

Warning: Children in the Library!

Welcoming Children and Families into the Academic Library

By Kathryn Tvaruzka, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire

Abstract:

While library programming for children is a staple in most public libraries, it is quite rare in the academic setting. In 2006 the education librarian at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire began offering literacy programs in a library that traditionally discouraged children and community members from using its resources. Successful programs now include monthly story time sessions, events for families, and a summer reading program for at-risk youth who participate in the Reading Partners and Upward Bound programs. Positive outcomes include media attention garnered both on and off campus, high attendance at programs, and increased collaboration with campus and community organizations.

Introduction

While library programming for children is a staple in most public libraries, it is quite rare in the academic setting. In 2006 Kathryn Tvaruzka, education librarian, and a former children's and young adult public librarian, began offering programs at McIntyre Library at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, a library that traditionally discouraged children and community members from using its resources. Successful programs now include monthly story time sessions, events for families, and a summer reading program for at-risk youth who participate in the Reading Partners and Upward Bound programs. Positive outcomes include a wealth of publicity garnered both on and off campus, high attendance at programs, increased collaboration with other campus and community organizations, new service-learning opportunities for university students, and impressive service credit for Tvaruzka's tenure portfolio.

Research and Rationale

While academic libraries still primarily support their main constituencies of faculty, staff and students, many are now reaching out to the surrounding community through programs and services, but rarely are programs for youth a focus of their efforts. As Richard Dougherty, former director of the University of Michigan Libraries, cautions, "College and university librarians have for too long sat on the sidelines. They have resisted the opportunity or responsibility to reach out and become more involved with young people in their community" (55). Research clearly reports, and librarians have always appreciated, that a lack of literacy skills causes problems for "living, working and survival in general" (Eyre 220). Reading skills are vital in attaining information literacy skills, and according to

Gayner Eyre, "It has long been recognized that imaginative literature plays an important role in the acquisition of reading skills, not to mention aiding in the development of imagination, appreciation of narrative and providing enjoyment of story" (222). The American Library Association and children's librarians worldwide know that children exposed to reading prior to starting school have a higher chance of success in education. Several studies have shown that reading habits developed in the preschool years directly contribute to higher literacy rates in adulthood (Jordan, Snow, and Porche 527). A National Center for Education Statistics report released in 1998 declared that "Participation in literacy activities provides valuable developmental experiences for young children. In addition to developing an interest in reading, children who are read to, told stories, and visit the library may start school better prepared to learn" (1). According to Iona Malanchuk and Marilyn Ochoa, "Academic librarians should also participate in literacy outreach programs for children and youth in order to help build these skills and encourage lifelong learning" (23). And Dougherty continues by saying that it is ". . . imperative that academic librarians be associated with their colleagues' [public and school librarians] efforts to help kids become successful readers and successful students. . . Today's five year old who is struggling to acquire language skills will be entering college before we know it" (155). Academic librarians have strong public service skills and are adept at developing relationships on campus through liaison duties and instruction responsibilities. By taking those skills into the programming realm they can continue the efforts to promote early literacy and enjoyment of reading through campus and community outreach efforts.

Literature Review

A review of the library and information science literature pertaining to programming for children in an academic library yielded few results. A search of *Library Literature*, *ERIC*, *Education Research Complete* and *LISTA* produced fewer than five articles that specifically address instances of programming for children in an academic library. Most of these articles reported instances of successful ways academic libraries have reached out to the greater community. Some university and college libraries have instituted library programs for youth, notably the University of Florida in Gainesville's successful sixth grade parent-child reading club. Some articles reported on programs involving teens, but few spoke of regularly scheduled programs for children and families. Because a review of the professional literature resulted in so few specifics, a request for children's programming information was sent to the EBSS listserv in early 2007. About ten education librarians responded that story times or literacy events were either currently being offered or had been in the past; however, many respondents reported that attendance was quite low. Many theorized that this was in part due to parking issues on individual campuses and the distance between the university's preschool centers and the library. Others reported that it was a good idea but they lacked the time to commit to programming or felt that programming did not fall within the purview of their institution's mission or strategic plan.

While the review of the literature did not find many specific articles on children's programming in academic libraries, we should not conclude that it is not happening. This author instead hypothesizes that it is being done across the country but not thought of as important enough or worthy of scholarly communication.

Background and Justification

McIntyre Library went through many librarian and staff retirements between 2005 and 2008, including the retirement of the library director. With so much change taking place at the library, the interim director encouraged new and innovative library projects in an effort to increase the library's visibility on campus. Librarians at UW-Eau Claire have faculty status and are reviewed on three criteria: librarianship, scholarship and service. As a former children's and young adult librarian, Tvaruzka was well-prepared and trained for outreach and programming, and in the fall of 2006 she met with the interim library director to propose a service opportunity to offer monthly story times at the library. The director was very receptive to the idea; not only did it have the potential of escalating the library's image on

campus, but it also provided the library with an opportunity to help with campus-wide initiatives to expand community partnerships. Surprisingly, even though Tvaruzka had heard that the library was formerly unreceptive to allowing children into the library, the staff was amenable to starting library story times, with many voicing interest in helping. In addition, McIntyre Library's recently renovated Instructional Media Center (IMC) was designed perfectly for group presentations, even if this wasn't the designer's intention. While there is no special programming room, a large circle was cut into the carpet in the center of the IMC, with comfortable, and easily movable, furniture to accommodate groups of small children.

Story Times at McIntyre Library

Many mid-to large-sized universities provide a daycare or preschool for students and faculty with young children, with these services often also afforded to community members. These centers provide a built-in audience of young children who would surely love the chance to visit the library. After receiving the interim director's permission to proceed, Tvaruzka met with the director of the University's Children's Center. This meeting resulted in the creation of a monthly half-hour story time session for the three-, four- and five-year-old classes. The Center looks forward to this and has never missed a session. Current group attendance ranges between forty and fifty children with another ten to fifteen adults trekking to the library the last Tuesday of each month during the academic year.



Another important objective in providing children's story time was to reach out to the surrounding community. Both internal and external publicity was completed, including coordination with the campus News Bureau where press releases were drafted and distributed campus-wide and to the local newspaper, television and radio stations. Internal library promotion was accomplished through signage, library plasma screen slides, library blog and website inclusion, and emails to education students and faculty. Within the first

two months of offering story time, the local news media took notice, and the IMC story time was featured in the local newspaper and public radio station. This relatively small amount of publicity resulted in immediate attendance by local community members; on average an additional five to ten children and their parents, grandparents or caregivers attended the monthly story time sessions. Interestingly, there was one positive outcome that was not anticipated. Each month university students and faculty/staff who are parents of children enrolled in the Children's Center attend library story time, too. The story times provide a rare opportunity for working students and parents to see their children during the day, and it's a delight to see them share in the story time experience together.

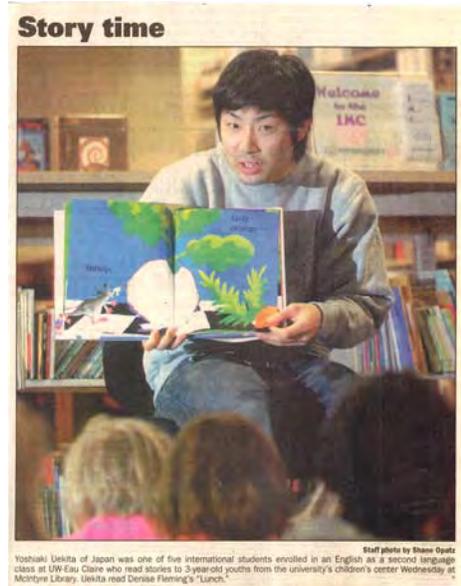
Involving Others in Library Programming

Monthly story times have also piqued the interest of classes and student organizations on campus. Because the sessions are held during peak library hours and out in the open where college students are working, education students and student organizations have asked to help. The IMC children's book collections provide exposure and access to pre-service teachers and school media specialists. As Rice-Lively and Immroth state, "Education students seek materials for student teaching, storytelling projects, or assignments that focus on a particular theme or topic" (63). To go a step further, giving students the opportunity to watch a librarian model storytelling abilities and oral reading skills provides them with an opportunity that they often don't get on campus, possibly not until their student teaching or practicum experiences. To date, members of the Eau Claire student chapter of the American Marketing Association and many education students have all volunteered to lead story time sessions. These students receive coaching from Tvaruzka on picking appropriate read-aloud books for preschoolers, training on reading aloud and help finding appropriate transitional activities and songs. Other campus librarians and library staff have also expressed interest in reading.

Service Learning Opportunities for International Students

All degree-seeking students at UW-Eau Claire must complete a minimum of thirty hours of service learning. This requirement enables students to be contributing members of the Eau Claire community, apply knowledge outside of the classroom and enhance interpersonal and problem-solving skills. The UW-Eau Claire English Language Academy for non degree-seeking students has implemented a similar requirement. This affects International students at UW-Eau Claire, including those with limited English language abilities (ELL students)

who do not have the language proficiency to independently fulfill the service learning requirement. ELL students must enroll in the University's ESL integrated skills course, and in an attempt to help them meet the service learning requirement, the course instructor and Tvaruzka developed a storytelling project. At the beginning of each semester Tvaruzka visits the classroom where a demonstration story time is done and the students are given instruction on selecting appropriate children's literature, given tips on how to read aloud to young children, and even provided instruction on the physical nature of storytelling, including how to hold a book so that the audience can see (see appendix 1). The course instructor continues to work with the students for several more weeks practicing pronunciation, intonation, rhythm, expression and enthusiasm. After weeks of preparation, the ELL students present a regular monthly IMC story time session. These sessions have been extremely popular and have received heavy publicity, including an article and feature photo on the cover of the local newspaper. The library obviously benefits greatly from this publicity and collaboration, but more importantly the ELL students obtain authentic language practice, exposure to institutional participation, the ability to contribute to the community, and interaction with American children in a structured, low-stress situation.



Partnering with Agencies Serving Youth

Opportunities for partnerships with other groups on campus and in the community availed themselves including collaboration with Reading Partners and Upward Bound. The Reading Partners Program is a literacy project in which university student volunteers are paired with elementary school students to spend extra reading time in the homes of the children. Established at UW-Eau Claire through a partnership

with the Eau Claire Area School District in 1985, the program serves a large percentage of minority families, including a sizable Hmong population, in which English is a second language and education levels are low among adults in the homes. According to the program coordinator, ninety percent of the children enrolled in the program are English language learners and struggling readers. In addition to fostering the joy of reading, the program makes good literature available for socio-economically disadvantaged children. Almost 90 percent of the children enrolled in the program qualify for free and reduced lunches. Since Eau Claire's largest minority population is Hmong, it is necessary to address the educational and economical issues facing Hmong citizens as well as all of Eau Claire's citizens. The Reading Partners Program is an innovative way to begin breaking the cycle of poverty and illiteracy. The program aims to bring new books to struggling readers and to instill the love of reading through encouraging children and families to read together often.

Co-sponsored Special Events for Families

In the spring of 2007 the Reading Partners coordinator and Tvaruzka co-sponsored an event to celebrate the 50th birthday of Dr. Seuss' *The Cat in the Hat* to support literacy in the community. The party began in the Library's IMC, but activities took place throughout the building. Children in kindergarten through grade five who participated in the Reading Partners program were invited to attend with their reading partners, but the entire UW-Eau Claire community, including students, faculty and staff with children, were encouraged to attend, as was the general public. Activities included screening of Dr. Seuss cartoons, Seuss bingo, a library scavenger hunt and other games. Always a requirement for library programs, refreshments were served. This first attempt at family programming, held on a weekday evening no less, brought over fifty children and parents to the library. Subsequent family programs through collaborations with the Reading Partners Program continue each semester and have included Children's Book Week costume parties, an African-American Read-In and other smaller events, such as the exhibition of the Reading Partners large reading chain in the IMC.

Summer Reading Program

The summer of 2007 brought about a new collaboration with the addition of program co-sponsorship with Upward Bound. According to the *Upward Bound* Web site,

Upward Bound provides intensive academic and other support to prepare participants for college. Services include academic instruction, tutoring, counseling, cultural enrichment activities, and a

nine-week residential summer component on a college campus. Upward Bound serves high school students from low-income families; high school students from families in which neither parent holds a bachelor's degree; and low-income, first-generation military veterans who are preparing to enter postsecondary education. The goal of Upward Bound is to increase the rate at which participants complete secondary education and enroll in and graduate from institutions of postsecondary education.

The Upward Bound residential summer component at UW-Eau Claire requires that the teen participants also complete a form of community service work. The library was approached by the Upward Bound director who was looking to create a community service project that would keep the teens on campus. Working with the Reading Partners coordinator, a summer reading program was developed that pairs Upward Bound teens with children enrolled in the Reading Partners Program. The summer reading program is held two afternoons a week for eight weeks at the library. The library provides the space, and Tvaruzka developed a reading folder for the children who earn small incentives after they complete three different reading activities. Prizes are awarded for the time spent reading aloud to the Upward Bound mentor, the time spent listening to stories read to them by their Upward Bound mentor, and the time spent reading independently at home. Small prizes were obtained through donations from library staff, and Reading Partners supplied gift books for those who completed the program. Because the Reading Partners coordinator is not contracted for the summer months, and because Tvaruzka has many other responsibilities, a service learning opportunity for a university student was created to manage the summer reading program.

These successful programs were implemented quite easily, and they quickly gained momentum and popularity. Organizations on campus and in the community are eager for additional programs for youth. As library advocate for services for youth Virginia Matthews summarizes, "Librarians who serve children know a wonderful secret...they know that every time they share a story, a game, a song with small children, they have a chance to light a flame of perception or leave a memory that will remain forever. It may even make a difference in an entire lifetime" (100). Because universities already serve youth in several ways, through preschool centers, academic talent searches, hosting National History Day competitions, Upward Bound, Youth Options, and many others, academic libraries can

also easily get involved. Academic librarian Myra Michele Brown also welcomed children into her library; she was motivated because her university had not really become a part of the community, even though it employs thousands. Brown believes it could be because “the public often doesn’t realize it has a right to use the state university’s libraries, which are supported by taxpayer’s dollars” (45). By offering a family story hour she voiced to her community “you are welcome; your children are welcome. This library is informal, fun, and committed to the literacy of children” (45).

Story Time and Library Program Resources

Of course not all librarians are cut out for getting in front of groups and performing. But those who want to give it a try can do so without prior experience or even the need to spend a lot of time planning. There are a wide variety of library story time planning books on the market, most of which are arranged by theme and provide lists of good read-aloud books, transitional activities, movement games, rhymes, songs and finger plays. Recommended titles include *Ready-To-Go Storytimes : Fingerplays, Scripts, Patterns, Music, and More* by Gail Benton; *A Storytime Year : a Month-To-Month Kit for Preschool Programming* by Susan Dailey; *Library Story Hour From A To Z : Ready-To-Use Alphabet Activities for Young Learners* by Ellen Hasbrouck; *Storytimes for Two-Year-Olds* by Judy Nichols; and author and librarian Rob Reid’s collection of story time planning titles including *Storytime Slam* and *Family Storytime* . Obviously, the local public library will provide a wealth of information; observe one or more story time session, and talk with youth services librarians to coordinate a schedule that does not impede on their programming calendar. If staffing to implement programs is an issue, try finding student organizations that are looking for volunteer activities.

Conclusion

It may be because as a former public librarian well-versed in program planning that the decision to provide children’s programs came easily. The simple addition of story time resulted in several other positive outcomes. Monthly story times have allowed parents of children attending the university’s preschool to see their child during the day. Future teachers and librarians are able to observe storytelling in action, and are able to volunteer to lead sessions. Members of the surrounding community are reminded that the collections, resources and services of the university library are available to them, and students in need of service-learning credit have another opportunity to earn their hours. In addition, outreach and programming also provides tenure-track faculty librarians the opportunity to

complete tenure and promotion requirements in terms of the University’s service mission, “. . . while providing an undeniable benefit to children and families within the local community” (Malanchuk and Ochoa 28). For Tvaruzka it is the smiles on the faces of the university students studying in the library when they hear the not-so-quiet pitter-patter of dozens of little feet making their way through the library that makes the extra work worthwhile.

Collaborations and connections with other agencies serving youth are rewarding, and will continue to improve the library’s image on and off campus. As Tina Schneider wrote in her article on outreach, “The outcomes are frequently endeavors that serve as inspiration for those libraries looking for ideas” (210). And while one must certainly think carefully about the impact program efforts will have on the other staff and library resources for its main clientele, “It may just be that your outreach efforts help to attract the primary clientele in the first place” (Schneider 210).

Works Cited

- Brown, Myra Michele, "Kids on Campus: an Academic Librarian is Inspired to Reach Out to the Community." *School Library Journal* (April 2001): 45.
- Dougherty, Richard M, "'Kids Who Read Succeed" and the Academic Librarian." *College and Research Library News* 3(1991): 155-156.
- Eyre, Gayner, "Back to Basics: the Role of Reading in Preparing Young People for the Information Society." *Reference Services Review* 31(2003): 219-226.
- Jordan, Gail E., Catherine E. Snow, and Michelle V. Porche. "Project EASE: The Effect of a Family Literacy Project on Kindergarten Students' Early Literacy Skills." *Reading Research Quarterly* 35(2000): 524-546.
- Malanchuk, Iona R., and Marilyn N. Ochoa. "Academic Librarians and Outreach Beyond the College Campus." *The Southeastern Librarian* 53(2005): 23-29.
- Matthews, Virginia. "Kids Can't Wait...Library Advocacy Now!." *School Library Journal* (March 1997): 97-101.
- Rice-Lively, Mary Lynn, and Barbara Froling Immroth. "Reader's Advisory in the Academic Library Children's Collection." *Collection Building* 12(1993): 63-66.
- Schneider, Tina. "Outreach: Why, How and Who? Academic Libraries and Their Involvement in the Community." *The Reference Librarian* 82(2003): 199-213.
- United States. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement. *Indicator of the Month: Early Literacy Experiences in the Home*. Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1998.
- United States. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education. *Upward Bound Program* 24 Nov. 2008. 8 Jan. 2009
<<http://www.ed.gov/programs/trioupbound/gteptrioupbound.pdf>>.

Appendix One

This document is shared with volunteers who wish to help with story time activities, including service-learning students, student organizations and ELL students.

Tips for Reading Aloud to Young Children

Thank you for volunteering for McIntyre Library story time. Please meet in the IMC (lower level) at least fifteen minutes before the session starts. Most of the children attending the session are 2 to 4 years old, and each session consists of an opening activity, followed by a story, and so on. The longest book always is read first. In between books we'll do another activity or sing a song because young children cannot sit still for too long, especially when they're all together in a group setting.

- Young children don't have a long attention span, so make sure you pick a story that is not too long or too advanced. On a one-on-one basis, children can usually sit through longer stories, but in groups they can't handle it. Plan on about five minutes per book, although this is not a steadfast rule.
- The book's length can vary – some books that are quite long can also be fun to share and contain repetition and opportunities for audience participation. Plan that young children can sit still for about five minutes. In a thirty minute story time usually four books are read with activities in between.
- Practice, practice, practice! Reading aloud takes lots of practice. Not only should you read through the book several times, you also need to read the book **out loud** several times. You'll be amazed at how hard it is the first time you do it, and how funny your voice will sound to your own ears!
- Practice holding the book so that everyone can see the pages. This will take some work, as it's uncomfortable at first. Don't turn the book so that you can read the words; learn how to read "sideways" or upside down!
- Introduce yourself before you start.
- Tell the children the title and author of a book.
- Use lots of expression – be silly and cheerful when you read!
- Don't read too fast.
- Pay attention to the children – are they understanding the story, are they interested? You may need to stop reading and pull the group back together. Remember, it's easy for children in groups to get distracted.
- Good stories for this age have lots of repetition, rhymes, and big, colorful pictures.
- Have fun! If you're nervous, the children will pick up on it. Just enjoy yourself. It's ok to re-read pages that have lots of repetition and to get the children involved by making appropriate animal sounds or repeating lines from the book.
- Remember, these are just kids and they aren't grading you or judging you! They are just so happy that you are spending time with them!



Kathryn Tvaruzka
Assistant Professor, Education Librarian
University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire
McIntyre Library
105 Garfield Avenue, L1001F
Eau Claire, WI 54702-4004
715.836.4522
tvaruzke@uwec.edu