



FOSTERING CREATIVE COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

CASE STUDIES

Case Study 4: Wichita Public Library

Relationships Build Short Story Dispenser Success in Wichita



The Wichita Public Library 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 Short Story Dispenser, a freestanding machine that produces short stories at the touch of a button, was placed in unexpected Wichita locations, including a veterans hospital. The project was funded by the Knight Foundation.

Stories originated from Short Édition’s 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.

“It’s just so unexpected for people,” said retired Wichita (KS) Public Library Director, Cynthia Berner, “particularly for people who maybe never had a library connection or who had a lapsed library connection, to see something from the library that was pretty modern, easy, and so different than that mental picture of an old, dusty library.”

Building a library connection, as well as strengthening existing relationships, proved instrumental to the success of the Short Story Dispenser project in Wichita. Not the least important was the relationship with library staff, who were pulled together to assist in initial implementation. Roughly eight to ten staff members helped to get the project running at full speed, said Berner, including a communications manager, responsible for social media, press outreach, and collateral materials; a digital services manager, who handled technical set-up and troubleshooting; several delivery staff who were responsible for changing paper and any troubleshooting, as well as a project manager. Berner estimates that this peak time, including initial grant application and meetings, machine set-up, launch and associated events, lasted about 12 weeks, with staff time of about three hours per week.

Short Story Dispensers were implemented in three key Wichita locations: a pediatric medical clinic, a Veterans Administration Hospital and a third, intended to “roam” in various locations, beginning with the grand opening of their new library in downtown Wichita on June 16, 2018.

The Wichita team deems the grand opening a definite highlight, when thousands of visitors to the Advanced Learning Library were introduced to the Short Story Dispenser. A total of 234 stories printed that day—nearly one story every two minutes. Usage continued to be strong through the next two months, yet they stuck to the plan of keeping the third Short Story Dispenser roaming, calling on an existing partner to participate in the project.

>> A Passion for the Project

Reverie Roasters, a local coffee shop, had a location within a library building, but the library team chose to move the Short Story Dispenser downtown. “We made the decision to move the Short Story Dispenser to their flagship store in downtown Wichita,” says project manager Julie Sherwood. “And once we did, it was so well-used and popular that we didn’t really move it around again. They’re really big on supporting literacy efforts.”

Sherwood offers that as a great quality to consider as you are contemplating partners for this project: “Before you start, find a partner who is absolutely passionate about literacy. That’s what we got with the owner of the coffee shop. And because he was so passionate, he was really proud to have this really cool tool to talk about something that was one of his core values for his business. That extra attention is why this location has turned out to be such a high-volume place for us.”

>> Unexpected Ownership

Once the Short Story Dispensers were in place, they became virtually plug-and-play. “There are some weeks where almost nothing happens,” says Julie Sherwood, Education and Engagement Manager and project manager. “But if you average it out, it probably comes out to a quarter hour a week. It’s been very manageable.”

“We were deliberately pretty passive once they were up and running,” adds Berner. Although the team contemplated doing additional promotion around the Short Story Dispensers, other projects took precedence. “But I think that showed us,” says Berner, “that just having the installation creates value in and of itself. Anything above that is a value-add.”

Although the Wichita team initially decided to handle all maintenance issues with the dispensers, a change of heart proved an “accidental best practice,” said Berner. “We had promised those partners that we wouldn’t be asking anything of them other than the space,” she states. Staff would get notified when the machines were offline or out of paper and head out to the site, meaning that the machine was left not functioning for a certain amount of time.

“Finally,” continued Sherwood, “we decided to see if our partners would be willing to take care of these small functions themselves. And that change actually created more ownership from our partners. We realized that we really want them to help promote it. If people see the Short Story Dispenser and don’t know what it is, we want our partners to be encouraging them to use it and to be telling people about it. I would say find a way to get your partners as involved as you can get them so that they can help promote what you’re doing.”

>> VA Partnership

“Dole Veterans Administration Medical Hospital (VA) was the first partner we contacted,” said Sherwood. “We had been wanting to develop a partnership with them and our contact there was very enthusiastic about working with us. They actually hosted a launch event at their site when we kicked it off at that location.”

“However, there wasn’t a lot of use at the VA hospital. We had envisioned that it would be in the main waiting room, but ultimately, the Short Story Dispenser was placed in an adjacent waiting room that didn’t get much traffic. Another downside was that we received feedback that the print was too small for many veterans.” Contacts at the VA then requested that at least a 14-pt type be used, an option not available on the machine. Although Sherwood and her team eventually made the decision to relocate this machine, they are calling this a win.

“All that aside,” continues Sherwood, “it did draw us into a closer partnership with the VA community.” Since the introduction to the VA via the Short Story Dispenser, the library is now part of a community group of organizations that provide services to veterans. In addition, a representative from the VA has begun programming at the library.

Since relocation to Wichita State University, in partnership with the university library, the Short Story Dispenser has seen a spike in usage, but that may be a result of additional availability: “We also hadn’t thought about the fact that both the clinics and the hospital are closed on weekends. So we lose two days of usage, per week,” says Sherwood.

>> Pediatric Partners

Wichita Public's third location for the Short Story Dispenser was the University of Kansas Pediatric Clinic, with which they'd already had a relationship through various reading projects. Despite an overall success, with strong usage and positive feedback, the team is seeking a new venue.

"We thought that we would try placing it in a place where the library might not be as well-known," says Sherwood. Hunter Health Clinic is located in a lower income neighborhood that has yet to have a relationship with the library. Sherwood reports that the machine arrived in 2020, just prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, so no anecdotal data is available yet.

"One piece of advice I would give would be for a library to think about their goals and what they want to achieve before they do it," says Sherwood. "If you want to maximize the number of stories read, then definitely go for high-traffic places like a coffee shop or airport. Those are going to get more views. But if you're trying to really make a connection, for instance with lower-income kids, then putting it somewhere like Hunter Health Clinic is a way to use the Short Story Dispensers in a very specific but smaller way to connect with a particular community."

"All of it has just been a great opportunity and experience for us," said Berner. "We were all so thrilled to have been selected to be one of the original four partners."

Although the Knight Foundation grant ended in April 2019, Wichita Public plans to continue with the Short Story Dispensers. "We signed on for another two years because we love the product and we believe in it," said Sherwood. In August 2020, the Short Story Dispensers were retrofitted with touchless covers, enabling them to be accessible in post-COVID settings. Each machine has been redesigned with three new options: Short Édition Stories (for adults), Children's Stories (from Short Édition), and Local Stories. The final category will come from stories written by area authors and submitted through the library's new Short Story Portal.

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 Wichita Public Library will be the community's preferred knowledge resource, providing inviting libraries, superb collections and excellent service.