

BEYOND THE IVORY TOWERS: THE EXPERIENCES OF NORTH-WEST UNIVERSITY (NWU) LIBRARY SERVICES IN COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PROJECTS

Siviwe BANGANI¹, Sabelo CHIZWINA² and Mathew MOYO³

¹Manager. Information and Loan Services North-West University. Mafikeng Campus
Email: Siviwe.Bangani@nwu.ac.za

²Head Librarian. Information Services. North-West University, Mafikeng Campus
Email: Sabelo.Chizwina@nwu.ac.za

³Director. Library Services. North-West University. Mafikeng Campus
Email: Mathew.Moyo@nwu.ac.za

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to report on the experiences and lessons learned by North West University Library Services with five community engagement projects undertaken in years 2014 and 2015 respectively. Community engagement forms a key part of NWU's strategic objectives. In pursuit of this key objective, the NWU Library Services decided to respond positively to a call for the development of communities around the University by setting-up libraries in schools in the Mafikeng area. This community engagement is conceptualized as a library advocacy initiative. The reason for this is that academic librarians as champions of libraries, are able to impart their knowledge as well as to equip school libraries with best practices. All the organizations wrote donation letters requesting donations from the library. Books, desks, seats, shelves, and computers were donated to two primary schools, two secondary schools, and one cultural centre to ensure that learners in those schools have access to proper libraries. Through our experience, it is clear that projects initiated by the communities have a better chance of success than those initiated by Librarians. It has become apparent to us that all community engagement projects require partnerships in order to achieve success. One of the major challenges we faced is functionality of the libraries once they are set-up. Most of the learners in the organisations visited have never used a library before. This paper will serve as a template for academic libraries in Africa and beyond, who wish to conduct community engagement projects in a similar manner to learn from our experiences.

Keywords: Academic libraries; community engagement; outreach projects; advocacy; partnerships

1. Introduction

Academic libraries have long been associated with supporting and providing access to resources to support the academic programme of the academic institutions. Academic libraries by the nature of their staff component possess diverse skills that can be utilised in the community, public and school library ranging from acquisitions, organization of information, to information

literacy training. Community, public and school libraries in South Africa urgently require these skills for the effective organisation and utilisation of libraries. The provision of library services is critical if the government is to meet its developmental goals and also to foster a reading culture in the country.

Community engagement is on the agenda of most South African universities to transfer the knowledge that they possess. Very little is published in South Africa that illustrates or describes the various forms of community engagements that the university libraries can initiate. This was supported by Olowu (2012) who stated that many projects and methods being developed by higher education institutions in South Africa are to be found in the hidden web; including papers, reports, technical notes or other policy documents published by government agencies and universities and are therefore not easily available. Further, there is a paucity of studies that focuses on rural universities and how they can aid their surrounding areas. This paper will share the experiences of how a university library can be involved in community engagement which can be adopted in similar contexts.

2. School Libraries In South Africa

School libraries in South Africa are the responsibility of the Department of Basic Education (DBE). However, with the increase in number of school-going learners, the DBE priority is on increasing access to schools for all school going-age children. One of the drawbacks of this is that only 7.2% of the country's schools have a well-stocked library (Mojapelo 2015). The emphasis of the DBE is building of new schools as well as improving the quality of teaching and learning. Library services still lag behind despite the existence of the National Guidelines for School Library and Information Services (SA DBE 2012) which provides a foundation of how school libraries could be established. The School Library Unit within the DBE which was responsible for the operations of school libraries was disbanded in 2005. This is despite the fact that the need for school libraries is critical as research by Paton-Ash and Wilmot (2013) has shown that schools with well-stocked libraries performed better than schools without a library. Schooling 2025 puts emphasis on reading and writing and as the literature has long indicated, school libraries are essential to improve these skills whether for learning purposes or for pleasure reading (Wessels & Mnkeni-Saurombe 2012).

To address the shortage of school libraries, joint ventures have been established. In the Mpumalanga province of South Africa, Le Roux and Hendrikz (2006) reported on a joint venture to combine public libraries and school libraries. Another method that has been adopted is the university-community-school partnership in Cape Town using the Cascading Support Model to support library assistants in creating functional school libraries (Silbert & Bitso 2015). In 2014, the National Library of South Africa was awarded a grant of 32 Million Rands by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to support a pilot project to strengthen selected Public Libraries in South Africa. One of the aims of the project is to locate the public library as a community hub. Meaning that it has to support the school libraries as part of its mandate. Through our community engagement initiatives, the NWU-Library sees itself as being a joint venture with schools in support of the provision of school libraries in the country.

3. Community Engagement

The literature highlights that there is no agreed definition of community engagement (Blackburn 2014). Olowu (2012) defined community engagement in the context of higher education as universities applying their expertise to tangible problems and collaborating with community partners to utilise the technical know-how. On the other hand, Brandy as cited in (Jenkins & Cecil 2015, 162) defined community engagement as: "... an integration of projects: one time group service projects; option within a course; required within a course; action research projects; disciplinary capstone project; and multiple course projects" The above definition shows that community engagement is an academic endeavor that is integrated into the curriculum. In South Africa, the HEQC's Framework for Institutional Audits as cited by (Maistry & Thakrar 2012) defined community engagement as the expertise that universities apply to address issues relevant to their community.

This paper will use The Carnegie Foundation's definition as it encompasses the work the library does. The definition is as follows:

"Community Engagement describes the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity". (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching 2006)

The White Paper on the Transformation of Higher Education (Department of Education 1997, 11) stipulates that universities should 'demonstrate social responsibility ... and their commitment to the common good by making available expertise and infrastructure for community service programmes'. As already pointed out community engagement forms a key part of NWU's strategic objectives. As the "heart" of a university, it is imperative for any academic library to ensure that it plays a role in fulfilling the strategic objectives of an academic institution.

Blackburn (2014) alludes to the role of a library in community engagement as to either facilitate the creation of social capital or actively working for social change in the community. The creation of social capital is assumed to lead to an increase in public participation and have an influence on services and structures whilst actively working for social change leads to the creation of locally defined institutions, such as community-led libraries.

4. Academic Libraries And Community Engagement

Cho (2011) described the University of British Columbia (UBC) project titled the Chinese Canadian Stories: Uncommon Histories from a Common Past. This community project sought to preserve Chinese Canadian stories by providing a portal and digitalization workshops amongst other activities. This project was funded through \$1.17 million Canadian Federal Government Historical Recognition Program. Thorne-Ortiz (2015) reported on a program at Syracuse University where as part of community engagement they invite youth groups from middle and high school to visit the university library. Some of the goals of this initiative are to promote community engagement and to reach potential patrons. In the United Kingdom, Shiel, Leal Filho, do Paço, and Brandli (2016) reported about the collaborative community project in Worcester known as "The Hive". This is a joint public and university library which houses five services within a very sustainable building. Bonnell (2014) reported on a Midwestern Universities community engagement programme of registering voters for elections.

In South Africa, Silbert and Bitso (2015) undertook a study of The Cascading Support Model which trained library assistants in under-resourced schools through a mentoring programme involving the UCT Libraries. These projects appear to be one off projects with a specific outcome. Jinkins and Cecil (2015) described such projects as using the silo paradigm community engagement model. In this model projects have the following characteristics: utilizes one-off projects, outcomes are specific, and are limited to the scope of the specific project. The review of the literature shows that community engagement programmes are diverse and in most cases there is no funding involved. Academic libraries are simply utilising the resources they have to aid the community around them. This study will seek to add to the existing knowledge as well as providing examples of best practices that can be adopted in other contexts.

5. Methods

For purposes of this paper we used the observation methods and informal interviews to obtain data. The sites for this study are primary and high schools in the Ngaka Modiri Molema District in the North-West Province of South Africa. The university library used is the North-West University Library (Mafikeng Campus).

In order to ascertain that the libraries that we set-up at schools are being actively used, we visited the libraries during the South African Library Week and the National Book Week. During those days, librarians observed teachers assisting learners in the library. Librarians also became involved with other activities like reading books to learners, re-arranging the shelves, and advising teachers on how to make effective use of the library spaces. Teacher-Librarians were also interviewed informally to find-out what challenges they had with the newly set libraries and advised accordingly.

6. Findings

The following were some of our experiences:

Experience 1: Organisations that initiated the requests for donations have a better chance of success

The Slurry Primary School Library Project, Mmabatho Secondary School Library Project and Mmabana Cultural Centre Library Project are examples of successful projects. The similarity between these projects is that they were all initiated within those organisations themselves. They all wrote letters to the University Library requesting assistance with setting-up libraries without being advised to do so by a library staff member. As a result, once the libraries were set-up, the change agents (library contacts) within those organisations were able to source more sponsorship to further enhance those spaces. In the case of Slurry Primary School, for example, they took advantage of their proximity to the Anglo-Platinum plant, and requested assistance with extending the library building.

During the South African National Book Week (NBW) – an annual event celebrated in September in South Africa - we paid impromptu visits to Slurry Primary School Library, Mmabatho Secondary School Library and Mmabana Cultural Centre Library. We were very impressed by how active the libraries in those three organisations are. It is during NBW that the Slurry Primary School Library was launched. As a key partner, North-West University Libraries was also invited to the Slurry Primary School Library launch. This gave our library and university publicity on local and national newspapers.

Experience 2: Community engagement projects require partnerships

In academic libraries, this partnership is both internal and external. In order for us to assist with computer donations, we had to work closely with the University IT department as custodians of all computers on Campus. We've had to also work very closely with the facilities section so that we could be able to donate chairs and tables. Our Marketing and Communications Department is involved in terms of marketing the activities we engage in. We have to inform them of all community engagement activities we undertake.



Figure 1: Different stakeholders involved in the Slurry Primary School Library

Once you set-up the library you require constant communication between your library and the school so as to ensure that the library does not become a white elephant. There is always a challenge of who will run the library once you have left after setting-it up. In our case we work with “Angels-of-Tomorrow” – an organisation that supplies volunteers to run school libraries. The “Angels-of-Tomorrow” are already involved at the Slurry and Moshawane Primary Schools. In the case of Mmabatho Secondary School, they have employed a professional librarian who is paid by the School Governing Body. In Mococe Secondary School, we have had to train one of the teachers to run the library. This is also the case at Mmabana, where one of the interested lecturers was given an informal training to run the library. By the time we wanted to set-up a library at Moshawane Primary School, the school had not been officially opened yet by government which meant that we had to get permission from the Provincial Education Department in order for us to go there. As partners with those organisations, we are constantly in contact with them.

Experience 3: Fundraising as a crucial aspect of community engagement activities

Partnership is also very important in this instance in order to raise funds for your community engagement activities. Immediately after our first project, we quickly realised that we were running out of material to set-up more libraries. We requested donations from the Rotary International Organisation which assisted us with donation of children's books. More childrens'

book donations were received from our book vendors and publishers. During the National Book Week in 2015, the library sold some old books to the University community to raise funds for our community engagement projects.



Figure 2: Selling of old library books to fundraise for community engagement projects

A fund-raising group formed as a sub-committee of our marketing team has been appointed to assist with fundraising for community engagement projects. The sub-group has initiated engagement with local businesses for donations towards our community engagement activities.

Experience 4: Focus on certain projects instead of taking many projects at the same time

Community engagement projects take some of your time, so we had to turn down a few requests from other local schools for us to assist with setting-up of libraries. Once the local schools caught word of our activities, they all began to send letters of requests to our University. We had to create a waiting list of schools as we could not assist all of them at the same time. Each project requires time as you have to keep on going back to inspect its progress. At the moment we are focusing on two projects at a time with a view to ensuring the success of those projects before we take other projects.

Experience 5: Ensure buy-in from library staff

Community engagement projects are a voluntary service to the community. It is very important for management of a library to get a buy-in from the general library staff as these projects are labour intensive. You need manpower to remove and move furniture from a library to a school. Manpower is required to set-up a library.

Likewise, the buy-in is required from management of the library and university at large as most of the activities happen during normal business hours. Without the support of staff and management, any community engagement project of this nature is doomed to failure.



Figure 3: Library staff take time to read books donated by NWU-Library for learners at Moshawane Primary School during National Book Week

Experience 6: Unpacking the “library” and its importance for the schools

Due to the disbandment of the School Library Unit within the DBE in 2005, there seems to be a lack of proper understanding of what shape a school library at primary and secondary school should take. All the schools we went to had a room they called a multi-media centre with boxes of prescribed textbooks and no book racks. This room was not accessible to learners.

According to most agents of change within those schools, teachers do not properly understand the concept of a school library and its importance for the school. As a result some of those rooms are also used as storeroom or extra staff rooms. This meant that we have had to assist the agents of change by explaining the concept of a library to other teachers.



Figure 4: Learners at Moshawane show appreciation for their new library

7. Conclusions and Suggestions

From our findings, it can be concluded that schools and communities who initiate the establishment of libraries tend to be more successful than those who wait to be approached by librarians. Partnership is also critical in order to succeed in CE and established librarians need to give continuous support to the beneficiaries as a way to ensure viability of the newly established libraries. In library community engagement projects, it is also important to partner with other like-minded people and organizations so as to help each other source materials for the needy schools and communities. The CE experience also concluded that a lot of time is required to work on the setting up of the library as well as training of the change agents. There was lack of understanding of what a library is by teachers, neither did the schools have purpose built libraries.

As a recommendation, a study of the training needs of school and community librarians should be conducted with a view to provide them with the relevant skills to grow and run the libraries. In addition, the Department of Basic Education should develop standards on the establishment and management of school libraries so as to ensure uniformity and equity of learner experience in schools. Another recommendation is that a dedicated librarian should be made available for community engagement initiatives so as to avoid burnout on school librarians who have other primary responsibilities.

References

- Blackburn, F. (2014). An Example of Community Engagement: Libraries ACT and the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities. *Australian Academic and Research Libraries*, 45(2), 121-138. doi: 10.1080/00048623.2014.908497
- Bonnell, A. L. (2014). Voter Registration Services at an Academic Library: A Non-Traditional Reference Service. *Reference Librarian*, 55(4), 289-297. doi: [10.1080/02763877.2014.928921](https://doi.org/10.1080/02763877.2014.928921)
- Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. (2006). Carnegie classification for community engagement. Palo Alto, CA: Carnegie Foundation
- Cho, A. (2011). Bringing History to the Library: University-Community Engagement in the Academic Library. *Computers in Libraries*, 31(4), 15-18 14p.
- Jenkins, L., & Cecil, A. K. (2015). A Shift in Community Engagement Models: A Case Study of Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis and the Indianapolis Business Community. *Journal of Convention & Event Tourism*, 16 (2), 159-174.
- Le Roux, S., & Hendrikz, F. (2006). Joint use libraries: Implementing a pilot community/school library project in a remote rural area in South Africa. *Library trends*, 54 (4), 620-639.
- Maistry, M., & Thakrar, J. (2012). Educating students for effective community engagement: student perspectives on curriculum imperatives for universities in South Africa. *South African Review of Sociology*, 43 (2), 58-75. doi: [10.1080/21528586.2012.694243](https://doi.org/10.1080/21528586.2012.694243)
- Mojapelo, M. S. (2015). A legislated school library policy : can functional school libraries be envisioned without one? : library and information services to children. 33(2), 36-55. http://reference.sabinet.co.za/webx/access/electronic_journals/mousaion/mousaion_v33_n2_a2.pdf

- Olowu, D. (2012). University–community engagement in South Africa: dilemmas in benchmarking. *South African Review of Sociology*, 43(2), 89. doi: [10.1080/21528586.2012.694252](https://doi.org/10.1080/21528586.2012.694252)
- Paton-Ash, M. & Wilmot, D. (2013). The state of school libraries in South Africa. *Journal of Education*, 57: 127–162.
- Shiel, C., Leal Filho, W., do Paço, A., & Brandli, L. (2016). Evaluating the engagement of universities in capacity building for sustainable development in local communities. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 54, 123-134. doi: [10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2015.07.006](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2015.07.006)
- Silbert, P., & Bitso, C. (2015). Towards functional school libraries : supporting library assistants in under-resourced schools through a university-community-school partnership. *81*(1), 53-62. http://reference.sabinet.co.za/webx/access/electronic_journals/liasa/liasa_v81_n1_a7.pdf
- South Africa. Department of Basic Education. (2012). National Guidelines for School Library and Information Services. Pretoria: DBE.
- Thorne-Ortiz, F. A. (2015). Hosting Patrons Between the Ages of Nine and Sixteen in an Academic Library. *College & Undergraduate Libraries*, 22(1), 117-121. doi: [10.1080/10691316.2015.1001248](https://doi.org/10.1080/10691316.2015.1001248)
- Wessels, N., & Mnkeni-Saurombe, N. (2012). Teachers' use of a school library in a South African township school : closing the literacy gap. *78*(1), 45-56. http://reference.sabinet.co.za/webx/access/electronic_journals/liasa/liasa_v78_n1_a6.pdf