



Reading fellows

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Raising your profile

We information professionals already know the valuable networking role we play on a daily basis, constantly putting contacts in touch with each other and acting as a catalyst to cross-departmental initiatives. Kind of institutional match-makers if you will. This is old news. This is not new to us. But here's the thing: how to open the eyes of our non-library colleagues to the benefits of using our expertise to bring the whole community together?

Finding your showcase

Quite often it seems to me your showcase finds you. Always an advocate for the universal benefits of reading for leisure, I was naturally drawn to an innovative university-wide reading scheme at Kingston called '[The Big Read](#)'. A pre-arrival shared reading project designed to make students feel welcomed and engaged even before they set foot in Kingston. The idea – common in the USA but less tested in the UK – was that personally sending them all the same book to read before they enrolled might just confirm that Kingston was the place for them. And that by giving them a sense of belonging it might help them settle quickly and even make it less likely that they would drop out in the future. The Project Director, Professor Alison Baverstock, had obtained funding for a joint student staff development project in 2015. The book chosen was *About a Boy*, written by Nick Hornby (a Kingston alumnus), which offered a range of potential topics for discussion such as adolescence, bullying and depression. Every undergraduate, postgraduate, home and international student due to join us in the autumn term was either sent (or given on arrival) a copy of the book to keep and was invited to discuss it once they got here. This proved hugely popular and regularly generated the hoped for discourse in the queue to enrol or the scrum at the Freshers' Fair.

But what wasn't predicted was the way in which university staff threw themselves into the project. Support staff were particularly keen: technicians, receptionists, office administrators and – it goes without saying – librarians. Receptionists used the book to generate conversation at main university welcome desks. An easy way in when waiting for the timetabling software to load – "Did you read the book?" The LRC staff talked about it during library tours and induction sessions, using it as an example of how to use the catalogue, how to search databases, and how to organise referencing. HR used the book for staff induction. The entire Finance Department read the book and used it for team building exercises. Teaching staff across an impressive range of disciplines found it a useful basis for learning in the first few weeks of term using the book's themes in imaginative ways.

There were a number of very popular promotional events – talks during which enthusiastic readers quizzed the author on topics raised, and a balloon debate when nine representatives from a variety of faculties and departments discussed how the book's subject matter related to their professional and personal interests and revealed they had used the book in such diverse teaching areas as social work, nursing, languages, literature and, most surprisingly, civil engineering.

The feedback polled from students was almost exclusively positive: 86% of student respondents felt it was an effective initiative for new students. One international student said they had never been given a book to keep before. Others said they saw the book as a present.

Heaps of books waiting to be collected were observed lurking around university cafés, on reception desks, in lecture theatres. They all disappeared. We had to reprint twice to keep up with demand. The strange thing was that cleaning staff reported that not one single copy had ever been seen thrown away in a bin.

In short, there was a real buzz about the place. Conversations started between hitherto strangers in offices, at meetings, in staff rooms, at university bus stops – and all about one book. It brought the whole academic community together. Cheesy, but true. We found a common thread. Not easy for five faculties and 22 directorates spread over five campuses.

Identifying your role

But where did the library professionals fit into all this? The LRC was embedded in 'The Big Read' right from the start. Unthinkable to have a reading scheme without the library as primary support. An invisible helpline. But as the project expanded our level of visibility grew with it. Last year the book was chosen quickly to kick-start the project before the individual students involved moved on. But for KUBigRead#2 the entire student/staff community has been invited to own the process of choosing the new book. Over 100 titles were proposed and working with students an algorithm was produced based on weighted criteria which calculated the shortlist of six. A panel drawn from right across the university demographic has now met twice to agree the final choice – *The Humans*, by Matt Haig.

LRC staff have played an integral part: getting the message across during the selection process, encouraging everyone to read all the shortlisted books and feedback their comments, participating in the process to choose the criteria for the algorithm, sitting on the final selection committee, and networking through contacts at Boards of Study and Student Staff Consultative Committees. They have been central to the administrative processes involved in making multiple copies of all the shortlisted titles simultaneously available in all five campus LRCs. Above all they have been using personal and professional social media (mainly Twitter) for ceaseless promotion: banging the drum whenever possible. Possibly – it has to be admitted – on occasions becoming Big Read Bores. The greatest participation in the selection process was rather gratifyingly from library staff – 31 of whom read all six titles and predictably provided us with fulsome and frank feedback.

Expanding your market

Once you start meeting people across the organisation things begin to occur to you. You notice guys (gender-neutral obviously) who might find it useful to meet certain other guys. Guys with things they didn't know they had in common. Until the library introduced them. Quite often a match made in heaven, resulting in some joined up activities which might never have been linked otherwise. 'The Big Read' met Little Reads in some book groups which had already been made possible by Race Equality Charter Mark funding. We are introducing 'big reading' into programmes already well under way, enhancing their content. Headstart for example – which supports students who come from backgrounds typically under represented in higher education. Or pre-sessional welcome courses for students coming early to Kingston to improve their English language skills and prepare for a university career in the UK. All were existing schemes with huge LRC input but where the

addition of shared reading was incorporated to great effect, all the while serving to underline the role of the library in supporting students and raising their level of attainment.

Seven-point plan to pimp your profile, based on our experience:

- Polish up your matchmaking skills. You know people. You know people who know people. Get them together. *Be useful.*
- Volunteer to be champions. Look for high profile schemes which could benefit from library involvement. Could the LRC help with that? Yes, we can. *Be proactive.*
- Go to meetings. Any meetings. Decisions are made by those who turn up. Turn up your volume. *Be loud.*
- Promote yourselves on social media. Shamelessly. Individually. As a team. As a library. Locally. Nationally. Internationally. Bounce it off the rafters and it will boomerang back to you. Bigger. *Be bold.*
- Hold institution-wide events in the LRC. We held our spin-off book groups on sofas in the LRC café. *Be welcoming.*
- Enlist your own staff as ambassadors. Engage them. Fire them up. Send them out to preach to non-library colleagues. *Be inspirational.*
- Get a gimmick. A library pet sometimes helps. We have a cat. Metaphorically speaking. The cartoon cat is everywhere – and they talk to the cat. *Be cute.*

Looking forward

We found the kind of project which could be both bigged up and downsized: simultaneously facing in two directions. 'The Big Read' is planning to expand outwards – bringing additional collaborative partners on board to include more university communities and provide a wide research base for a study into the effects shared reading can have on student enrolment, engagement and retention. Any takers? But at the same time we will focus inwards to use Little Reads as book groups for specific groups of KU students and staff, and for Kingston area community groups like residents' associations and U3A, building valuable bridges across a wide range of local networks. The fruits of reading fellowship can be enjoyed on so many levels.



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