

Getting some reading in: a collaboration between capital cities

Laura Ennis & Wendy Morris

Don't tell anyone but the acquisitions role isn't usually very sexy. Let's be honest the customary daily grappings with authentication problems, PDA, MARC peculiarities and costs per download don't get the average librarian's heart racing. Unless of course you have to buy, catalogue and label stock in total secrecy against a tight deadline. It's enough to bring out the spy in anyone! Add in a collaboration between University library services North and South of the border and you're cooking on gas. *The KU Big Read* was a pilot project started at Kingston University in 2015 where every new student was sent or given on arrival a copy of the same book. The idea was to make students feel welcomed and part of their new community - and to give them something easy to talk about with fellow scholars in their first few days. The scheme was a huge success with tremendously favourable feedback and a large number of students saying that it made Kingston feel special, encouraged them to enrol and helped them to engage with the University once they got there.

Getting started

In 2016, Edinburgh Napier University joined the project and both student cohorts read the same book – *The Humans* by Matt Haig. Previous research at Kingston had already concluded that students would welcome a scheme to encourage shared reading for pleasure (Baverstock, Bryars, Peel, Steinitz and Waddington, 2016). Academic staff on all campuses were encouraged to embed the book in their early weeks of teaching with surprising and imaginative contributions in areas as diverse as nursing and civil engineering. Support staff used the book for teambuilding exercises resulting in a joined-up feeling across the whole academic community. We found a common thread. Cheesy but true. There were author events at both universities and the two LRCs worked closely together to devise ways of using the book to recruit active library users and make information literacy more dynamic.

Getting the stock in

The espionage came as result of the shortlist. The entire university demographic had been involved in suggesting possible choices for the book. A recent survey of UK academic libraries had shown that over half do not have a dedicated collection to encourage recreational reading (Gladwin and Goulding, 2012) and we wanted to buck the trend. We weren't looking for a worthy tome but rather a lively page-turner which would re-introduce students to the benefits of reading for pleasure. A complex algorithm resulted in a shortlist of six titles – multiple copies of which were to be made available for loan in all campus libraries five minutes after it was all made official. Ordering, invoicing, accessioning, cataloguing and labelling all needed to be done in advance with no-one outside of the inner circle finding out in advance which books were on the shortlist. Much use of secret passwords and cataloguing at home at weekends resulted in a successful launch with no premature leaks to spoil the excitement. The rest of the academic community of course took this all for granted and didn't appear in the least surprised that they could borrow all the shortlisted titles from the LRCs as soon as the Vice Chancellor had made the announcement. Our users never appreciate the back-room shenanigans that have to go on to make these high profile things possible.

Getting the customers in

In Edinburgh, an online information space was created, using the Springshare platform LibGuides, with the aim of generating engagement with themes from the book and promoting the use of library collections. Themes from *The Humans* were identified and related music, literature and movies were drawn from the existing LRC resources. These were displayed visually to make them appealing to the reader and stable proxy-enabled hyperlinks were added to make the pages as accessible and user-friendly as possible.

As *The Humans* deals with themes of anxiety, depression and bullying, special care was taken to signpost the mental health services available (Eisenberg and Hunt, 2010). These included the university counselling services as well as wider initiatives from the NHS and charitable organisations such as Mind. Resources in the library which discussed issues such as happiness, anxiety, mindfulness and depression were also highlighted.

The guide was published in July 2016 and was promoted via a simple link on the student-facing Big Read pages. Over one thousand hits have been registered so far and the pages have since been submitted as part of the annual portfolio of evidence for Edinburgh Napier's Customer Services Excellence accreditation.

In Kingston, there were reading groups at all campuses during Welcome Week discussing the themes of the book – surviving in an alien environment and adolescent angst. Students were touched by being sent a book as a gift and many said that receiving it at the beginning of the long vacation had started them reading again for recreation. One new student said he had been reading all summer as a result and had stopped gaming altogether! *The Humans* also found its way into LRC induction lectures and information literacy sessions for our first years – being used as an example of how to use the catalogue, the reading list software or demonstrating referencing styles. The KU Big Read also won a Rose Award as best university project of the year.

Getting the community in

Civic engagement is embedded in the ethos at both Edinburgh Napier and Kingston. The opportunities for engaging with the local community which were provided by a shared reading experience could not be ignored. As a result reading groups have been set up at local schools, youth groups, the University of the Third Age and at a women's college, to encourage women wanting to improve their literacy back into work and further education. All these groups have been invited to visit the LRCs to make them feel part of the academic network. The most exciting development of all however has been an initiative around reading for the homeless. In Kingston discussion sessions have been held at a local hostel - one led by the author Matt Haig himself - whose residents were grateful to be recognised as educated individuals. 30% of guests at the hostel are in full-time employment and many of those who aren't are keen to add participation in a university-run reading group to their CV. Talking about books boosts confidence and allows the participants to identify with the problems of others, often putting their own temporary troubles in perspective.

Getting established

The Big Read has enabled two academic libraries to collaborate to entice students into the LRC and engage in activities with the aim of making them loyal and successful clients throughout their courses. There are already two other universities interested in joining the scheme for 2017 and the reading groups in the local communities look set to expand. The best bit though is that our Collections teams get to carry on playing John Le Carré. Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Librarian anyone?

References:

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About the Authors:

Laura is Information Services Advisor at Edinburgh Napier University Lennis@napier.ac.uk @004dot678 and Wendy is Senior Information Advisor at Kingston University London w.morris@kingston.ac.uk @morwentodd