Kristen Cardoso and Amy Russo

Inviting people in

Participatory displays in the library

Located on a small campus serving approximately 750 graduate students pursuing professional master's degrees, our centrally situated library at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies in Monterey, California, remains open longer than any other department. At least one staff member and one student assistant is always available for service. When students enter the library, our front desk, and the people who work there, are the first sights they see. With a central service desk, students can quickly learn where to go when they have questions just by walking in and out of the library. Nonetheless, it can be easy for students to walk past the desk without interacting with us. Approaching our large, L-shaped front desk can be intimidating, especially for the many students who may not be aware that the librarians want to help, and that it is appropriate to speak with us, as well as the student assistants. To help spark conversations and foster relationships between library users and the staff, we have taken advantage of our entryway lobby to create a welcoming environment and invite participation.

The authors of this article are a full-time librarian responsible for ensuring positive user experience in the library and a library graduate assistant pursuing a master's degree in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). The authors collaborated on a number of successful participatory displays in the library's front lobby and observed user interactions. These displays not only encouraged interaction between students and staff, but also between the students themselves, and gave students a sense of belonging and ownership of the library as their place. In their book, *Encoding Space: Shaping Learning Environments that Unlock Human Potential,* Brian Mathews and Leigh Ann Soistmann write that a successful place "encourages students to be active residents who define, interpret, search, and modify the settings for achieving personal goals" and that what matters more than the arrangement of a space is "feeling a sense of ownership and camaraderie that elevates the experience."[1] Participatory displays near and sometimes directly at the library's front desk helped develop these senses of ownership and camaraderie in our users.

From transactional space to communal place

To create an interactive and personal experience for students, we strategically repurposed empty space for displays that would go beyond being informative to becoming

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invitations to interact. The goal was for these interactions to become the basis for students developing and feeling ownership of the library. We will be focusing on students in our article, but it is worth mentioning that the interactions sparked by these displays went beyond student-to-student or even student-to-librarian. They involved staff from every level in the library and encouraged input from and conversations between faculty, staff, students, and other visitors. Displays were not only created communally by library users and staff, but the interactions happening around these displays transformed the transactional nature of the library's front desk and lobby into a community space where people were invited to stop, talk, and feel at home.
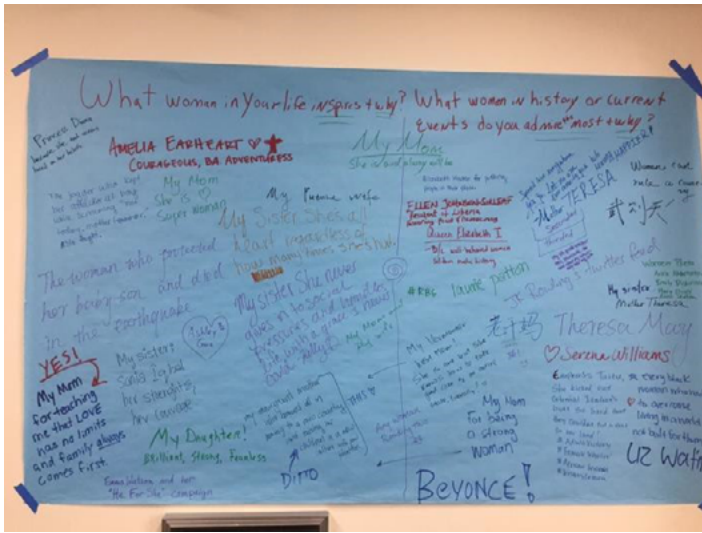
Empty wall as conversational canvas

To access the library workspaces and collections, all students exit the foyer into an area where they must choose to either proceed up the stairs to the second-floor collection or turn left for the computers, group tables, and collections available on the first floor. On the right, this passageway features a large empty wall that has been used in the past for art exhibits and is located in a prime spot through which everyone passes. Students often linger as they wait for tutors, group study members, friends, or for their materials to finish being checked out. Ac-

quisitions Librarian Pamela Jungerberg had the idea to mount kraft paper here, inspiring many creative endeavors.

When using kraft paper in this space, we always start by writing our own question or prompt. We use kraft paper measured to fit the size of the wall, mounted simply with blue painter's tape. Students are provided with an assortment of markers for writing their answers. We alternate colors of paper to help visually signal a change in question, and since rolls can be quite large, one purchase lasts a long time. We already owned markers, although two staff members donated additional markers, and the tape was the only additional purchase. Questions cycle and remain up for one to three weeks, depending on how long a particular theme stays relevant. Our questions have included "Where will you go for Spring Break?" "What podcasts do you recommend and why?" and "What woman from the past do you admire?/What woman in your life do you respect the most?"

One popular question asked students to recommend and describe a podcast. This topic was relevant as many of students listen to podcasts both for information and relaxation and invited personal responses as students thought about a part of their lives that normally is separate from the library as workspace. Students were observed checking the growing number of answers while waiting and using it as a basis for conversa-

Example of a kraft paper conversation.

tion. After the display had been taken down, one student came to the front desk and asked if there would be a compilation of the responses—to which we happily obliged. A list tabulating everyone's recommendations in alphabetical order was put together, printed, and made available.

Through trial and error, we have learned some best practices for using kraft paper. The markers needed to be visible and within reach, such as on a stool or small table, otherwise students did not use them. We also found that providing a few initial answers helped "prime the pump." Writing our answers in different ways (in size, style, and language) helped give students a sense of freedom in their answers. Furthermore, with the wall in line of sight of the front desk, we found

Magnet poetry.

that engaging students who were waiting or checking out materials—by pointing out the question, asking about their answers, or showing our own—often encouraged them to write or read a response and share their reactions.

The success of our effort is evidenced by the unprompted requests for collaboration from the student groups on campus in starting their own kraft paper displays. Student Council wanted feedback from students regarding their recent events and initiatives, and they came to us for help. Our Peace Corps Club put up a kraft paper asking students to write the word "welcome" in their native language alongside a map that marked the location and name of each Peace Corps student in celebration of their

involvement. We knew the students felt a sense of ownership when they began placing their own creations up on the wall. Additionally, we have observed students who lead campus tours often say that the kraft paper is one of the highlights of the space.

The library's relationships with students and student groups was strengthened by these kraft paper collaborations, and students said they liked seeing other students (and, by extension, themselves) highlighted in this way in the library. Even when students did not talk about what was on a particular kraft paper display, they communicated with each other through what they wrote on the displays themselves. Students wrote words of encouragement to each other during finals and orientations, they wrote out responses to comments, and even "liked" comments by writing "+1" or "yes!" Even though the library is a place where students study individually for long periods of time, through these types of interactions, students can feel like they're a part of the whole student body. The library becomes a place to be together and belong to the campus community.

Creating themes in communal places

Following the success of the kraft paper walls over four semesters, we decided to expand our effort to encompass a theme over multiple displays for National Poetry Month in April. Our plan was threefold: we decided to hold a poetry-sharing event, create an interactive ad for the event, and construct a 3-D display. On the side of the L-shaped

desk before the book check out area, we often display books, DVDs, or informational signs. For the interactive ad, we displayed a flier for our poetry share on the desk, and, to help draw more attention, we added a box of magnet poetry.

The box contained two sets of magnet poetry pieces, including nouns, verbs, adjectives, and endings. Students created poems by forming phrases or sentences. At first, students made their poems directly on the desk. Our coordinator of technical services at the time, Christie Tam, improved the display by adding a baking pan for students to use in their creations. We created a few poems to get things started, but quickly students, staff, and faculty joined in. Poems ranged in topic and tone, from funny and clever to serious and even dark. At times, the poems formed little chains in response to one another. We surmise that the magnetic poetry was so popular as it was easy, funny, tactile, and nonjudgmental.

We thought the poetry share would be well attended, but aside from

A look at the poetree.

a staff member no one came. The question became why, when the magnet poetry box had been so popular and was meant to draw attention to the event flier. One student came late and another expressed disappointment that they were not informed of the event. We had followed our normal PR procedure with print fliers, digital signs throughout campus, Facebook posts, and a piece in the weekly campus e-newsletter. Past events, such as board game night, had been more successful. The only salient difference we could think of is that we talked up these previous events more with students as they entered the library and checked out materials. We also learned that just because students greatly interact with a display does not mean they read signage around it.

The third piece of our themed display was a 3-D model to display poetry. We were discarding a set of materials we now have available electronically and, inspired by photos from other libraries available online, our reference librarian at the time, Jen Waterson, decided to create a tree out of the books where poetry could be written on slips of paper shaped like leaves and hung —what we called "a poetree." Each person was encouraged to write down one poem they liked and add it to the tree.

Building the tree was a collaborative effort. Two librarians, two graduate assistants, and a few students who just happened to be walking by all helped put the original structure together. One of our graduate assistants, Ashley Kim, crafted a beautiful set of paper leaves and apples for writing the poetry, to which we attached string for taping to the tree. From our previous efforts, we know we must make things as easy as possible to lower the threshold to participate, so the leaves, tape, and pens were all placed on a high coffee table to provide easy access to a writing surface and all the necessary materials. This left the students to write their poem and then attach it to the tree, which still represented a significant investment of their time.

We also found that adding the graphic sign of the poetree posted behind our 3-D model helped students accept the shape and purpose. Everyone took the time to both think of and share a poem and to read the poems of others as they grew in number.

Conclusion

While we do not have the power to dictate how a space is viewed, we can "set a tone and invite people in" by providing interesting topics and interactive displays.[2] Doing so allows everyone the opportunity to cocreate the library's space and culture in a way that values and generates self-expression. Students especially have what TESOL scholars refer to as a willingness to communicate, or a readiness to volunteer ideas and opinions with others. What they need are chances to do so in an environment where they can feel comfortable and confident in their contribution being valued and free from judgment.[3] Interactive displays in the library are one way of offering and developing that environment together.

Notes

1. Brian Mathews and Leigh Ann Soistmann, *Encoding Space: Shaping Learning Environments that Unlock Human Potential* (Chicago: ACRL, 2016) 24.

2. Ibid., 101.

3. P. D. MacIntyre, Z. Dörnyei, R. Clément, and K. A. Noels, "Conceptualizing Willingness to Communicate in a L2: A Situational Model of L2 Confidence and Affiliation," *The Modern Language Journal* 82, no. 4 (1998): 545–62.

Larger implications

The magnitude of this collection development project reaches beyond the general importance of normal library collection development because of the university community that I serve. Lander is a small, regional Southern state-assisted, four-year university in a very rural area. In these kinds of remote, Southern areas that are typically steeped in religion, bringing access to current and unbiased information about sexuality, LGBTQIA history, and the LGBTQIA rights movement is extremely important. The point of higher education is to enrich and broaden the minds of our students and community, and I believe that making this topic visible and available is just the beginning of getting this topic out there and accepted. Also, since we as an institution are responsible for the information and research needs of our students, this collection development project was instrumental and necessary for our community. It was also necessary to pinpoint and resolve such a glaring gap in our resources.

Implementing this in your library

There are many of you who may want to tackle this kind of targeted collection development project. I was very lucky to have a wonderful and understanding director who allowed me free range on this subject, as well as fiscal assistance for the project. For your library, I suggest starting with the idea. Look in your collection for an area that you think has, for one reason or other, been overlooked. You may already have a topic that you can work with or you may want to increase your LGBTQIA resources like I did. No matter what your topic, the first step is to research what books are needed in this subject area. Hunt down the best resources that cover this topic, and make a wish list.

Some of you may not be able to make a large purchase like I was, but that doesn't mean you cannot make a difference. Try to order as many books as you can at any point in your purchasing process. Even if it is a few books a month, over time, you will be able to fill any holes in your collection. And don't be afraid to tackle difficult topics or subject areas. These are the areas where people learn, grow, and are challenged by ideas outside their comfort zones. Through these kinds of initiatives, you can, little by little, make a difference, not only in your collection, but for your university as a whole.

Note

1. To see the full list of the books we bought for Jackson Library, visit http://bit.ly/2z1oJwA.