



Idea Lab: Outreach in the Time of a Pandemic

IDEA LAB

Introduction to Idea Lab

Meaghan O'Connor, DC Public Library

The Idea Lab within JLOE is a space to center the voices of library practitioners, with a focus on emerging practices and experimental approaches. This inaugural Idea Lab is dedicated to the creative and inspiring ways that libraries are connecting with their communities - either virtually or socially-distantly - while prioritizing health and safety for customers and for library workers.

“Public Libraries are a last refuge for the most vulnerable members of our communities”

The worldwide shut down of physical library locations brought public attention to what the library community has long known—that public libraries are a last refuge for the most vulnerable members of our communities. Many libraries quickly and successfully pivoted to digital services

and virtual programming, all the while understanding that these services don't meet the needs of some of our most regular customers. People who rely on public libraries for a human connection with a staff person or another customer, internet access, a cool space on a hot day, or something as simple as a water fountain.

So how have libraries responded to this urgent need to recreate our outreach and engagement strategies when our buildings are off limits and human connections are necessarily distanced by six feet or mediated through a screen?

At the District of Columbia Public Library, we're building on a foundation of strong partnerships to stay connected, deliver programs, and provide updates about library services. This looks like conducting virtual outreach through partners like the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Washington and their Clubhouse in Your House initiative and other community organizations. We're also developing downloadable kits that partners can use to lead their own programming while taking advantage of library resources. We're putting together programming packages and book giveaways that we can deliver to a central location - like DC Housing Authority or a summer meals distribution site - for a partner to distribute to their constituents. We know that there are critical gaps that we aren't able to safely support right now. But I've never been more proud of the ingenuity and compassion of my team, my library, and of libraries around the world.

Opportunity Hides Behind Adversity

Dianne Connery, Pottsville Library

Opportunity hides behind adversity. And have we ever had some adversity lately?! I was really moved by what one of our regular patrons shared with me recently. She talked about how access to the internet will be the difference between her five boys missing a year of school and having those same boys thrive. Three of her sons have a variety of challenges - ADHD, stutter, autism, and dyslexia. The family has been coming to the library for years, and the boys are exceptionally polite. Their father takes the one car to work M-F. They do not

have internet in their rural neighborhood (satellite is the only option where they live—too expensive and not adequate bandwidth) nor a computer. Because of Covid-19, it is unlikely the sons will be able to go to school in person. The boys need specialized education that the mom doesn't feel equipped to provide. Oh, she earned her GED 3 years ago and needs job skills. I worry. How will a family like that ever get out of the hole they are in?

The library staff was able to refurbish a donated computer from a local business and loan them a hot spot. This is a start, but it isn't the real solution. Through reaching out to a local wireless internet service provider and to a national non-profit, Gigabit Libraries Network, we have identified funding to put up a small tower in their neighborhood which will make it possible for everyone to have access. That includes the grandmother down the road, who can't read, who is raising her dyslexic 7 year-old granddaughter.

In this rural library, outreach and engagement are on a whole new level now because the needs are so great. Outreach is coordinating local businesses and churches to leave their WiFi on in their parking lots. Engagement is bringing together the stakeholders who know what the issues are and can make things happen. We've always been close to the community, but now outreach means looking beyond our city limits for long-term solutions to help patrons reach their aspirations. Much of the staff's time is spent in national, even global, Zoom meetings about universal broadband and advocacy. Using a map of low-income students' homes without broadband, we are coordinating efforts with ISPs, ISDs, and non-profits to build the infrastructure for these students to have in-home internet. While waiting for more funding we've been able to launch neighborhood access stations – similar to parking lot Wi-Fi, but within walking distance for those who do not have transportation. They deserve an equal right at education. We understand we are at a turning point, and libraries are making a choice right now. Rural libraries are in a position to transform lives and communities. We must know what people in our community need and work with other organizations to make it happen. There is opportunity.

Outreach in time of confinement: One example in Haiti

Elizabeth Pierre-Louis, Program Coordinator, Fondasyon Konesans ak Libete FOKAL

In Haiti, on March 19th, 2020, a presidential decree closed all schools, universities, churches, limited transport, reduced the workload of civil workers, closed the international airport and imposed a curfew. As a national foundation, [Fondasyon Konesans ak Libete](#) providing public reading services, we felt compelled to close to the public until an unknown date.

It was not the first time we were forced to close quickly and for a long length of time. In 2019, due to socio-political instability, schools and many businesses were closed for almost a trimester. But here it was at international scale with frightening repercussions. FOKAL has a network of 17 community libraries across Haiti and provides them with financial and technical support. We organized distance work and thought about how to keep our public, patrons occupied, informed but also entertained. We decided to offer online content, recommendations, critiques, poetry, downloadable books, as well as original creations.

Already in 1997, the library program had re-discovered a gem, the adaptation of the Lafontaine Fables by Haitian lawyer and author, George Sylvain in 1901: *Fables de La Fontaine racontées par un montagnard haïtien et transcrites en vers créoles /The Lafontaine fables told by a Haitian mountain peasant and transcribed in creole poetry*. First the work was in public domain and most of the French XVIIth century fables (themselves adapted from Aesop and other Greek and Roman Antiquity poets) were once again adapted, this time to the Haitian context in

early XIXth century creole. A weeklong festival was created then, a reedition of the book with the addition of the modern Creole and spelling and glossary. Fast-forward to 2018, when we decided to focus more activities with local content to young children and a play/musical “Lafontaine d’après Sylvain” was created using these adapted fables. The audience from “7 to 99 years old” loved it, the play toured the country, performed in several schools and auditoriums. Recently we worked with a young animation designer and launched last week a short animation film “Kòmè lasigal ak sò fwonmi” (La cigale et la fourmi) one of Lafontaine most famous fable last week.

This original online content is part of the collection that we are building during the COVID era to make more books on different formats accessible to all age groups. We are working on online theater plays, debate, songs as well as reading chapters of books in the public domain.

We feel very privileged to share this [short animation film](#) with you. Other short animation films will follow.

Amplifying Our Voice

Jason Kusma, Executive Director, Toledo Lucas County Library

Like many organizations, Toledo Lucas County Public Library (TLCPL) relies on a mix of on-site interactions and print materials, robust website content, social media, earned media, paid media placements, email, and digital signs to stay connected with the community about all of our services and programs. When we closed our locations in March in advance of Ohio’s stay at home orders, we responded with increased attention to social media, website content, and email and have seen the increased eMedia circulation that other libraries have reported.

However, we also needed to consider how we could communicate TLCPL’s unmistakable positive presence in the community while customers couldn’t be in our vibrant and welcoming spaces. Given the trajectory of COVID-19, we additionally needed to think about a long-term shift in communications outreach with an emphasis on creatively amplifying our message. Here are a few of our tactics:

[Sageloves2eat](#): We invited a local teen who regularly posted about books on her Instagram page to be a social media influencer for TLCPL’s Summer Read program. She posted about how and why to join as well as provided fresh perspectives from her own reading.



[@sagelovestoeat](#): It’s my favorite time of the year! The Summer Read at the @ToledoLibrary is back! earn prizes!



[@savelovestoeat](#): Currently Reading: Tyler Johnson Was Here by @mrjaycoles. Really good so far. It’s a page turner.

TLCPL usually connects best with teens in our spaces, so enlisting a teen social media connection helped amplify our message. This builds on our overall socialmedia influencer plan that allows us to engage with audiences who typically don't follow us.

[Your Chapter Awaits community art project](#): One of our key previous projects was creating and printing a 64+ page seasonal program guide. Without customers in our buildings and drastically reduced programming profile, we reallocated this budget to a community art project. We invited local visual artists and a local poet to create artworks that reflected ideas important to them with the Library as the common thread. We printed posters and small stickers to distribute for free at all of our locations. Most importantly, all the artists and a curator who assisted us distributed the posters throughout the community at local Boys & Girls clubs, coffee shops, restaurants, stores, and more. A major regional outdoor shopping center printed even larger posters and displayed them in store windows. Instead of sharing our message by ourselves, we had an entire creative team helping us.

[Amplifying storytimes](#): TLCPL positioned our virtual storytimes as [Saturday Morning with the Library](#) to build on data suggesting that nostalgia is a powerful force during COVID as people seek comfort with familiarity. In addition to storytimes, each week we provide singalongs, magic shows and more. In keeping with amplifying our message, special guest storytimes feature local celebrities who then share the storytimes on their own communications channels to reach more people in our community.

Looking beyond our traditional channels will continue to be a focus to ensure our relevancy and importance to the community is ever present.

70 stories for Children: From Librarians with Love

Melania Butnariu (Brasov County Library, Romania) and Dr. Claudia Serbanuta (Progress Foundation, Romania)

This Idea Lab is dedicated to the power that love and dedication for library users has in bringing together people, building trust and putting forward innovative ideas.

As the pandemic wave reached Romania, at the beginning of March 2020, the first decisions put in place by authorities to assure social distancing included closing the schools and libraries. In a matter of days, public librarians were left with a limited way of connecting with their public. In the absence of online library services, for a number of weeks, the librarians struggled to connect with the public using alternative solutions. Among the ideas put to work, the one implemented by librarians for their children audience won the heart of everyone: a marathon of story-reading for children!

When the State of Emergency was declared the librarians, who previously worked in projects that were implemented nationally, activated their online connections and opened their network in support for librarians nationwide. One such effort gathered together, as a WhatsApp group, the librarians working with children on the project "Friendship on a String" coordinated by the Center for Excellence in Children's Services from Brasov County Library. Besides the original 55 librarians that joined the group before March, by May the group had over 100 users and was buzzing with links to free resources and webinars that librarians could use to reach out to children in their communities.

As the International Children's Day was approaching, Melania Butnariu, the administrator of the WhatsApp Friendship on a String group and the host of the Marathon, put to practice a quote from Lidia Kulikovski, a library guru and mentor to many librarians from the region: "A librarian who does not innovate is like a car without an engine." Here is Melania's take on this event:

Starting with this idea, sometime before the 1st of June, I proposed to carry out an activity together with librarians from our group and they agreed to give it a try, because what would June 1st, the International Children's Day, be in our libraries without stories? We wanted to do an online story-reading marathon. The emotional response of librarians was so strong that, even though we have not worked together before and some had little experience with online platforms like Zoom, more than 90 librarians expressed interest in participating and a strong team of eight librarians volunteered their time and expertise for coordinating the effort to bring this idea to life. With an ad-hoc team, an inexistent budget and a lot of love the Marathon took place within a week.

From 10AM to 6PM, 70 librarians from 2 countries, Romania and Moldova, read 70 stories live on Zoom with an amazing energy and with an extraordinary desire to deliver the stories, to share their love for books and reading and also to manifest their love for children. The whole marathon was broadcast on the page created for this event, a page that gathered over 25 hundred likes. The video of the marathon had a reach of over 50 thousand, with a total of almost 50 thousands minutes watched by the public.

We had some blessings from above as we managed to pull it through with some intense practice time, and no technical difficulties. After 8 hours of broadcasting live, when the participants met on the Zoom session we cried of joy, we laughed of joy, we congratulated ourselves and we screamed "Incredible!!! We did it!!! Our efforts were not in vain!!! We are a great team!"

Special thanks to the small team that made this possible - 7 members from different institutions were there with me, day and night, in bringing this dream to life: Mariana Marian (Sălaj), Cristina Maria Olaru (Focsani), Maria Truță(Arad), Margareta Tătăruș (Focsani), Mihaela Doina Stanciu (Brăila), Claudia Șerbănuță (București) și Vlăduț Andreescu (Târgoviște).



[Seventy Stories for Children Facebook Page](#)

[Full marathon Recording](#)

[YouTube channel](#) where all individual stories will be posted