

by | Andy Plemmons



THE CONNECTED LIBRARIAN

GRADES
K-5

CONNECTING COMMUNITY THROUGH LITTLE FREE LIBRARIES

Each year our fifth-grade students offer a gift to the school in appreciation of all that the school has given to them. Often this gift is selected by the teachers, and the students are involved only at the last minute to write a speech about why the gift was chosen. If we want to foster volunteerism in our students, we need to involve them in all parts of a project. Recognizing that, I offered some ideas of how we might think about the school gift from the very beginning of the year and involve multiple teachers, resources, and community members. After some initial brainstorming, we decided that a Little Free Library would make a perfect yearlong project. We wanted to build one to place at our school and one to put somewhere else in our community.

Little Free Libraries are outdoor boxes (somewhat like large birdhouses) that are stocked with books. Anyone can borrow a book or leave a book. The full story of how the Little Free Library project was started can be found at <http://littlefreelibrary.org>.

Although our students loved the idea of creating a library as a gift, most had no idea what a Little Free Library looked like. This became our starting point. Using Screencast-O-Matic (<http://screencast-o-matic.com>), I walked students through some slide shows on the Little Free Library site and explained the basics of our project. I also used the screencast to express the importance of student voice. I wanted students to bring their own ideas to make this project unique to this fifth-

grade class. Our art teacher showed this screencast to each fifth-grade homeroom. (View the screencast at <http://tinyurl.com/lp6c6s4>.)

Project Teams

Each student had a role to play in the project. Homerooms were divided into teams to work during art class. Each team had four roles: a lead designer, a task manager, a researcher, and a writer. During art class, some group members came to the library to work with me, or sometimes I went into the art classroom to work with multiple groups.

Lead Designers

These students drew initial design concepts using pencil and paper. In

their drawings, they designed the shape of the structure as well as what might be painted onto the surface. Once their concepts were sketched out, they worked with a computer program called SketchUp (www.sketchup.com) to create 3D models of their libraries. A student teacher in art was familiar with this tool and served as an expert when groups had questions about how to design in 3D.

Researchers

These students worked with me during almost all of their art classes. Their priority was to research the Little Free Library site for information on design. They shared their findings with the other members of their teams. For example, they discovered architect plans for sample libraries and shared those with the lead designers. The researchers also found tips on the best materials to use to build a library, which they shared with the writers to put into their material requests. In addition, the researchers considered the types of people who might help us with this project, such as artists, builders, and even the mayor and commissioners.

Writers

These students also worked with me almost every day because of their close relationship with the researchers. The role of the writers was to create letters that could be sent to businesses, families, and community members to solicit support for our project, either financially or with resources. One initial goal of the writers was to craft letters to our local home improvement stores with lists of the materials we would need to build two libraries. We found during this process that there was a greater need for letters, so we expanded this role into the writing classrooms as well.

Task Managers

These students served as additional hands and eyes to make sure that all team members were doing their part. They also helped out with any additional support that might be needed by an individual team member.

Skyping with the Co-founder

During the first weeks of work, I posted on my blog about our project. It wasn't long before I received a phone call from Rick Brooks, co-founder of Little Free Library, wanting to know more about our project. This simple phone call reminded me how important it is to show our work as librarians, because making our work and the work of our students public connects us with opportunities. Rick agreed to Skype with the students. The Skype was a key part of this project because it expanded the project beyond our community. Rick helped the kids see that this was not just about putting a wooden box outside of our school. It was also a contribution to a global

movement to increase access to resources and to foster a sense of community in neighborhoods. His wisdom and passion allowed students to better understand the purpose of a Little Free Library.

Persuasive Writing

The fifth-grade teachers and I decided to build on the work of the writers from art class. I held a persuasive writing workshop. We talked about being genuine and speaking from your heart. Then we brainstormed a list of people to ask for help. Students agreed that we needed materials, a carpenter, books, and money for official registration.

In class, students got to work on their letters. Several wrote letters to Home Depot asking them to donate the materials we would need. Other students chose to write letters that could be sent home with every fifth-grade student, asking families to send in \$1 toward the official registration of both libraries. A couple of students wrote to a local community center that many of our students use after school to ask whether our second



library could be installed there. Finally, some students wrote letters to ask students in the school to bring in gently used books to fill the libraries. These students also designed boxes to put in the school library to collect any donated books.

Once the letters were created, the teachers helped get them to the necessary recipients. Then the wait began. We went into this project with a lot of faith that we could make it happen. I wasn't prepared for how much our community came through for us in this project. Home Depot called me to say that they had read every student letter and they not only wanted to donate all of the materials we needed but also wanted to build and deliver both libraries. The director of the community center called me on the phone and was excited about the potential of having a library at his center. Students and families began bringing in books by the boxload, as well as donating enough money to pay our registrations and buy more books.

Final Steps

As we neared the end of the school year, a few steps were not yet complete. We needed to select how the libraries would be painted by voting on the designs. This was a collaborative effort among the students, the teachers, and the principal. For the library that would be placed at the school, students chose a design that represented our city and state. For the community center library, students chose a design that represented our school so that people who visited the center would feel connected to our school. In art class, students worked together to paint the sketch designs onto the libraries. The art teacher then finished the libraries by covering them with multiple coats

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of a clear varnish to protect them from the weather.

At our fifth-grade graduation, two students prepared a speech to explain the process we went through to create the two libraries. Hearing their speech meant so much more than the speeches had in past years because I knew that as they talked every fifth-grade student had a connection with the gift that was sitting on the stage.

The very last step in this project was to get the libraries installed. Once again a volunteer opportunity was presented and accepted. Two outstanding parents in our school dug the holes, mounted the libraries on posts, and concreted them into the ground. Students helped fill the libraries with books and continue to replenish them with books today. The libraries have proven to be a well-used resource in both locations and by more than just our school community.

I encourage you to think about what service projects live within your own building. How can you as the librarian facilitate these types of experiences for your students? How

can you connect your library and your students with opportunities to volunteer and make a difference in their community?



Andy Plemmons is the media specialist at David C. Barrow Elementary in Athens, Georgia. His library program is grounded in transliteracy, participatory culture, and students as creators of content shared with the global community. He makes his work public through his blog (<http://barrowmediacenter.com>). He can be reached on Twitter (@plemmons) and e-mail plemmons@clarke.k12.ga.us.