

Article

Young Adult Literature in the Academic Library

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Abstract

This article explores the promotion of a young adult literature collection to promote pleasure reading and literacy among the students of Bowling Green State University. Due to the rising crossover appeal of many YA titles among adults, an established but underused young adult collection within the library was identified as a way to serve students looking for popular titles. An effort to promote YA literature throughout the library was subsequently undertaken. Results showed an increase in circulation of YA literature, reflecting a desire for recreational reading and a willingness among college students to read YA literature.

College students often assume university libraries offer access to popular fiction based on their experiences with school and public libraries. Bowling Green State University Libraries, like many other academic institutions, offers titles that support the curricular needs of patrons, not books intended for pleasure reading. However, recent trends in the relationship between student retention and pleasure reading along with requests at the reference desk for leisure reading titles have caused the library to reconsider its current collection to meet the student's requests. Rather than adding a new collection of popular fiction, an idea formed to repurpose an existing collection of young adult (YA) titles already located in the library's Curriculum Resource Center. The Curriculum Resource Center (CRC), considered a special collection of University Libraries, already maintained a comprehensive young adult collection available for checkout, so an attempt was made to see if the student body had any interest in utilizing YA literature for pleasure reading.

Literature Review

The trend of providing non-academic literature in academic libraries has evolved over the years, with interest in extracurricular reading gaining popularity as literacy research provides evidence of a decline in literacy rates among college students (Elliot, 2009). Arguments both for and against such collections abound, with many academic libraries exploring and experimenting with popular reading collections throughout the years. The collection development approach of popular literature collections varies with the institution, but identifying and promoting materials that already exist within the collection is highly appealing. Elliot points out academic libraries offering curriculum materials collections may already own a collection of highly desirable young adult titles (2009, p. 342). Likewise, another examination of popular reading conducted by Hallyburton, Buchanan, and Carstens (2011) found that faculty, in particular, circulate titles that are ordered for the general collection but are first temporarily highlighted in a popular display (p. 111). To take advantage of titles the library has already purchased, whether for a general or special collection, is a low-cost first step in testing the success of a popular reading collection within an institution.

Literature featuring young adult characters, such as *The Catcher in the Rye*, has long appealed to adults, and literature written for young adults has slowly gained approval from those over 18. These works with multigenerational readership are now referred to as crossover fiction and publishers are producing more of it as a result of increased adult readership. In 1997, Judith Rosen discussed the rising popularity of both children's and young adult titles for adults, citing Philip Pullman's *The Golden Compass*, published in 1995, as a breakthrough, while Michael Cart (2009) identified 1989's *Weetzie Bat* by Francesca Lia Block (p. 74). Corbett (2005) tagged Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* as a truly successful crossover novel because it was simultaneously marketed in the adult and teen market with different covers. The appeal of crossover books is surely in some part due to the broadening of themes in YA literature. Topics once considered adult-only are now written for ever more sophisticated young people, and sex, drug abuse, depression, mental illness, death, genocide and torture are acceptable topics for publication (Walton, 2009, p. 388). In

2012, the list of successful crossover titles is long and the authors willing to write in the YA genre are growing due in part to the phenomenal sales success of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books, Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight*, and Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*.

Collection promotion and readers' advisory of these titles, however, has long been the domain of public, rather than academic, libraries. Academic libraries are notorious for removing jackets from books, stripping them of their appeal and attention grabbing information. In 2005, Massey reported that jacketed books circulated at a much greater rate than non-jacketed in an academic setting (p.17). Surveys conducted by Smith and Young (2008) also found that book jackets increase circulation and argue that publishers continue to design and distribute jackets for a reason (p. 522). In her article *Judging a Book by Its Cover: Publishing Trends in Young Adult Literature*, Cat Yampbell (2005) emphasized that the power of the cover cannot be underestimated, noting "regardless of the quality of the literature, its cover often determines a book's success" (p. 349).

Based on the experiences of bookstores and public libraries, YA collections should not be housed with the children's books (Yampbell, 2005, p. 354). Young adults are simply not comfortable browsing for titles in a section of the children's collection and, as a result, YA titles are almost universally found in their own designated areas in both public libraries and bookstores. An argument could then be made that adults would, likewise, not feel comfortable browsing for popular reading materials within a collection intended for juveniles.

Project Background

Bowling Green State University (BGSU) is fortunate to house the expansive and well-maintained Curriculum Resource Center (CRC), which serves the College of Education. This special collection features three areas: a collection of hands-on teaching materials, curriculum and textbook resources, and a collection of 40,000 children's books, all available for checkout. Also located within the CRC is the Children's Book Center, a review center for the Cooperative Services for Children's Literature (CSCL). This organization makes available copies of newly published children's literature for teachers, librarians, and students to review in northwest Ohio, southeast Michigan, and northeast Indiana.

Once the new titles, approximately 1,500 per year, are retired from the Children's Book Center, they are incorporated into the juvenile stacks of the CRC. This means BGSU children's book collection has a yearly infusion of new titles provided by publishers in addition to the hand-selected titles provided through the traditional collection development process. Once in the stacks, the ability to find the YA selections through browsing becomes daunting as children's and YA titles are interspersed. Likewise, pre-service teachers, who are the most frequent patrons of the collection, rarely use YA titles for their coursework as it favors classical literature. The staff of the CRC decided

to begin exploring ways to increase the circulation rate of these underused YA novels hidden in the collection.

Meanwhile, reference librarians were being queried about popular reading titles for non-academic purposes. As BGSU has a popular culture special collection, many popular fiction titles are housed in the library and appear in the library's catalog. These titles, however, can only be used inside the Popular Culture reading room for study and research. This caused some confusion and disgruntlement for students, who believed these titles were available for checkout. Prior to starting this project, reference librarians referred these patrons to the local public library, inter-library loan, or the literature collection maintained in the general collection. While this was enough for some patrons, others still were discouraged by this answer. These questions at the reference desk, combined with the desires of the CRC staff to make the YA novels a more prominent part of the collection, sparked the idea to use the YA collection as a vehicle for pleasure reading access within the library.

Our Project

The CRC staff shouldered much of the work on the project and undertook a three-pronged plan: display, promotion, and statistics. This approach was based on information gleaned from available current literature. The idea to promote YA as popular reading material for adults is not new and was discussed in Cart (2004). He pointed out that YA literature appeals to many adults, which is a shift from past practices and further suggests collecting YA for this wider audience. The undergraduate population, a portion of which fall directly into the publisher-defined age for YA, seemed particularly well suited for this project.

Display

One of the first tasks was to determine which books to highlight through the display. Largely, this process involved pushing a cart through the stacks and selecting books with an eye-catching cover or spine, personal favorites of the staff, or titles that had received good reviews. CSCL books that had been received over the last year were often selected to ensure newly published titles were included in the display. In addition to the newer titles, some highly popular books our students might have been interested in, such as *The Hunger Games* trilogy and John Green's books, were also added. Fortunately, the CRC has a policy of keeping book jackets on the YA literature collection, which is not the case in the main stacks collection of University Libraries. Because of the book jacket appeal of current young adult novels, the display had the potential to be attractive and enticing to the users (Yampbell, 2005, p. 349). The resulting list of books included a mix of already popular titles, classics, and hidden gems from amongst the vast collection.

Initially, the project started out with one display: a single section of shelving containing six shelves in the collection that was easy to see and find. We decided the rather sterile look of steel shelves might be off-putting to general browsing and opted to dress the

shelf to look more like a bookshelf one would find inside a home. Staff members contributed a variety of knick-knacks from their households that did not have any monetary value, including a plant, calendar and some seasonal miniature pumpkins, to make the shelving unit appear inviting and open. An added benefit of creating this look was it stood out even more amongst the collection. (See Figure 1)



Figure 1: Book shelf display

The next step was the process of arranging the multitude of books that had been culled for the display. The first arrangement was by genre, but we tried to make it look as messy as possible without obstructing access to the books. The books had to be easy to find for staff looking for inter-library loan requests, but no other requirements were necessary. The books stood in a variety of bizarre and interesting angles: slanted in a pile with more books leaning upon them, or books standing atop horizontal books with the eye-catching covers facing front. The end goal was to make the books look as

tantalizing as possible because these were not old, stately titles in an academic library; they were books to take home and enjoy.

Rearranging a display frequently attracts readers to checkout a book that may have been on the display for weeks due to poor placement. For example, moving the book from a high, top shelf to a middle shelf in a patron's eyesight can increase a book's odds of being picked up for perusal. Likewise, flipping a book from being displayed by the spine to displaying the cover can also influence a patron's snap-judgment to pick up a book.

Therefore, the books on the display were rearranged every other week. This included replacing titles that had circulated and moving non-circulated books to a different spot. A series of themes were attempted for the display to help with keeping the arrangement fresh. These included alphabetical by author (including a challenge to have an author for every letter of the alphabet represented to select books that normally might not be considered), alphabetical by title, and finally, by color of the jacket to create a rainbow effect. None of the themes were particularly more popular than the others, but circulation of items from the display did tend to drop off towards the end of a theme's period and pick up again when a new arrangement debuted.

Titles on display also were continuously rotated. This is a common practice in both public libraries and bookstores and it was something we wanted to employ in our setting to invoke the sense of something for everyone. In some cases, this was done to fill the holes of books that had been circulated. In others, a new arrangement required more titles to fill open spots to make the shelves full and welcoming. This also made it nice for repeat customers who were finished with a book they previously had checked out and were looking for new titles.

One idea that was tried with the display that did not work as well was placing "Recommended By" tags underneath the books that various staff members found interesting and unique, a practice also borrowed from bookstores and coffee shops. This idea came from practice at commercial venues and seemed like a great idea in the initial planning, but one that was much more difficult to maintain given the limit of the collection. It soon became apparent with only one copy of most titles, the minute an item circulated the recommendation tag was a moot point until the book returned up to six weeks later. In public libraries that might have many copies of the same book, this idea would probably work much better, but for an academic library with a single copy, it just was too much work to redo every time a book circulated. Of note, the four books that contained the trial "Recommended By" tag associated with them all circulated.

We also started to expand into new displays as the weeks approached the holiday break. The second display was an end cap--a wire-shelving unit attached to the end of the modular shelving--near the initial display unit. The CRC has a small collection of graphic novels that, for the most part, were also hidden within the larger collection. With the success of the Young Adult display, we thought the same results might happen if we put the graphic novels on this secondary display. Unfortunately, most of these novels

had been rebound and did not have the eye-grabbing covers or description contained by the novels, so most were passed over.

In the final two weeks of our trial period, a tabletop display case opposite the stairs leading to the CRC's floor was also used as an outlet for the project. Inside, we put a computer keyboard and mouse, post-it notes, pens, highlighters and old textbooks from the curriculum collection, making it look like a student's computer desk. On top of the case, we had a collection of YA books that encouraged the students to take a study break and read. This display was mildly successful, helped by its location. It might have been more successful had it been up the entire time, which is something to keep in mind for next time.

Promotion

For the young adult popular fiction displays to be successful, we had to promote them both before and during the four week trial time period. The CRC, while not in a terrible location on the second floor of the library, is mostly visited by students in the College of Education and Human Development. Motivation was needed to get non-Education majors to climb the stairs and wander down the hall.

One of the ways this gap was filled was through the CRC's blog. We made posts about the displays, encouraging patrons to head up to the second floor and check out what was available with text like "Stop up at the CRC before you head home for the holidays and check out our FUN READS display for a great selection of popular YA fiction. Browse, check out, read, repeat!" We also did some book reviews on the CRC blog of titles that were on display, including: "Looking for a vampire fix? Try *Blue Bloods*," and "Welcome to Nerdfighter Island: A John Green Primer."

To draw attention to the posts for people who did not check the CRC blog on a regular basis or at all, we added an image, some text and a link to the posts from the main library home page, which contains a rotating banner to highlight specific areas of the collection and library. We also utilized the main library's blog to bring in patrons that may be utilizing a different portion of the library, but not the items held by the CRC. In addition, BGSU has an email that goes out to all constituents called "Campus Update." On the whole, this service is used to announce programming, calendar dates and other news-worthy information from across campus. All departments are invited to submit items to be added to the "Campus Update". Once again, a quick blurb was crafted to invite readers to check out the selection for popular reading and this was posted to the daily e-mail update.

Another important area of marketing was inter-department awareness. In particular, it was important to ensure that the reference department knew what the CRC was attempting to provide to the users in order to help promote it. We asked the reference department to refer students to the second floor when questions about popular reading occurred; the CRC has popular fiction available and people willing to help them find a great book to read. An attractive placard was placed in a clear acrylic frame on the main

reference desk and posted information regarding authors of interest, such as Stephenie Meyer, Markus Zusak, Libba Bray, Melissa de la Cruz, and Neil Gaiman. Students were encouraged to “take one home for the holidays.” While the jargon term “YA” was used in some of the signage, we mostly attempted to brand the display as reading-for-fun, not reading-for-genre.

Another method that proved effective for creating awareness among the students was tapping into a captive student audience during library instruction sessions. Our education liaisons had the opportunity to pitch the collection and display to the classes that came to the CRC for various assigned instruction sessions.

An informed and on-board group of staff and students working within the CRC also contributed greatly to the success. They were able to hand sell books to people wandering within the collection and find books that filled a need for the patron. They also kept an eye on the displays to identify when new books were needed or a book circulated. The entire department was supportive of the display and they were excited to promote the books and collection.

Statistics

In order to keep track of the actual effect on circulation, we recorded statistics on the items we put on display. This was done to provide quantitative information to evaluate the three displays, the books featured, and the overall success of the project. A simple Google Spreadsheet was used, with a list of all the titles and the dates the titles were added to the display. Each book was checked to see previous circulation patterns, if any, and this information was added to the spreadsheet.

A quick check of the displays was completed every morning to catch any changes so the spreadsheet could be updated. When a book was removed from the display, we would go into the integrated library system and see if it had been checked out. If it hadn't been checked out, the title would be noted by a color code that it had been removed from the display but not checked out. If it had been checked out, we would check to see if it was a local circulation. Titles circulated through ILL would receive a different color code than those that circulated to a BGSU patron. The circulation date was also noted in the spreadsheet. If books returned before our display period was up, the item went back on display and this was noted in the spreadsheet.

What could not be captured in our basic statistics, however, was patron information. With privacy concerns, we did not capture any type of patron statistics. Without that piece of knowledge, we had no way of knowing if the patrons checking out the material were already customers of the CRC or how many individual customers checked out the items. We also had no concrete way of knowing whether or not the patrons who found the books enjoyed the titles they selected and if they would come to check more books out from the CRC in the future. With more time prior to implementing a similar project, attaining permission to collect patron information would add another dynamic layer to the results.

Results

Throughout the entire experiment, 121 young adult titles were pulled from BGSU's collection and placed on display. Of those displayed 71 of the titles circulated three times or less prior to being displayed, including 28 that were never removed from the shelf. We did include some highly popular fiction, with 18 titles having anywhere from 10 circulation hits to Philip Pullman's *The Golden Compass* which had 34 circulations prior to being displayed. The books also ranged from having circulated as recently as one week before it went on display to it not being circulated since March of 2004.

In total, 50 of the displayed books were circulated during our experimental time for a 41% circulation rate. Four of the titles that went out and were returned were checked out for a second time in the display period. Of most interest was the number of books with very few previous circulation hits that were checked out after they were put on display. Of the 75 titles that we displayed that had under 5 previous circulation hits, 33 were picked up and circulated to BGSU patrons. Twelve of those 33 titles had never been checked out previously, while 10 had only circulated once. Unsurprisingly, most of the circulation happened around the weekends, when our student patrons had more free time in their schedules and were looking for something to occupy their time.

Nearly every book circulated was pulled from the original, main six-shelf display. One graphic novel, *Robot Dreams*, was checked out from the endcap display and three books were circulated from the tabletop display that held 11 of the displayed books. We also heard from student workers, but did not capture in a statistics-based form, that patrons looking at the displayed books would ask for other recommendations from the CRC's collection at large, understanding that more young adult titles lurked amongst the picture books. Obviously, those items were not captured by our basic tracking system, but were an added side-effect of the YA display.

Lessons Learned

With a short time frame from inception to implementation due to the impending holiday break, there were many interesting observations made throughout this process. Some of these were expected, while others were surprising.

As we knew, there were limits to the popular reading material housed in an academic library. While the CRC has a large collection, there are not many duplicates of the same titles, which led to the previously mentioned problem with "Recommended By" tags in the display. Most academic libraries will, likely, be unable to overcome this problem or need to think of a creative solution to the issue.

The location of the display also would be something to reconsider in the future. The main floor of our library has by far the most traffic of any of the library's eight floors. It houses computer labs, classrooms, a café, and a learning commons that generate traffic far beyond library users. Our outreach efforts through posters and blog posts designed to guide student patrons upstairs to the second floor were somewhat effective,

but a display on the first floor would have undoubtedly tapped in to foot traffic that our second floor special collection just does not have.

In a surprising outcome, this project did not require the staff time or attention we previously predicted. The initial setup for the display consumed the most staff time, as the books had to be selected and displayed, and the information had to be disseminated. However, in total, the project only required an hour or two of staff member's time a week for maintenance once the display was up and running. There was additional time spent by the CRC staff talking to patrons about the display and doing reader's advisory, but staff found these conversations led to a better understanding of both the collection and the patrons.

Another outcome that took us aback in a positive way resulted from the conversations with patrons. They made suggestions regarding collection development, including genre weaknesses in our collection, such as a lack of multicultural romance titles, along with suggestions for titles that were missing from series or sets. This allowed the CRC to further strengthen the collection.

Finally, we concluded, in agreement with the literature, that appearance did matter. Rebound monographs had little to no appeal and efforts to extend the life of graphic novels by binding them were good for wear and tear of the items, but not for circulation appeal. Interesting covers are very enticing and displaying books with the cover facing out was highly effective for circulation, but it created space challenges. Academic libraries attempting to display their general literature collections in the same manner would be challenged to make the displays appealing. Rarely do books in an academic library's general collection go on the shelf with dust jackets and many are rebound after years of use. While it is not impossible to recreate this project using titles from the general collection, the lack of attractive dust jackets would certainly be an obstacle. For circulation conscious academic libraries interested in this type of project, the expense and space of maintaining book jackets may be well worth it.

Conclusion

Promoting YA titles to our patrons was positive on several levels. As academic librarians we enjoyed the opportunity to conduct readers' advisory service with enthusiastic patrons who were not completing assignments. By making a concerted effort to promote pleasure reading through recommendation tags, instruction sessions, and a general atmosphere of YA enthusiasm, we connected with students in a new way. Our patrons seemed to appreciate the comfort this garnered, and through those relationships we created opportunities for teaching other user skills such as requesting from consortium libraries.

This trial also served to provide librarians with another answer for our patrons asking for popular reading titles at the reference desk. YA titles, as opposed to the general literature collection titles, were aptly suited for this project because these novels are rarely used in BGSU courses. These titles proved to be strictly books-for-fun with eye-

catching jackets and plot descriptions on the books themselves, which the books in the general literature collection are lacking. The YA books were also immediately available, unlike books from the public library and inter-library loan.

We were pleased with the results of our project and found that promoting a popular collection of YA literature that we already owned was worth our efforts as evidenced by our circulation records and relationships formed with readers. A next step in an exploration of popular literature in an academic library would be to create and promote a first floor main collection display of featured titles located prominently in the lobby of our institution. This would pull high interest books that we already collect and circulate from all areas of the library, and include popular crossover YA literature titles. Helping both student and faculty patrons find pleasure reading titles by prominently displaying them in a convenient and attractive display would encourage reading and positive public relations which are in alignment with the goals of our library and university.

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