Beyond the Book: Collaborative Collections Designed for Creativity and Experiential Learning

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The purpose of this paper is to inspire librarians to seek collaborative opportunities to enhance access to non-traditional resources, both physical and digital, to support creativity, curricula, experiential learning and relevancy to students and scholars. Two of the collections highlighted, from concept to shelf, were created for the design disciplines at Kwantlen Polytechnic University in Canada. The first collection features a garment collection owned by a local costume society while the second one focuses on electronic parts for use in digital design research projects. The third collection, a seed library, was developed to support student learning in horticulture studies.

Introduction

Need a Dior? A flex sensor? Or maybe a Chocolate Sweet Pepper is more to your taste?

At Kwantlen Polytechnic University, “where thought meets action,”¹ the library has begun offering access to object based resources to support creativity, curricula, experiential learning, multiple ways of knowing and research. In doing so the library strengthens its resources and relevancy to students, faculty and scholars. Three collections recently developed provide access to historical garments, electronic components and locally cultivated seeds. All were developed by subject liaisons in collaboration with their faculty, students and community partners. While it is easier to find examples of object based collections within the realm of public libraries, they do appear in some academic libraries. It is hoped that by describing the non-book collections developed by Kwantlen Polytechnic University (KPU) Library from concept to shelf academic librarians will be inspired to look for ideas and opportunities to collaborate with their faculty and within the communities they serve to also build non-traditional collections “beyond the book.”

Beyond the Book Resources in Libraries

Up until recent initiatives, KPU library resources could be described as fairly typical for an academic library—book and journal content accessible in both print and electronic formats, subscription databases, DVDs and streaming films—all acquired in line with collection development guidelines to support course offerings and scholarship. Although results are not overwhelming, a quick, informal survey of library literature does produce examples of unique, object-based collections housed within academic library settings. Examples include a recently established wine library at Cornell University;² and a seed library at Dalhousie University Library.³ A related example, at the National Library of Turkey, highlights use of a stamp collection as an important information source that “illustrates the social, commercial, political, cultural, historical and artistic aspects of a society.”⁴

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Collections featuring technological devices appear to be ramping up with offerings such as drones. As Jeffry Young notes, “colleges and universities across the country now lend tech hardware in addition to books. And we’re not talking just laptops, netbooks, and iPads which … have become pretty standard fare”.

Other examples are perhaps better described as an event rather than collection such as the living library, hosted by Douglas College, Canada, that allowed people to check out a human being. While examples of living library collections are also found in public libraries the Douglas collection “strives to be informational, with titles like Stained Glass and Insect Biology.”

Public libraries offer many examples of object collections ranging from games (physical and digital), musical instruments, power tools, cake pans, and taxidermy items to a recently documented “tiebrary” which lends ties to jobseekers. The Public Library Association (PLA) resource page titled “Non-Traditional Circulating Materials” provides a good starting point for librarians seeking ideas.

While articles reporting on the “wild” and “weird” could have library users believing these sorts of collections are a new phenomenon, public libraries have been providing items “beyond the book” for years. Statistics collected provide a retrospective look and indicate that in the United States “non-book items were often quite popular.” Research focused on children’s resources available over 100 years ago show the use of games, toys, puzzles and even “sliced animals” because librarians of the day “believed that their services should include resources that promoted tactile and creative learning.”

Mary Johnson in her article, “Primary Sources in the Library: From Object to Inquiry” stresses the value of objects. “Objects as simple as an old fountain pen or as complex as a Civil War battle map challenge students to apply sophisticated information literacy skills. From object to inquiry, it’s a natural fit.” It is a sentiment echoed by Louise Coffey-Webb writing on the value of access to original artefacts through costume collections. Notes Coffey-Webb, “Primary sources reign, and those researchers whose main references are other people's writings and theories, rather than the clothing itself, may be missing rich and valuable resources while bypassing the actual materials.” Interestingly it was the search for access to original clothing artefacts that kick-started the first of three object-based collection collaborations at the KPU Library—the historical garment collection, an electronic parts collection, and an heirloom seed library.

**Collaborative, Non-Book Collections at Kwantlen Polytechnic University Library**

*Need a Dior? The Historical Garment Collection*

The Historical Garment Collection provides on-site, hands-on access to a small, rotating selection of garments including creations by famed designers like Christian Dior and Issey Miyake. It should be noted that KPU Library which closely monitors use of the garments is not owner but rather temporary custodian of these artifacts. The artifacts are part of a larger, 8000-piece collection that belongs to the Society for the Museum of Original Costume (SMOC), a volunteer run organization located in Vancouver, British Columbia. Although SMOC is within close proximity to the library its location and setup is not conducive to host student researchers.

This particular collaboration began when undergraduate students enrolled in a costume history course at the KPU Wilson School of Design needed access to historical garments. “As a facilitator of design methodology, physical resources are critical to support student learning outcomes” noted Fashion and Technology Design instructor Shirley Calla. Recognizing both the need for access to historical garments and the challenges of trying to establish an on-site collection in an environment of post-secondary budgetary cuts Calla was determined to find a solution that would provide students with an on-site, experiential learning opportunity. Through a long
standing association with the museum society and having worked previously with the design liaison librarian, Calla set up a meeting to propose a collaboration that would be beneficial to all involved.

As Calla noted “the course curriculum was developed to incorporate a specific and intentional combination of creativity, collaboration, and critical thinking inquiry. Through these experiential learning activities students collaboratively conduct a cataloguing inquiry of historic apparel artefacts, contributing to the documentation of this local historic garment collection. Simultaneously increasing student motivation and their knowledge of the sociological implications of dress history, additional intended transformational learning outcomes have included intrinsic dispositional shifts in attitudes around craftsmanship, conservation considerations, patterns of consumption, and sustainable practices.”

A collaboration is truly a win-win situation when each partner needs “something” but also contributes “something” substantial in return. With SMOC, it owned the garments but needed help researching, cataloguing and digitizing its collection. As the old saying goes, “many hands make light work”, so having students help collect garment data and contribute to the Virtual Museum database held appeal to the volunteer organization. Contributing to educational opportunities is also part of SMOC’s mandate so participation in the collaboration allowed the organization to support research and scholarship, and draw further awareness to the Society.

The students in the fashion history course needed access to garments. In exchange, their research and documentation, including digital photographs of the garments, was shared with SMOC for use in their Virtual Museum collection. Another “perk”, students could contribute their developing knowledge and vocabulary to provide fulsome garment descriptions for the database. For example, one garment feature that a lay person might describe simply as a “pleat” was documented by the students as an “inverted box pleat”.

FIGURE 1
A library meeting room was transformed into a “pop up” research and digitization lab.
(Photograph by Denise Dale, KPU Library)
As for the library, not only did it want to enhance access to both physical and digital collections to support curricula and experiential learning, it also wanted to remain relevant to design students as well as the community at large. Hosting a rotating historical garment collection seemed like an ideal way to do just that.

In exchange for the privilege of hosting temporary collections of garments, the library offered secure storage space, digitization equipment, care and handling training, cataloguing expertise, and research materials. A library meeting room was transformed into a “pop up” research lab to provide students, working in small groups of 3 or 4, with access to garments, digitization equipment, and close proximity to needed research materials. This helped students develop awareness, enthusiasm and appreciation for the library, its resources and expertise offered by the librarians and staff. The collaboration also provided an opportunity to introduce visiting museum members to the library, to community borrowing privileges, and to showcase the scope and depth of the print historical fashion designs resources.

As word about the success of the garment collection collaboration spread, faculty in other design areas turned to the library to further collaborate on unique collections like an electronic parts collection.

*Need a Flex Sensor? The Digital Physicalities Electronic Parts Collection*

The electronic parts collection was developed in collaboration with the Digital Physicalities Research Group, an extracurricular group primarily composed of design students and faculty but open to members from the...
community at large. Group members work on experiments or create prototypes that explore digital and physical interactions. As Victor Martinez with the KPU Wilson School of Design, notes, “these interactions of the digital and the physical are being explored through various media, both traditional and digital, including microcontrollers, sensors, output devices and all forms of hacking (materials, toys, space etc.). In order to apply these digital media in the physical world, the exploration includes additive manufacturing techniques (3D printing), and exploration of new material methodologies.”

In support of Digital Physicalities, the library provides access to a circulating collection of parts such as mini-servos, motors, flex sensors and resistors for use in the design research projects. Once a project is complete, it is dismantled, and reusable parts are returned to the library. Consumables or “one time use” items do not need to be returned. As with the garment collection, the library is custodian rather than owner of the resources which were purchased by funds donated to the design department.

Prior to the library’s involvement, a number of SparkFun Inventor’s Kits were purchased to provide electronic parts and computer components for integration into design projects. Kits were distributed to each project group where members soon discovered they either did not utilize all the parts in their kits or did not have enough of a particular part. While the solution was to simply swap parts amongst the various project groups this was easier said than done. Not everyone attended meetings on a weekly basis meaning a system needed to be put in place that would allow members to access the parts independent of meetings and design department hours. Other issues included how to ensure the kits remained university property, and where possible recycled into new projects. Martinez approached the Design Liaison librarian for help finding a solution.

Housing the electronic parts collection at the library solved a number of issues including access, distribution and security. The library with its early opening, late closing and weekend hours provided access to the parts collection independent of a designated faculty member, departmental staff or meeting nights; as long as the library was open there would be access! This was particularly helpful for community members whose availability to come on campus was limited to evening and weekend hours. Centralizing the parts to the library also meant members could pick and choose among the available parts and in essence create their own kit. If it was discovered that an extra part was needed it just meant popping down to the library. The library also provided a circulation system that not only tracked usage of the collection and ensured parts would be returned but also reserved access to Digital Physicalities members.

FIGURE 3
Example of the KPU Library catalogue record for the Digital Physicalities collection. (Source: KPU Library Catalogue, Photograph by Denise Dale, KPU Library)
While it was easy to say yes, the logistics of setting up the collection were a bit more challenging. Because the parts were being set aside for use by a particular group, borrowing privileges needed to be restricted to its members (note: anyone can join Digital Physicalities and community members are entitled to free library cards). The easiest way to control this was to place the collection “on reserve” thus it is stored in a special section behind the Checkout Counter and signed out only to members on a list provided by the Digital Physicalities Group Coordinator.

Parts are catalogued as reserve items meaning a simplified record can be created to list lists and facilitate circulation. Parts are loaned for the semester but can be renewed if a project is still in progress.

In addition to the catalogue a list of parts with photos is available online through a collection specific subject guide as well as at the Checkout counter to facilitate identification and retrieval

Because labels cannot be affixed to the parts, they are kept individually in small self-sealing plastic bags which contain a barcode, labelling and photo descriptions. Like parts are grouped together in small plastic drawers which also contain labelling and a photograph for easy identification and access.

As mentioned previously, some of the parts were categorized as “consumables” or one-time use only and do not need to be returned to the library. These parts are simply kept in open boxes with the collection and handed out upon request. A simple hash mark system keeps a tally on parts and provides an indicator of when more should be purchased by the faculty contact member.

FIGURE 4
The Digital Physicalities electronic parts collection is kept on “library reserve.” Individual items are grouped together by part category and kept in drawers behind the Checkout Counter. (Photograph by Denise Dale, KPU Library)
**Need Sweet Chocolate Pepper? The Seed Collection**

A good example, outside the design liaison areas that also epitomizes KPU’s tag line, where thought meets action, is the seed collection. The purpose of this collection to share and preserve locally grown, open-pollinated seeds. Access is also open to community members who are encouraged to borrow from and contribute to the collection. As outlined on the Seed Library Subject Guide, created by Science and Horticulture Liaison Librarian Celia Brinkerhoff:

“Our mission is to promote food security in our community through the preservation and exchange of locally grown and harvested seeds. We believe in keeping heirloom and open-pollinated varieties alive, in an effort to promote a more sustainable and biologically diverse food system. We also believe that in retaining the right to grow our own food, save seeds, and share our knowledge with one another, we can help to make a positive change towards a sustainable future.”

The idea for a seed collection at the institution was originated by a Horticulture faculty member and students in the Sustainable Greenhouse Club. As with the Digital Physicalities collection, logistics surrounding access, cataloguing, control and resource maintenance were catalysts for enlisting the library’s help through the liaison librarian.

The collection currently boasts over 500 varieties of seeds organized by growing ease, from easy and intermediate to difficult. A detailed list, available through the Seed Library subject guide, provides information about the name (scientific, common), variety, seed source, growing region and year the seed was harvested. The guide also provides details about borrowing privileges, how to donate to the collections, introduce students and scholars to other print-based resources available in the library and a chance to connect with the liaison librarian.

**FIGURE 5**

Seeds are kept in packets organized by growing ease. (Photograph by Chris Pfahl, KPU Library)
The seeds are housed in packets kept in a traditional card catalogue. The removable drawers make it easy to transport the seed collection to other venues. “It is important for the collection to be mobile,” says Brinkerhoff who makes a point of attending community events with help from a student assistant from one of the horticulture programs. Gatherings such as the Langley Environmental Partnership seed swap and an annual outing to the British Columbia Seeds Savers organization provide opportunities to promote the seed library and invite the community members to participate in the initiative, to extend an invitation to visit the institution and to further discover a wealth of resources on the shelves.

Back on campus use and interest in the seed collection continues as well. Students majoring in urban ecosystems within the Bachelor of Horticulture program use the collection for rooftop garden projects with harvested seeds going back into the collection, and hence the community at large. There is also interest from the sustainable agriculture program to be involved in with the seed collection for seed testing and preservation purposes but logistics need to be worked out since the program is located at another campus.

Beyond campus Brinkerhoff reports that the idea of seed collections is catching on within the academic realm. She was asked to provide mentorship to another local university interested to set up its own on-site seed library.

### Pursuing Further Collaborative Opportunities

Finding ways to remain relevant to users is a concern shared by many libraries. Declining statistics in academic libraries of “in-house library materials”, circulation and reference statistics indicate libraries need to find ways to connect with a wider community and place itself as a “center for creativity, discovery and collaboration.” This indicates that the KPU library collaborations mentioned are on the right track and liaison librarians should continue to build momentum by looking for further opportunities or participate in proposals to expand on existing ones, particularly those that involved the community at large.

One proposal being drafted builds on current momentum with the historical garment collection. Calls wants to establishment of an extracurricular group broaden research opportunities and documentation on the garment collection. A proposed Dress Research and Scholarship Society (DReSS) will be open to all students and faculty from various disciplines (e.g. art, anthropology, sociology, history) as well as alumni interested in material culture history. The cross disciplinary nature of the group would also provide opportunity for liaison
librarians to develop partnerships amongst themselves as promoted in a recent publication, “Collaborating for Impact: Special Collections and Liaison Librarian Partnerships.”

**Conclusion**

For the library, there were many positive outcomes resulting from the collaborations to provide access to non-traditional resources such as historical garments, electronic parts, and heirloom seeds. These included creating enthusiasm for the library and its resources, maintaining relevancy to students and scholars, contributing to curricula, creativity, experiential learning, as well as support for multiple ways of knowing. The collaborations also helped establish and strengthen relationships with community partners.

The purpose of this paper was to inspire academic librarians to actively seek opportunities to develop collaborative collections “beyond the book.” Looking for external and internal partnership opportunities can be the first step to developing non-traditional collections at academic libraries.

**Notes**

1. Kwantlen Polytechnic University tag line. Information about the institution is available at: www.kpu.ca.
22. Ibid.
23. Information about the Digital Physicalities Research group is available at www.digitalphysicalities.com
25. Information about SparkFun Electronics is available at www.sparkfun.com
26. For more information, see the Library guide to the Digital Physicalities http://libguides.kpu.ca/DigitalPhysicalities

Bibliography