Library Display 2.0: Evolving from Monologue to Dialogue

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Abstract

Generally created by individual librarians and anchored to a physical space, library displays are often static, limited, and fleeting. However, these displays can evolve into wider, more affective, multi-dimensional, 21st century, virtual spaces by incorporating collaborative discourse between multiple librarians, by reaching out to the community for content, and by using technological tools, such as email, Google Drive, Google Images, QR codes, and social media. This paper presents a case study of the life of a library display from inception through execution. By pooling the skills, experiences, and stakeholder networks of two librarians and an MLIS intern, the library’s December display highlighting items from the juvenile collection evolved into an engaging third space that allowed for greater interaction between the library and various campus communities and resulted in a 75% increase in the circulation of the juvenile collection. Seeking and incorporating the input of various stakeholders in the creation and voice of the display builds an audience for the display alongside the display itself, and creates a richer, wider, more inclusive community dialogue where all voices are valued and heard.
Library Display 2.0: Evolving from Monologue to Dialogue

Library displays offer an opportunity to market library collections and may use ideas or techniques pulled from the business sector with the purpose of increasing circulation (Jacobson, 2012; McPhie & Wannerton, 2014). In academic libraries, displays serve an even more distinctive purpose as they offer opportunities for campus outreach, the promotion of inclusivity, and the engagement of the curiosities of their diverse user communities (Maloney, 2012; Mitchell & Zwemer, 2000; Reece, 2005). In addition to an academic library display’s appeal to the intellectual considerations of its campus community, an effective exhibit needs to also move both the heart and the perception to create an active rather than passive connection with the user (Bowen & Roberts, 1993). To that end, displays offer the potential to be transformed into third spaces which contain, uplift, and value the various campus cultures of students, faculty, and staff to promote engagement and interaction, which thus connects the community with the library (Elmborg, 2011).

While the purpose behind library displays is clear and fits well within the service orientation of the profession, most displays tend to be static presentations of materials in fixed and sometimes inaccessible locations. This can prevent the content of the displays from truly being effective as a community outreach tool or from offering the opportunity to better engage with the diverse patrons that may frequent a particular library. The inclusion of technological components as a part of library displays presents a possible solution for elevating the library display to a more dynamic and interactive representation of the materials. One such avenue for moving displays to an online environment is through the creation of a web page of past displays where display content is digitized with a color scanner and linked to a library’s home page (Aloi,
2007). While such an approach offers great potential, it is still rooted in the virtual space of the library itself.

Another approach to integrating technology as a way to enhance library displays involves the use of Quick Response (QR) barcodes linked to social media and library services (Baker, 2010). The codes are read from any QR-enabled device, including most smartphones, and linked to a collection of materials that can include a Flickr image display, an electronic sign-up form for community services, or a record in the library catalog.

The use of social media and other technological sources is another method of widening a display’s scope, audience, and exposure, allowing it to reach out farther for an interactive connection with more of the library’s users. And as it reaches out farther, the display’s emotional affect is technologically increased by the wider inclusion of “not just textual documents but also objects, images, sounds, and everything that falls within the range of experience and perception” (Bowen & Roberts, 1993, p. 409). In particular, Pinterest has been used as a way to share historical collections and to create collaborative spaces for patrons (Clark, 2012). With the use of technology, displays have an increased power to emotionally transport a user to a different time, place, and space. A digital third space can be fostered where the patron, much like a business customer, feels uplifted, connected, welcomed, and valued (Elmborg, 2011). Since the community culture determines this space, tuning in to it can spur more intentional, community involved displays. (Elmborg, 2011).

At the Gregg-Graniteville Library, displays are created monthly and arranged in a cabinet directly inside the main entrance. Librarians rotate the task monthly, and each librarian conventionally conceives and creates each month’s display as a solo effort. Beginning in 2013, each December’s display cabinet has featured materials from the juvenile book collection, which
consists of reading materials for grades PreK-12. Unlike at a public library where such books are primarily used by children, the juvenile collection at the Gregg-Graniteville Library is instead used primarily as a resource for both education majors and student leisure reading. On a campus of higher learning, the children’s books juxtapose oddly with the stacks of deep, serious, historical and worldly knowledge that both feed and draw faculty and student researchers throughout the year. Thus, the central question when conceiving the December display is how to highlight the juvenile collection to students and faculty who, at the end of the semester, tend to be focused on the more traditional academic tomes needed to complete research and coursework.

Creating a Display from Emotional Affect

As part of her course of study, the LIS Graduate Intern from USC was asked by the Instruction Coordinator to develop an innovative concept for the December display to address these seemingly disparate purposes, and together they discussed ideas. The intern shared with the Instruction Coordinator how she had recently discovered the juvenile collection tucked into a far corner in the back of the second floor while helping an education student at the reference desk. As a child, children’s books, with their whimsical themes, colorful illustrations, and life parables, had propelled her toward a Bachelor of Arts degree in English, a career as a writer and teacher, and a love of literature that led, ultimately, to her pursuit of librarianship. She wanted to likewise stir and connect the hearts of the campus community with the juvenile collection. She sought to remind the campus, at a stressful, exhausting time in the semester of the surprise, delight, and rekindling of spirit that children’s books elicit. She also wanted students to have the opportunity to glimpse into the very real, very human lives of their often serious professors. By turning the display case into a third space (Elmborg, 2011), it could become a place to open up, interconnect, and engage various campus cultures. Rather than a conventional monologue from the library
collection to the campus community, the intern initiated a third space for physical and digital dialogue within the campus community itself.

With the initial concept approved, the LIS Graduate Intern and Instruction Coordinator discussed the idea of asking people across campus about their favorite children’s books, passages, or what they enjoyed reading with their children. The Graduate Intern was hopeful of a response, but she was also realistically aware of the demands on everyone’s time nearing the end of the semester. Whether the students, faculty, and staff would be in the mood to reminisce about their favorite children’s literature amidst the piles of research papers and grades to calculate, remained to be seen. The Instruction Coordinator recommended bringing one of the Instruction and Reference Librarians into the conversation to assist with campus outreach as this librarian routinely handled outreach and marketing for the library, and using the established communication channels would increase the likelihood of a response. Through collaborative discourse and pooling their various skills, roles, and perspectives, the three together fueled the creation of this display, thereby widening its reach and its success.

Email Outreach and Community Response

The Instruction and Reference Librarian crafted and sent the email to the campus over both the Faculty/Staff and the Student News lists. The email outlined two options for submitting book suggestions: either reply to the Instruction and Reference Librarian via email, or post suggestions on the library’s Facebook page. The response to the email was surprisingly immediate, with the first response arriving within eleven minutes. By the end of the day, eleven people responded. A second email was sent a week later, resulting in seven more responses. In total, library staff received suggestions for thirty-five books from eighteen respondents. The responses, all from faculty and staff, included childhood memories of characters identified with,
illustrations poured over again and again, the memory of the sweet voices of their since-grown children as they had memorized favorite books and took turns reading aloud, holiday traditions enhanced by books, stories acted out, vocations discovered, and the morals and early lessons learned that stayed with these professors throughout their lives. The intimate and detailed responses were astonishing, gratifying, and far more than expected.

All but one respondent replied via email. That one posted her suggestion directly to the library’s Facebook page. As the responses came in, the Instruction and Reference Librarian thanked each person and asked for permission to post their suggestions and accompanying memories to the library’s Facebook and Pinterest pages. All respondents agreed to fully participate.

Social Media and Digital Tools

The Instruction and Reference Librarian suggested that they expand the reach of the display to the library’s social media platforms, specifically Facebook and Pinterest, to create a digital component to the display. According to Severson (2014), “the easiest form of outreach is to get your collections visible in as many places as possible” (p. 15), and since the campus was going to be involved in the display’s content, it seemed natural to expand the interaction to the digital space. As the responses came in, the Instruction and Reference Librarian created a folder in her Microsoft Outlook account to collect the emails. She then created a spreadsheet in the library’s shared Google Drive and used that to input the following information: respondent’s name, suggested books with authors’ names, and memories. She also looked up each item in the catalog and input the call number so that when it was time to pull the books from the shelves, all the necessary information would be available and ready to print.
The advantage of using Google Drive to log the data, besides having all the information collected and organized in a central location, is that it is accessible by everyone involved with the display; whereas, the Instruction and Reference Librarian’s personal email account is accessible to no one but her. Although the use of Google Drive can bring with it various privacy issues, it was decided that the public and social nature of this display did not necessitate stricter privacy controls.

**The Physical Display**

When the Graduate Intern pulled the children’s books for the exhibit, she found that many of the older books were worn and jacketless. With a stack of old books lacking identifiable covers, and an enclosed space too small to open them all for viewing, the challenge was to find a way to present both the books and the favorite passages in a way that was effective and engaging. Google Images provided an ample selection of the original cover art for nearly all the books suggested. The older, original, rather than updated, versions of the cover art were chosen to exactly duplicate the images in the hearts and memories of the professors who suggested them.

The images were saved as jpeg files and then pasted into a Word document. Next, the Graduate Intern created simple text boxes directly quoting, word for word, the email responses, followed by the name of the faculty member quoted. A papyrus font was used to give the quotes a childlike impression in the absence of the professors’ child-voices. She used light blue and soft yellow as background colors for the text boxes because these colors are reminiscent of soft blankets and moonlight, which are the cozy staples of childhood and bedtime stories. Each book cover image and textbox was then enlarged to the size of one or two per page. They were cut out, and using black poster board to entirely cover the back of the display case, simulating a night
sky, and a big yawning cartoon-faced moon in the center, the art and quotes were arranged across the back drop. The title of the display in soft blue and yellow was “Favorite Bedtime Stories of USCA.” Some of the books were set open on the glass shelves in the center, but the books themselves were mainly stacked or propped up on the sides. The printed art and quotes were the main draw and focus of the display.

Figure 1. Favorite Bedtime Stories of USCA

Figure 1. Photo of the completed display.

The Digital Display

The Instruction and Reference Librarian posted all suggestions and quotes to Facebook. When the physical display was complete, the Instruction and Reference Librarian took pictures
and posted those to Facebook as well (See Figure 1) completing the circle of outreach, response, and display of user-generated content.

To further expand the display’s reach beyond the library space, Pinterest was used to create an attractive and engaging digital version of the text and visuals used in the physical display. Pinterest is a site that allows users to collect and organize visual bookmarks. Pinterest boards are created based upon topics or themes, and items posted to the boards are known as pins. The visual impact of a Pinterest board is similar to that of a collage, and it is functionally similar to a mood board used by a designer. Because Pinterest is so visually appealing, it is an excellent platform for building an additional digital version of the display.

The Instruction and Reference Librarian created a board in Pinterest titled “Favorite Childhood Books.” To create the display, she searched each item in the library’s catalog and clicked on the item cover. She then copied that URL to “pin” onto the Pinterest board. Once the new pin was created, she captioned it with “Find this book in the Gregg-Graniteville Library,” followed by the durable URL for that item so that when clicked, the user would be taken directly to that item’s record in the library’s catalog. Once that was done, she included the specific memory or passage of each item in the comments section as exemplified in Figure 2.
Figure 2. Favorite Childhood Books

![Screenshot of the digital version of the display created in Pinterest.

Results

Circulation

It is difficult to know if increases in circulation statistics can be attributed solely to the display. However, circulation numbers compared with previous years suggest that this particular display did have a positive impact on the circulation of the juvenile collection.

In January 2015, circulation of the juvenile collection was nearly seven times that of the previous year and nearly three times that of the year before (See Table 1). In addition, this increased circulation carried through the Spring semester, with Spring 2015 outperforming the
previous year by 75% and the year before by 57%, despite the fact that there were no changes to the School of Education’s curriculum.

The increased circulation of the juvenile collection in Spring 2015 is especially interesting when compared to the same time the previous year when there appeared to be no positive impact on circulation numbers as a result of the first display of juvenile items. One likely reason for this year’s increased impact may be the fact that outreach was employed to invite the campus community’s involvement in the creation of this display, thereby proactively building an audience for the display’s content (Severson, 2014).

Table 1

Annual Circulation Numbers for the Juvenile Collection during the Spring Semester

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>January</th>
<th>February</th>
<th>March</th>
<th>April</th>
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<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Circulation totals include both checked-out items and browsed items. Displays of juvenile items were created in December 2013 and 2014, but not 2012.

Social Media

During the library’s outreach efforts in the creation of the display, the library’s Facebook page gained five new followers, and the digital version of the display created in Pinterest drew another five followers. A total of six Facebook posts were made regarding the display, with each post reaching an average of 29.7 people. On Facebook, a post’s “reach” is measured by the number of comments, likes, and shares it receives. The number of clicks a post receives is
another method for measuring engagement. The six posts received a total of 178 clicks, with 71 of those clicks going to the final post—the photos of the completed display case.

**Collection Development**

In addition to promoting the juvenile collection, the creation of this display was also used as a collection development opportunity. Suggested books that were not already available in the collection or that were in poor condition were ordered. In addition, several requests drew attention to gaps in the collection, such as incomplete series, and those items were subsequently ordered. In all, 15 new items were ordered for the juvenile collection.

**Future Directions**

The response from the campus during the outreach phase of the display’s creation was extremely positive, and at least anecdotally, the effort was a success. However, more could have been done to increase and assess the display’s overall impact.

**Planning and Outreach**

During the outreach phase of the display’s creation, two emails were sent soliciting book suggestions, and several responses were received after each email. It is very possible that more emails sent earlier would have resulted in more responses, and therefore, more campus engagement. Also, after the display was complete, library staff received very little feedback from the campus community. An email sent promoting the completed display, especially to the respondents whose participation helped to create the display, may have resulted in helpful feedback and increased engagement.

**Quantifying Engagement & Impact**
While it is difficult to assess and quantify the level of user engagement with a display in an open access area of the library, it is not impossible. Following are some strategies that can be used to assess, quantify, and encourage user engagement with the display.

**Connecting users with the collection.**

Since one of the goals of the display is to promote the library’s juvenile collection, handouts describing the collection and its location in the library can be placed next to a display. Not only will this promote the juvenile collection, but counting the number of leftover forms can measure engagement. Extending this concept to the digital realm, a QR code can link users to additional content related to the books in the display, the juvenile collection, or even the library’s Facebook page.

One factor that hinders our efforts to connect users with the items on display is the locked display case itself, which blocks users from spontaneously engaging with the books. A posted notice directing people to the Circulation Desk to access items in the display case can provide a means of circumventing the obstacle of the locked case.

**Engaging the community in the physical space.**

The creation of the display relied on campus participation, and the potential for users to continue this interaction was carried into the digital space with the use of Facebook and Pinterest; however, this interaction was not extended to the physical space. One way this can be accomplished is by setting up a flipchart on an easel next to the physical display. Not only does this give users a means by which to respond to the display, but also the opportunity to contribute to the conversation and to share their own memories and favorite books, allowing the display to continue to develop and grow. Taking a count of the comments also offers the added benefit of giving library staff another means of measuring engagement.
Conclusion

Creating displays is often a solitary process. Due to ever-increasing workloads and even staff-shortages, the work of creating displays, which by their very nature are fleeting, may be deemed less important than other duties and relegated to a secondary status. In these situations, either one person is charged with creating the displays, or the staff rotates the responsibility. However, for library displays to have the most impact, they must appeal to various sensibilities. Taking a team approach to display conceptualization and creation can be a more effective approach for librarians and library staff to incorporate multiple perspectives, increasing the likelihood that the displays will appeal to broader audiences. Pooling the various skills, experiences, and networks of multiple librarians in designing and executing individual displays can create more effective displays that measurably increase circulation.

Finally, in the ongoing effort to market library resources to the campus, the campus community itself presents a substantial and largely untapped resource. Closer focus on soliciting and incorporating user-generated content for displays has the potential to increase circulation of highlighted collections and to connect the community with the library through the display. By involving users in the creation of these displays, libraries can build audiences for their displays alongside the displays themselves. At the same time, inviting input from students and faculty creates a third space in and around the library that connects campus stakeholders both with the library and with each other. Furthermore, displays offer the potential for new and innovative modes of promotion and assessment of user behavior and engagement in the physical, digital, and affective spaces.

Taking display creation from a sole monologue on the library collection, created by one librarian, to a dialogue both between librarians, and between the library and the wider
community, elevates a display beyond the physical space into a diverse chorus of voices and perspectives. Out of this grows a new 21st century space that revolves around the library by inviting, sharing, and above all, valuing the views, experiences, and knowledge of its audience.
References


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