Cats, comics and Knausgård: promoting student reading at a UK academic library with a leisure reading collection

Susan Hurst Information Assistant Clifford Whitworth Library, University of Salford M5 4WT

s.hurst@salford.ac.uk

Dominic Marsh Library Services Manager Clifford Whitworth Library, University of Salford M5 4WT

d.c.marsh@salford.a.cuk

Dean Brown Information Assistant Clifford Whitworth Library, University of Salford M5 4WT

d.a.brown2@salford.ac.uk

Shona Forbes Information Assistant Clifford Whitworth Library, University of Salford M5 4WT

s.a.forbes@salford.ac.uk

Abstract

This case study describes the creation of a leisure reading collection in the Clifford Whitworth library at the University of Salford. It briefly surveys existing literature on leisure reading collections and looks at the growing interest among UK academic libraries in recreational reading. It considers the reasons for promoting reading as a leisure activity to students and describes the processes of selecting, purchasing and marketing the collection at Salford. It also considers possible future developments for the collection and the evaluation of the library's attempts to encourage a culture of reading amongst Salford students. The positive response to the collection suggests the development of leisure reading is a worthwhile activity for academic libraries to focus on and the study contains useful information for others who are interested in creating a similar collection.

Keywords: leisure reading; reading for pleasure; university libraries; higher education; student engagement

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Introduction

The University of Salford is located in the north west of England, just over a mile from Manchester city centre. It has held university status since 1967 and currently has approximately 20,500 students with about 75% of these studying as undergraduates and 85% studying full time courses (Complete University Guide, 2017). UK students make up 84% of the student body with EU nationals accounting for 5% and international students 11% (Complete University Guide, 2017). In keeping with Salford's industrial heritage, the university has sought to develop a distinctive model, combining practical and vocational work with research and 'pioneering exceptional industry partnerships' (University of Salford, 2016). The 2009/10-2017/18 strategic plan aimed to 'take the University to a top quartile position in the UK league tables' by 2017 (University of Salford, 2008). However, the university's position in UK league tables has not altered significantly in this period (The Guardian, 2017).

This case study looks at a university library project to promote reading to students as part of a wider strategy to enhance student attainment, engagement, wellbeing and, ultimately, retention at the university. There have been only limited studies on any direct link between reading for pleasure and increased academic attainment in adults, with more research needed to show the medium term benefits which might apply over the period of a student's university course, for example. However, the link in the case of children is clear (Reading Agency, 2015) and it makes sense to assume that reading widely as an adult can only help to develop key university skills such as critical thinking, comprehension, the ability to construct an argument and write well, just as in the development of

literacy in children. There is also good evidence of increased wellbeing for adults who read for enjoyment (Reading Agency, 2015). The authors believe, therefore, that the promotion of reading is an important objective for the academic library in supporting student development, wellbeing and engagement, especially since it cannot be taken for granted that students are keen readers or library users already. The leisure reading collection was one part of the library's reading promotion activity.

Literature review

Leisure reading collections within the academic library aim to enhance directly the mission of the university by improving student engagement and development (Gladwin and Goulding, 2012; Dewan, 2013). The majority of literature on leisure reading has dealt with collections in the United States, for example Bosman, Glover and Prince (2008), Gilbert and Fister (2011) and Dewan (2013). Gladwin & Goulding surveyed 57 UK academic libraries in 2012 with the majority saying that they did not have leisure reading collections nor did they promote reading for pleasure. However, advantages for the academic library of leisure reading collections can include increased footfall and circulation of stock and the raising of the library's profile within a university (Nicholson, 2012).

Various means have been used to create leisure reading collections, with the main debate appearing to be whether to create a new collection from scratch with the need for additional money for new purchases, or to repurpose existing stock (Gilbert and Fister (2011), Yoder, (2013) & Watson (2013)). In addition to budget, the main barriers to the creation of leisure reading collections appear to be concerns about mission drift and staff support. Library staff interviewed by Gladwin & Goulding (2012) felt the core purpose of academic libraries was to provide resources appropriate to support teaching and research within the institution, with leisure reading requests better dealt with by public libraries. However, staff attitudes can also be a driving force in establishing recreational reading collections. Watson (2013) and Slater and Kardos (2017) found staff attitudes to be very encouraging with much positive input into collection setup. Staff felt collections benefited their users by offering

a means of relaxation and stress relief, and saw them as a way to encourage patrons into the library and introduce them to new ideas.

Other UK institutions

Within the UK higher education sector, there is increasing interest in the potential benefits of leisure reading. Concerns that students entering university do not have a culture of reading, lack the necessary critical thinking skills and are ill prepared, therefore, for the transition to university study (Reisz, 2016) are joined by reports of increased mental health problems amongst students (Marsh, 2017) as potential factors affecting student retention. Research that considers the benefits of reading for pleasure is being harnessed, then, to show that reading beyond the confines of one's academic subject is linked to improved academic attainment, enhanced employability and to increased wellbeing. Nottingham Trent University library's website, for example, promotes reading as something that enhances the student experience in that it can improve wellbeing and ease the potential strain of university life:

'Reading for pleasure can lessen feelings of stress and depression, boost self-esteem and your ability to cope with difficult situations and the bonus is that you can do this using Your Library for free.' (Nottingham Trent University, 2017)

The University of Leicester library website also mentions the 'positive impact' reading can have on wellbeing (University of Leicester, 2017), as does Lancaster University library which, with a separate leisure reading collection, promotes books that offer a 'break from studying' (Lancaster University, 2017). Loughborough University quotes the National Endowment for the Arts' 2007 research report, linking leisure reading to increased academic attainment (Loughborough University, 2017), while Manchester Metropolitan University's 'Love to Read' site focuses on reading for enjoyment and

provides a link to the Reading Agency literature review (2015) on the benefits of reading for pleasure (Manchester Metropolitan University, 2017).

Why leisure reading at Salford?

These and similar initiatives influenced the development of reading promotion activity at Salford. Data from the Society of College, National and University Libraries (SCONUL) showed that Salford students read less than their contemporaries at institutions of a similar age and with similar student numbers and taught subject areas. In addition, students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds make up more of Salford's student intake than the average in the higher education sector and this group has a higher dropout rate than average (Crawford, 2014). Among the many ways that students engage with a university, use of the library can be an indicator of academic success (Stone and Ramsden, 2013), so we were keen to think of ways to promote the use of the library to students.

A Salford library staff forum was held with around 40 staff in attendance. The attendees were then split into small groups and asked to come up with practical (and fun) ideas to encourage Salford students to read more and more widely. Staff were enthusiastic and within 20 minutes had generated 144 ideas. Following the forum, the responses were typed up and grouped under broad headings. Nine of these suggestions involved the setting up of a non-academic reading collection - for example, 'more popular fiction in the collections' and 'popular fiction on the ground floor'. It was decided to create three project groups, each of which would work on one the following strands: library hosted events; the promotion of the library's collections; and the new leisure reading collection under discussion here, as part of a wider attempt to engage students with the library.

Non-academic reading project

The aim of the leisure reading project was to create a collection which would promote book reading for pleasure amongst students, would engage non-library users and non-readers and would specifically include fun books that students might not expect to see in the library. A group of 6 staff volunteers was given some time away from normal duties in October 2016 to do the project, with the intention of launching the collection in January 2017. An initial budget of £5000 was approved for 2016/17 with £1000 allowed for each year in the future. It was estimated that this would purchase approximately 500 items in the first year, to include both fiction and non-fiction titles. A collection of popular science books, which had been purchased for the university's Manchester Science Festival promotion, was also donated to the project.

The project was launched under the name of 'non-academic reading', as a complement to an 'academic reading behaviours' project, which had been set up to enhance and increase academic reading at Salford. However, the title was felt to be unappealing to potential users and the alternative, 'leisure reading,' was chosen to market the collection instead. It was decided that the collection should be physically separate and it was originally proposed that the collection be located alongside the text of a Jackie Kay poem which had been inscribed on the wall as part of an exhibition in the library. Due to stock moves and ongoing refurbishment, this area was dark and relatively inaccessible and would have been a terrible location to launch a new service. An alternative location in a separate enclosed study space with comfy seating nearer to the entrance was decided on, which had the advantage of providing a relaxing reading room feel. Shelving was measured and put up in this area but a last minute switch saw the decision to use the most obvious space available rather than direct users with signs into a separate room. This final location at the entrance to the library was in a prominent position within the main library, immediately adjacent to the café. It was also decided that books would be displayed on the shelves without the usual Dewey class mark, in order to replicate more closely the experience of a book store rather than a library. It became clear that there was a need to balance a strong visual appeal to users, which played down the usual associations that library books may have for non-library users, with the need for library staff easily to

identify and shelve returned or stray books. Therefore, items were marked with a 'leisure reading' sticker, the first three letters of the author were used as a class mark, and a red or blue sticker was also added during processing to distinguish fiction titles from non-fiction. This split the collection in a way which would make sense to users and allow them to browse a small number of shelves easily but avoided the problem of having separate display sections for each of many genres, which might complicate shelving.

Book selection

There was discussion about which criteria should be used to select books. One suggestion was that only books published within the previous 12 months should be purchased. The idea of creating a completely contemporary collection was that it would make for a distinctive selection; it would also limit the available material to choose from in a rational way; and it would give the leisure collection a purpose and brand identity which differentiated it from existing material in the main collection. This was appealing given that academic libraries already have plenty of books which could be considered general reading material but which are difficult to locate by browsing because of the sheer number of titles (Dewan, 2013). However, the fact that the budget provided most of the money in the first year, with lesser amounts available to update the collection in future, meant that a more flexible approach was adopted. The intention, then, was to prefer newly published material but not to have an arbitrary focus on 2016 and, instead, to allow other factors to influence the choice. This meant, for example, that a long running crime or science fiction series of books was purchased complete, even if the first volume had been published some years' ago and that the first volume of a series in translation such as Karl Ove Knausgård's 'A death in the family' (2012) or Elena Ferrante's 'My brilliant friend' (2012) was purchased to see if there would be any interest from readers in obtaining the later volumes. Initially, it was decided to choose only works published in or translated into English.

Student survey

A survey of students was used to inform the selection of books, to investigate the current leisure reading habits of Salford students, and to gain an insight into the level of interest for this kind of reading collection. The book categories used in the survey were chosen by looking at the most popular genres available on the Amazon online bookstore. The survey was distributed through online links, promotional emails and tweets, print copies in the library and through face-to-face interviews in non-library buildings on campus. 97 responses were received with a large number saying they were interested in the idea of a leisure reading collection. The results are shown in Diagrams 1-3.

In addition, students were asked to name a book they had enjoyed in the last 12 months and to suggest a book they would recommend for purchase. About 50 titles were selected for purchase from these suggestions. We wanted to add further titles from a wide variety of genres and looked at newspaper and bookshop bestseller lists, titles borrowed from public libraries in the past year (British Library, 2016) and personal choices made by library staff on the project team. Staff with a particular interest in horror or fantasy fiction, for example, recommended suitable titles. In order to ensure a good selection of contemporary titles, books nominated for prizes such as the William Hill Sports Book of the Year, Booker prize, Pulitzer prize, Edward Stanford Travel Writing prize and the Baillie Gifford prize for non-fiction in 2016 were also added. It was decided to include a section of books about Manchester and Salford, (which would be good for creating displays and promoting the library to new students) and to add titles from non-fiction, which included everything from cookery and DIY to political biography, football and fitness. Crime, fantasy, science fiction, horror, graphic novels and general fiction were the other genres chosen. A classics category transmuted into modern and 'alternative' classics, including authors such as JG Ballard, Charles Bukowski, Haruki Murakami and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Later additions also included celebrity biography books, chosen specifically to appeal to non-library users/non-readers. These featured subjects including Katie Price, Ronnie O'Sullivan, Jamie Vardy, Rylan Clark-Neal and Lena Dunham.

Promotion

In order to create maximum impact, it was decided to wait until most items were received before launching the collection as a whole in the last week of the Spring term. This meant having to find room to store several hundred books for a few weeks but allowed for a launch event on a large enough scale to create interest amongst staff and students. The location chosen for the launch was perfect for attracting the attention of students but the final location of the collection was uncertain because the whole of the library's ground floor was scheduled to close for a 6 months' refurbishment period shortly after the collection's launch.

The collection was launched with coloured bunting hung over the four new bays of shelving which were flanked by two armchairs. As many items as possible were displayed face-on to the entrance turnstiles. In particular, graphic novels and celebrity biographies were prominently displayed to provoke a response. Bookmarks featuring the slogan 'Take a break with a book' were placed on the shelves and given out to library users. 'Love to read' recommendation cards were produced, initially for staff use, with the intention that users would then be asked to use the cards to recommend books for other students. A banner promoting the idea that reading outside one's subject area helps with academic attainment was used at the entrance to the library.

Tweets from the University of Salford Library's twitter account (@TheLibraryUoS) initially showed pictures of the whole collection and promoted the launch day, but later focused on recommended titles or books which were relevant to current news items or television programmes. Promoted titles included a book designed to assist in testing your cat's IQ on National Pet Day, Tim Peake's pictures from the International Space Station to 'take a break' from Brexit on the day Article 50 on leaving the European Union was triggered, and books about Manchester City, Manchester Oddities and the Hacienda were promoted at vacation time under a 'get to know the Manchester neighbours' tag. The 'Take a break with a book' theme was also later tied in with our promotion of library services in

the exam season, so that we promoted leisure reading as a relaxing alternative to the stresses of academic work. A further promotion was planned for the start of the new academic year.

Evaluation

Internal Processes

As well as outcomes related to the use and benefits of the collection, there were also outcomes related to the way the project was run. All elements of the project were carried out by staff on the project team, with guidance from relevant teams in the library. This had two discrete effects. Firstly, there were delays. It was found that the usual acquisitions process was not sufficiently flexible to accommodate the rather different requirements of a one off project. As project staff were carrying out unfamiliar processes to buy an unusually large number of books at once, training and additional time were needed. There were associated problems of access rights to systems for purchasing and cataloguing. New processing materials needed to be ordered and shelf ready suppliers had some problems with the changed requirements. Some Dewey class marks were imported onto catalogue records, for example, causing potential confusion for users in directing them from the library catalogue to a location in the main collection rather than the leisure reading section. These errors were amended as books were receipted but it was assumed that most users would browse the shelves to find books rather than discover them on the catalogue. Some titles were actually reserved by users before arrival, though, suggesting that users are likely to search for favourite subjects on the library catalogue, even prior to the establishment of a leisure reading collection. New features on the Primo library search system, including a mapping facility which located items on the shelf for users and an electronic bookshelf, which displayed pictures of the covers of books in shelf order on either side of the selected title on the catalogue, did help facilitate electronic browsing.

Secondly, the staff involved learnt new skills, both practical skills relating to (library management) systems and (collection management) processes, as well as softer skills: cooperation across teams; following through a process from beginning to end; and influencing colleagues by persuading non-project staff to carry out tasks for them.

Use and benefits

The stated purpose of the leisure reading project was to enhance student attainment, engagement, wellbeing and retention at the university. The evaluation of the success of this is a longer term ambition. First, we will need to consider whether the leisure reading collection has created either *new* library users or *more frequent* library users. This will be possible by looking at trends in library use amongst users of the collection and will be done after the collection has been in existence for a complete academic year.

At this stage – two months into the life of the collection - preliminary evaluation showed that in the first seven weeks there were 352 issues of the 578 books. This figure represents a good level of interest, especially since three of these weeks covered the Easter vacation period. Feedback from staff and students was positive, including comments such as: 'a lovely collection of interesting books'; 'great choice of books'; 'collection looks great'; 'lots of interest in this'; 'a great idea', although there was some criticism of the celebrity biography choices. There was also confirmation that the 'take a break' theme was appreciated with one student commenting that 'sometimes I'm sick and tired of reading law books and that [leisure reading] section is so good'. It was felt that, in the longer-term, promotion of the collection to new students who had not borrowed from the library during the first few months of their course could be trialled.

Future

Just under 400 titles were purchased, which was fewer than originally planned, since it was decided to leave some money to make final acquisitions depending on which books attracted the strongest user response. It was also intended that future additions would be made to the small children's science section we already had, so that there were some general books for children who came into the library with student parents. Ideas for the future include taking books out of the library with a stall promoting 'Books for the Beach' after the exam period and the possibility of collaborating with local public libraries on a leisure reading collection.

Conclusion

The ultimate goal of improving student engagement and retention will be judged in the longer term at a university wide level. However, the role of the academic library in student engagement has been well documented with academic interventions such as information literacy and induction support, plagiarism prevention and study skills programmes all implemented by academic libraries, together with initiatives which support the transition from college to university for prospective and new students (Hurst, 2017). These interventions to support engagement and retention have become increasingly important as academic libraries seek to demonstrate value to their institutions. If it is accepted that reading widely develops critical thinking and the 'development of skill sets that support academic learning' (Mahaffy, 2009), then the promotion of purely academic skills and training should be enhanced by non-academic interventions, such as the promotion of leisure reading, as part of a strategy to foster and develop a reading culture at university. In addition, the wider benefits reported by adults of reading for pleasure (Reading Agency, 2015) such as increased wellbeing and reduced stress can also be important factors to promote when attempting to engage students successfully with university life and work.

Bosman, Glover and Prince's 2008 study found that the promotion of reading for pleasure could change student perceptions of the library. Traditionally the library may have been a place of stress and anxiety, but promoting relaxation in the form of reading for pleasure could encourage both a

new use of the library and a new library identity. We hoped that promoting reading as an enjoyable activity and the library as a place of pleasure, which has fun promotions to attract students, would encourage contacts between the university and the student. Thomas (2012) reports that academic interventions are key in encouraging a sense of student belonging but also that the more engaged students are with an institution, the more likely they are to complete their studies. It could be argued that all positive contacts can be beneficial in that future requests for help are made easier for the individual to imagine and, therefore, engagement is easier to develop for the institution. In a student focus group on another subject, several students expressed their surprise and pleasure at seeing the leisure reading collection appear in the library, and at its unexpected selection of books, suggesting that the library is being successfully promoted through the leisure reading collection. The initial high level of usage and interest in our collection indicates that it is possible to enhance student engagement through the promotion of reading and, therefore, that extra-curricular activities like leisure reading can be part of promoting a sense of student belonging at university.

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