equitable opportunities for participation. If replicated across schedules and academic programs while preserving student choice and respectful dialogue, reading circles could contribute to a more collective and distinctive UTALT identity.

Future research should document participant characteristics and ethics procedures more explicitly, retain verbatim qualitative data, and incorporate longitudinal or mixed-method measures of belonging and cross-program interaction. Such evidence would allow the university to determine not only whether students value the circles, but also how sustained participation changes the quality and reach of institutional connection over time.

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