



FOSTERING CREATIVE COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

CASE STUDIES

Case Study 1: Free Library of Philadelphia

Short Story Dispenser Brings Scale and Impact to Philadelphia



The Free Library of Philadelphia was one of four public libraries to pilot an unusual project called Fostering Creative Community Connections, a partnership between the Public Library Association (PLA) and French publisher Short Édition, whose ingenious Short Story Dispenser was already a success in France. The Story Dispenser, a freestanding machine that produces short stories at the touch of a button, was placed in unexpected Philadelphia locations, including the Philadelphia International Airport. The project was funded by the Knight Foundation.

Stories originated from Short Édition's ever-increasing collection of 80,000 one-, three- and five-minute stories and was increased to include local stories. All libraries involved call the project a success, resulting in stronger partnerships, broadened community engagement, and a renewed understanding of the value of the public library by their communities.

“What tickles my fancy,” said Alex Bender, Library Coordinator at the [Free Library of Philadelphia](#) (PA), “is that our presence in the Philadelphia Airport means that someone getting on a plane to London can grab a story and be connected to the Free Library. We’re able to reach across the waters. This is a spin that maybe other libraries don’t have.”

Perhaps it’s this strategic location, or the proximity of Short Édition’s U.S. office in Philadelphia, that caused the Dispenser to not only take Philadelphia by surprise but possibly, the whole nation. “One thing that is still pleasantly surprising to me is the amount of attention this project received both in Philadelphia and nationally,” said Andrew C. Nurkin, Deputy Director for Enrichment and Civic Engagement at the Free Library of Philadelphia. “The impact is on each reader who encounters the Dispenser, and I think media outlets—including the New York Times and CBS This Morning—have recognized the power of those few minutes when a reader is delighted or moved by one of the stories.”

Philadelphia successfully launched the project in 2018 in three strategic locations. In addition to the airport, the South Philadelphia Health and Literacy Center—a co-located facility that includes the South Philadelphia Branch Library, a recreation center, and a pediatric care clinic operated by the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia—and a waiting room at the Department of Human Services (DHS), where children and families wait separated to have pre-arranged, often supervised meetings, or meet with social workers. All implementations were successful, thanks to a significant investment from partners and a large social media push on the part of the library, soft launches and press events.

While Nurkin cites this widespread opportunity for children and adults to access new reading material in surprising places as the most significant, quantifiable success for the library, he also acknowledges the unique opportunity for the library to create a ubiquitous presence. “[Short Story Dispenser] allows us to be present in places where people are not naturally thinking of us,” he says. “While catching a flight; when parents are taking their kids for a pediatrician visit, or a meeting at DHS, they’re able to see the library as a friendly presence and a multi-layered institution.”

The locations of the Dispensers were carefully chosen to balance visibility and impact. Only the Dispenser at the South Philadelphia Branch is accessible for the general public to walk in off the street. The airport Dispenser is located past security checkpoints, though given the number of passengers who pass through the Philadelphia International Airport each year, this Dispenser prints the highest volume of stories. The DHS Dispenser is in a waiting room that is not open to the public, though it is used frequently by the youth, families, and staff there. This makes Philadelphia’s numbers, an average of more than 1,500 stories per month, even more impressive.

>> Balancing Scale and Impact

Although the Dispenser at the Department of Human Services waiting room has the lowest usage of the three, it’s reaching an important segment of Philadelphians, says Nurkin: youth who are involved in the child welfare, foster, or juvenile justice systems. The Dispenser’s location serves young people and families awaiting stressful appointments, often either supervised visits with their family of origin or to meet with social workers. Reports from DHS staff suggest the interactions around the stories have been very positive for youth and their families.

“Compared to the airport, we have seen a smaller number of interactions at DHS, of course—maybe we have had 30,000 at the airport, compared to only 2,000 at DHS,” commented Nurkin. “Yet every time the button is pressed there, that story reaches the hands of someone who is in a challenging situation. For five minutes, the story transports them.”

>> Initial Hiccups

Nurkin states that the most significant challenge for Free Library of Philadelphia has been staffing. “The machines themselves are great,” he says: “They don’t require much maintenance just to print the stories on demand. But we learned that they also have an enormous potential for programs and other types of engagement that do require staff time we did not anticipate.” The library initially engaged four staff members to launch the project, including Nurkin, Bender, and two members of the Communications Department. Librarians at the South Philadelphia Branch Library have also planned activities around the Dispenser there. Nurkin stresses that the machines are very self-sufficient, with time needed only for maintenance: paper refills or a periodic malfunction. “On a programmatic front,” he adds, “I would have liked to give 10–15% of someone’s time to make it a larger project.”

In addition, many of the initial short stories in the Short Édition collection were European classics, or literature that was translated from French. “The content initially was a little hard for our audience to engage with,” says Nurkin. “Short Édition did a great job of reacting to this and correcting it, but it took some time.”

>> Moving Forward

While the grant ended in 2019, Free Library of Philadelphia has signed for another year of Short Story Dispensers, but they will need to consider a sustainable funding option for future years. “The subscription for the machines are more expensive than anticipated during a tough budget time,” says Nurkin. “They have become so important to the spaces where they are located; they’ve become defining features, so it’s very hard to disentangle them. On the one side, that’s great; on the other, it is a cost we have to absorb.”

He references a sense of obligation for each of the machines for varying reasons. The kids and staff love the one at the DHS facility, he says, and likewise, it’s become intrinsic to the South Philadelphia Branch Library. The airport Dispenser is not only very popular, it is hardwired into the airport network, making removal complicated.

“My other piece of advice would be to ensure you have sufficient staff time to manage this project. It does not run on autopilot—it needs a project manager who can handle maintenance, promotion, outreach, and content. With that commitment, though, the impact is worthwhile.”

Ultimately, Nurkin says, “the Dispensers are wonderful in and of themselves, and I would encourage other public libraries to use them. But it’s not an add-on; it’s a thing you should decide to do. Budget for it for the long term and give time to it to make the most of it.”

Funded by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, through a grant from the Public Library Association (PLA), Fostering Creative Community Connections pilot project supported four libraries in Knight Foundation communities to bring short stories to unexpected places via the Short Story Dispenser. For more information on Knight Communities, visit <https://knightfoundation.org/programs/communities/>.

French publisher Short Édition with the Public Library Association partnered to install machines in libraries in Knight Communities and to produce a nationwide short story contest whose winners were added to the Short Édition catalog in selected machines. For more information, visit <https://short-edition.com/en/>.

The project aimed to increase public awareness for libraries, while renewing interest in literacy and literature, and increasing civic engagement through community outreach, partnerships and empowerment of emerging literary voices.

The mission of the Free Library of Philadelphia is to advance literacy, guide learning, and inspire curiosity. Its vision is to build an enlightened community devoted to lifelong learning.