

## Curating, Community, Collaboration: The Incidental Outcomes of One Library Collection Development Lesson

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*Abstract: What began in a library science course as a collection development assignment serendipitously transformed into varied learning experiences for students across disciplines and program levels. This article shares the journey of how a singular lesson idea blossomed into an unintentional, multidisciplinary project that led to unexpected learning outcomes for all involved.*

*Keywords: School librarian, Intentional learning, Incidental learning, multidisciplinary collaboration*

Seeking ways to meaningfully engage students in the authentic application of new knowledge and skills is the ultimate goal of educators. With this in mind, a professor of School Library and Information Science (SLIS) created an assignment that optimized the meaningful application of the course content through the development of a specialized book collection. Knowledge of how to develop a library collection is foundational to meeting the needs of students and teachers by providing access to collections of rich and relevant resources. This assignment called upon candidates to curate a collection of book titles that would be of interest to a given demographic, inclusive of ethnicity, grade level, reading interest, and age considerations. This article shares the journey of how an intentionally designed course assignment blossomed into an unintentional, multidisciplinary project that led to unexpected learning outcomes for all involved. Those incidental outcomes include a community partnership, multidisciplinary collaborations, and experience with indirect service-learning. We hope that sharing this experience not only encourages others to tap into the hidden collaborative potential of their own projects and the meaningful learning outcomes afforded by them, but also serves as a guidebook for librarians as they create projects that reach beyond the stacks of their library.

### Incidental Learning

Foundational to the story of this experience is the discovery of unforeseen outcomes (incidental learnings), which brought depth to a singular course assignment. Incidental learning is defined as unexpected learning that occurs when the intentional goal is to learn something else (Long, 2017). This kind of learning is, essentially, the learning that happens as a by-product of intentionally planned learning experiences (Bisson et al., 2014; Kelly, 2012; Marsick & Watkins, 1990/2015). Understandably, incidental learning is often overlooked as educators are engrossed in the success of their students in achieving the intentionally designed learning outcomes of any given learning experience. The illumination of unexpected learning outcomes within a lesson provides the educator insight into the holistic nature of learning and an understanding that, at times, students may not get the entirety of the objective of a lesson, but learn other lessons throughout the process.

## Incidental Learning Incident #1

### Community Partnership

The SLIS collection development assignment was created to engage librarian candidates in the development of highly specialized collections that cultivate interest in literature via authentically connected texts. This microcosm experience was designed to promote the skills required of a librarian as the curator of book collections for specific student populations in individualized school settings. The product of the assignment produced a collection of books designed for a specific demographic within a given scenario. The SLIS professor realized that this assignment could not only be used to educate school librarian candidates in the collection development process, but could also be used to provide real-world experiences while serving the community. Thus, the SLIS professor redesigned the scenario in the assignment to challenge the candidates to curate another collection of books that could be given to a specific family in need. The SLIS professor contacted the community regional director for *Habitat for Humanity* to garner their interest and secure a partnership. Realizing that funding was needed to purchase these books, the professor wrote a nominal grant to support the acquisition of the book titles. Once funds were awarded, the *Habitat for Humanity* regional director was contacted for the purpose of identifying a family and specific demographics to guide in the selection of books. The selected Hispanic family of seven had five children under the age of eight. Librarian candidates were provided specific information that offered meaningful insight into the family as a whole, and the children more specifically, including ethnicity, age, grade level, and interests. Informed by the family and children's profiles, candidates made personalized book selections for inclusion in a home library. These candidate-curated collections were gifted to the identified family and an incidental incident occurred when a community partnership project was born - *Habitat for Reading*.

The partnership with *Habitat for Humanity* and the creation of *Habitat for Reading* generated an experience that moved beyond a single semester and beyond a single course. What started as a simple SLIS course assignment developed a university/community partnership that places books in the hands of children beyond the school day and in their home environment. This project has contributed to the building of a strong foundation for the development of early literacy within the children of many *Habitat for Humanity* families.

### Supporting Literature

#### *Early Literacy Experiences*

Strong foundational experiences with literature early in young learners' lives build a sound foundation for a literacy-rich life. Early exposure to reading is an indicator of overall success in school and nurtures a love of reading that extends beyond the classroom into adulthood. Therefore, early experiences with literature within the home are imperative for children (Fives, 2016; Goldfeld et al., 2021; Lamy, 2013; Leseman & Jong, 1998; Silinskas et al., 2020; Skwarchuk et al., 2014; Su et al, 2017). It has been proven that book ownership and early exposure to books can have a positive effect on learning (Tadesse & Washington, 2013; Towell et al., 2021). Sadly, not all children have access to books at home (Bracken & Fischel, 2008; Ness et al., 2020; Neuman, 2001; Raz & Bryant, 1990).

A growing number of children, particularly those from low-income families, begin kindergarten far behind their peers in terms of literacy development (Neuman & Moland, 2019; Whitehurst et al., 1994; Whitehurst, 2014). The socioeconomic status (SES) of families has been shown to have a substantial impact on the reading abilities of learners. In their study of the long-term educational consequences of summer learning differences on ninth-graders, Alexander et al. (2007)

found that two-thirds of the reading achievement gap could be explained by unequal access to summer learning opportunities during the students' elementary school years. The absence of those opportunities likely correlates with parental education and income, which are two strong predictors of academic achievement in children (Duncan & Murnane, 2011; Luo et al., 2020; Reardon, 2013). Several family characteristics are subsumed under SES or family income: there is less availability and use of printed materials in the home (Feitelson & Goldstein, 1986; Froiland et al., 2016; McCormick & Mason, 1986); children from low-income families are read to less frequently (Feitelson & Goldstein, 1986; Harris & Smith, 1987; Niklas et al., 2020); there is a limited amount of shared picture book reading to young children in the home (Crane-Thoreson & Dale, 1992; Hindman et al., 2013; Luo et al., 2020; Neuman & Moland, 2019; Rowe, 1991); and one in five children in lower-income families do not read any books at all over the summer (Scholastic, 2016). The characteristics of SES families are often insurmountable in the face of life's challenges. More broadly, at the neighborhood level, substantial structural inequalities exist. This creates book deserts in communities that significantly limit low-income families' direct access to books resulting in widening academic gaps among communities of varied means. For those living in high-poverty areas, the book desert poses an additional layer of challenge for the literacy development of children from SES families (Neuman & Moland, 2019).

### ***Reading Development***

The road to reading literacy is thought to start at an early age. Young children acquire knowledge and skills intuitively during interactions with their environment without specific direction from a parent. Building on children's acquisition of words from environmental print, parents are encouraged to read aloud to their young children. Reading aloud to children and interactions with storybooks have been long recognized as positive influences on reading interest and development (Flynn, 2011; LaCour et al., 2013; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; Luo et al., 2020; Snow et al., 1998).

### ***Motivation to Read***

The motivation to read is greatly influenced by having easy access to books. Allowing young children to explore and make choices about their reading material increases effort and commitment to reading, as well as increases the likelihood that they would engage in reading more (Guthrie et al., 2000; Reedy & De Carvalho, 2021; Worthy & McKool, 1996). Providing access to collections that include both fiction and nonfiction selections potentially increases reader motivation and interest, and provides daily opportunities for independent reading (International Reading Association, 2014). Key to reader motivation and interest is offering books that are of special interest to children and reflect their image/identities. Additionally, Pappas (1993) found that children showed a preference for informational text, and Mohr (2006) noted that nonfiction books were the overwhelming choice of first-grade students. Being able to browse and choose books of interest to children is essential in laying a strong foundation for reading literacy.

## **Incidental Learning Incident #2**

### **Multidisciplinary Collaboration**

The richness of the SLIS assignment was the catalyst for the professor to exuberantly share the resulting *Habitat for Reading* project with others. As a result, the power of the learning experience inspired other professors to seek ways to align their course assignments with the heart of *Habitat for Reading*. In the end, four professors, across three content areas and two program levels (undergraduate

and graduate) became coincidental collaborators in this project, establishing the impact of the high value placed on educators sharing their practice with one another. With this in mind, librarians stand at the forefront of being leaders in the inspiration for such literature-based learning experiences within their learning communities.

### ***Accidental Ally #1: Undergraduate Survey of Children's Literature***

The *Habitat for Reading* project provided a perfect opportunity for the professor of a children's literature course to extend children's learning activities aligned to specific books to include activities for parents to use while reading aloud to their children. Armed with the list of titles from the home library collection provided by the school librarian candidates, the teacher candidates each selected a book for which they would create a reading packet of relevant read-aloud activities. The original expectation for the assignment was for candidates to create a list of strategies and activities for parents to use when reading the books to their children. However, the candidates were so excited about the project, they not only created guidelines for parents, but they went above and beyond to also develop learning activities for the young readers that would help them in learning the concepts and reading skills for the chosen books. The activities were designed to engage children in critical thinking, fun, and creativity.

As an example, the packet created for the book, *BIG CAT, little cat* (2017), by Elisha Cooper, included a copy of the book and the following materials:

- A set of upper-case and lower-case letters for children to
  - compare and contrast;
  - spell words;
  - craft sentences.
- A box of crayons to
  - color a picture of them doing something with a friend.
- Three stuffed cats of different heights to
  - understand the difference between big, bigger, and biggest.
- A water-color set and paper on which to
  - paint a scene from the book;
  - paint a picture of a favorite pet.
- A journal in which to write
  - a story or poem about a pet;
  - a description of a favorite pet;
  - an entry about a time when they were sad about the loss of a pet or friend;
  - an entry about how they felt when they got a new pet or friend.
- Sponges in the shape of cat paw prints with 6 stamp pads of different colors to
  - create patterns;
  - complete graphing, counting, and sorting activities.
- A decorated stage was designed from a science board and cat finger puppets to
  - act out a play.
- A package of colored Goldfish crackers (representing cat food) to
  - complete graphing, counting, and sorting activities.

### ***Accidental Ally #2: Undergraduate Social Studies Methods***

The *Habitat for Reading* project provided a learning experience that aligned with the foundational objective framing the elementary Social Studies methods course. Candidates applied knowledge gained in the course regarding the mindsets required of a critically engaged citizen by curating children's literature and designing teaching activities that foster those dispositions and skills.

In groups, Social Studies candidates selected a children's book supporting themes related to the cultivation of critical citizens. These topic-specific titles extended the book collections of the librarian candidates and were funded by the *Habit for Reading* grant. Social Studies teacher candidates developed a folder with activities for parents and children to strengthen family shared-reading time at home. At the end of the semester, the final product was donated to the home library of a selected *Habitat for Humanity* family with elementary-aged children. The companion folder for each personally selected book included the following:

- Title Page- Title, author, illustrator, and image of the book;
- Peek in the Pages- An engaging synopsis of the book that excites the family about reading the book;
- Book Banter- 3-5 conversation starters for parents to engage with their children before, during, and after the book is read for parents to facilitate;
- Wonderful Words- Four words and pictures that match and link to the concepts/vocabulary of the book;
- Beyond the Book- Simple ideas of how the parent and child can connect the book to life and self. This may include links to things around the house, the grocery store, or other;
- Practical Pursuits- A hands-on activity related to the book, age-appropriate, and practical places the family may frequent;
- Supplementary Suggestions- Two additional related book titles with the following information: Title, author, image of the book, and a brief synopsis of the book that excites the reader.

### ***Accidental Ally #3: Graduate Survey of Reading***

One of the best ways to expose children to books and nurture a love of reading is to read books aloud to them. Reading aloud to children not only models good reading through fluent and expressive reading, but also builds critical language and literacy skills, encourages independent and confident readers, and broadens students' views of the world (Towell et al., 2021). The professor of a graduate reading course used the *Habitat for Reading* project as a vehicle for her candidates to apply their gained knowledge of reading strategies while teaching parents how to use these strategies when reading aloud to their children. Candidates selected a popular classic children's book, then created short tutorial videos for parents in which they modeled the use of a read-aloud strategy for parents. A series of sample tutorial videos for mini-lessons on read-aloud strategies include the following:

- Expressing the Emotion: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BOOWrq\\_57oE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BOOWrq_57oE)
- Linger Finger: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FPL8KTxI3QM&t=4s>:
- Characters Do - Characters Say: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bn7fmlwLGBQ>
- Move to Remember Action Words: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gec-6m-9l8s>
- The Teeny Tiny Details: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y7S7BxW8NH0&t=60s>
- Point and Read: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=270TLEMAgzQ&t=20s>

The development of the *Habitat for Reading* project generated an experience that was built upon multidisciplinary collaborations across the College of Education. While collaboration across the college was not an intentional expectation of the initial collections assignment, the inclusion of the resulting *Habitat for Reading* project within multiple courses enriched the curricula and deepened the learning objectives of each course involved. For the candidates, the experience shifted the purpose of the course assignments from a mere course completion task to a task with an immediate real-world influence and contribution. The professors involved were reminded of the power of collaboration and were inspired to seek out additional, equally meaningful, collaborative assignments/projects. The inclusion of these accidental allies expanded and enriched the original vision of the collections assignment and made a grander impact on the professors, candidates, and *Habitat for Humanity* families. In the end, the overall experience of the coincidental collaborations extended the depth and overall trajectory of *Habitat for Reading*, proving the power of collaboration.

## Supporting Literature

### *Multidisciplinary Collaboration*

Rich collaborations are imperative to bridging learning to real-world application. The Association of Teacher Educators promotes collaboration as a required focus of teacher education programs in the United States, “Accomplished teacher educators adopt a collaborative approach to teacher education that involves a variety of stakeholders...” (2008, p. 4). Collaborations that bring together different perspectives and expertise from multiple disciplines are imperative for strengthening programs, enriching curricula, and fostering creativity and innovation (Roper et al., 2021). In the case of the *Habitat for Reading* project, multidisciplinary collaboration extended the original vision of an assignment in the school librarian preparation course, enriching the curriculum and providing new learning opportunities for candidates in other disciplines.

In each course connected to the SLIS project, new approaches to the learning objectives of the course were inspired, deepening each course’s curricula. For example, within the Social Studies course, the collaboration offered an exercise in the application of the skill of identifying children’s literature connected to a specific Social Studies theme (development of the dispositions of a critical citizen). Additionally, it provided Social Studies candidates an experience in generating individualized and engaging reading activities. Compared to other assignments, candidates’ engagement with the *Habitat for Reading* project was distinctively higher. Based on instructor observations and final grades, candidates went beyond the expectations of the assignment (the only assignment of the semester in which this was evident for ALL candidates). They supplemented their final products with personally funded extension materials, demonstrating their ability to select meaningful materials to accompany engaging content-based activities in support of understanding Social Studies concepts. Typically, candidates generate lesson plans for “imagined” students, as most are not teaching in classrooms. The final product of this assignment provided candidates an opportunity to translate the skills required to create and engage in meaningful activities for specifically identified children, making the experience meaningful and, to some extent, personal.

Beyond enriching the curricula and program overall, this collaborative project promoted candidates’ awareness of and ability to recognize the value of other disciplines. As the heart of the project began as a collection development assignment in the School Library and Information Science program, the opportunity arose to educate pre-service teachers about the role of a school librarian as an indispensable resource and partner in teaching and learning. This is a lesson that is traditionally absent within most undergraduate programs. Based on course discussions and reflections, the pre-service teachers who participated in this multidisciplinary collaboration will enter practice armed with

the knowledge and desire to collaborate with the school librarian, enriching their curricula and teaching practices.

### **Incidental Incident #3: Exposure to Indirect Service-Learning**

As the result of a course assignment, the *Habitat for Reading* project included a community partner and organically developed into a collaborative indirect service-learning project. As defined, an indirect service-learning project benefits the community as a whole without direct connection to individuals (Kaye, 2010). Engagement in the project provided all learners the ability to transition the theory of their coursework into real-world contexts. Within each of the courses, candidates synthesized their understanding of children's literature, literacy development, and citizenship cultivation through literature within the context of *Habitat for Reading* as an indirect service-learning project.

Despite the absence of an intentionally designed service-learning project, all stakeholders were enriched by the resulting experience. A clear indication of the impact of the service element within the project was the extraordinary quality of the final projects across all of the courses. Each professor was surprised and elated by the unexpected depth of passion exhibited in the candidates' work, which went well above and beyond the original objectives of the assignments. These resulting displays of work reiterated the power of learning experiences grounded in real-world contexts. Participation in this indirect service project shifted the purpose from simply being a course assignment to being a meaningful and impactful gift to families in the community.

Service-learning was a topic of exploration within the objectives of the Social Studies methods course. Participation in this indirect service-learning project presented a connection to prior readings and class discussions, offering candidates a deeper understanding of the typologies and implementation of service-learning within their practice.. This insight was supported via candidates' reflections about the experience: "I realized that there are all kinds of service-learning projects and it isn't as hard to connect to the content as I thought" (Candidate, Fall 2019); "Given how easy it was to implement a service-learning project in our classes, I can't wait to add service-learning in my own practice (Candidate, Spring 2019). In addition, *Habitat for Reading* presented an in-practice example of how a teacher (SLIS professor) unearthed a connection between her curriculum and the community, easily generating an incidental service-learning project. Such exemplars present the notion that the integration of service-learning does not have to be an arduous and complex task and can promote candidates' confidence regarding their ability to infuse such learning experiences within their own practice.

Within the context of teacher and librarian education, service-learning, as a pedagogy, is an invaluable tool in bridging the gap between theory and practice (Lin & Bates 2015). Such connections allow candidates to envision the integration of service-learning, at any level, within their own teaching, further extending the transition of theory to practice.

## **Supporting Literature**

### ***Service-Learning***

Service-learning, as a pedagogical approach, echoes the work of Dewey (1916; 1938) through the intentional marriage of learning and community service. As a form of experiential learning, service-learning offers layered opportunities for learners to deepen, connect and expand knowledge in natural settings - providing meaningful connections that move beyond the confines of a university course.

Effective service-learning projects possess similar elements that lead to meaningful experiences. Chambers and Lavery (2012) suggest the first element of a strong service-learning project

design is addressing the needs of the community in genuine ways. Secondly, there is a balance between the learning and service aspects of the project; both receive equal attention in design and implementation. A focus on mutual benefits for all parties involved in a project is the third element of effective service-learning. This relationship is an authentic partnership where all are supported and all learn. The final element possesses a structured design cycle that includes preparation, action, reflection, and demonstration.

The impact of service-learning on learners is multi-layered. Lin and Bates (2015) declare that service-learning adds value to students' own learning while exposing them to possible actions illustrative of impactful citizenship participation. Other positive learning impacts include the improvement of social skills, increased academic success, cultivation of dispositions linked to social justice and social action, and the development of lifelong learners (Baldwin et al., 2007; Celio et al., 2011; Lin & Bates, 2015). In a study done by Chambers and Lavery (2012) service-learning encouraged the dispositional development of empathy, leadership, contemplation, and confidence. The research on service-learning collectively echoes the range of positive impacts of participation in an authentic, well-designed service-learning project.

### **Lessons Learned**

Upon reflection on this experience, all faculty involved walked away with a deeper appreciation of the power of collaboration. Unique to this collaborative experience was that it was serendipitous. Without the library science professor sharing about a classroom assignment, it would not have expanded beyond her own singular course. For us, this is one of the greatest takeaways of this experience. It is a lesson for all university faculty to engage in conversations about their pedagogy in both informal and formal ways, allowing unsuspecting partnerships to emerge. We have an informal group at our university, Purposeful Pedagogy Partners, that engage professors from all disciplines in discourse about their pedagogy, promoting the exchange of ideas and collaborative projects. Such forums encourage professors to think deeply about their course assignments to unearth ideas for meaningful interdisciplinary collaborations.

If we had intentionally designed this experience, we would have created formal working partnerships between pre-service teachers and school librarian candidates. Such partnerships are powerful when developing collaboration skills, building relationships, and deepening learning. For pre-service teachers, these partnerships would help them gain an understanding of the role and expertise of school librarians and how they can support them in their practice. Additionally, librarian candidates would model criterion-based book selection, deepening pre-service teachers' ability to purposefully select quality books for their own classrooms. For the school librarian candidates, working with pre-service teachers allows them to apply what they've learned in their program and practice what they will be doing in the field.

The ability of the library professor to lean into an organic opportunity that expanded a course assignment into courses within other programs illuminated an area of improvement needed within teacher education courses - a lack of attention to the idea of risk-taking and capitalizing on organic teaching opportunities. We busily teach our candidates to plan, plan, plan; however, we do very little to cultivate their ability to take advantage of organic opportunities with their students or colleagues. The challenge of this goal is the prescribed nature of most day-to-day classrooms. Therefore, we question how, or even if, teaching our candidates to consider unplanned experiences such as this project is warranted.

As an indirect service project, candidates produced final products that exceeded expectations. In the end, these assignments provided candidates with the realization that integrating service-learning into their classroom curriculum need not be an overwhelming and complex endeavor. Additionally,



this experience served as a model for candidates to see the ease with which interdisciplinary connections can be made. The practice of identifying links between content areas is a skill that heightens candidates' ability to meaningfully create integrated curricula. As a result of these specific incidental learnings, the next iteration of this project would be redesigned as a direct service-learning project.

Finally, the experience provided subsidiary lessons. First, sharing this idea led to the discovery of a department within the university that provides support for cultivating community partnerships. Specifically, University Advancement at our university provided seed money to establish the *Habitat for Reading* project. Second, the exploration of an existing project that placed books in the hands of children led to the expansion of ideas for the initial assignment that enriched its objectives beyond its original design.

## Conclusion

*Habitat for Reading* is the start of building early literacy habits in children who may not have had book-rich lives outside the school setting. This project, which began as a singular assignment within a library science course, continues to serve *Habitat for Humanity* families. Through one librarian educator's sharing of an assignment idea, unexpected learning emerged beyond her classroom. The incidental outcomes that emerged from the library collection development assignment included a community partnership, multidisciplinary collaborations, and experience with indirect service-learning.

The partnership with *Habitat for Humanity* offered an increased level of meaning for an ordinary in-class curating assignment, giving rise to the indirect service-learning project *Habitat for Reading*. The creation of this long-lasting initiative highlights the importance of seeking partnerships that enrich the learning experiences that bring renewed purpose to university coursework.

The library collection development assignment brought together candidates, faculty from various disciplines, and a community partner. The coincidental collaboration aspect of this initiative was generated through the open enthusiasm of a School Library and Information Science professor. As a result of her sharing her instructional ideas, other professors were inspired to be a part of the project. The strength of the multidisciplinary collaboration extended the vision of the project and the impact of the endeavor beyond the original intent of SLIS assignment. In the end, the university community learned the power of sharing pedagogical designs with others and the simplicity of serendipitous collaborations.

The unintentional outcomes related to the service-learning nature of *Habitat for Reading*, generated rich and meaningful learning. Learning that extends beyond the theoretical and becomes a practical experience positioned within real-world contexts, cultivates intrinsic motivation within students to perform at the highest levels (Levesque-Bristol et al., 2011). The incidental service project provided a space for candidates to apply and deepen the intentional learning objectives of their courses. Finally, engagement with *Habitat for Reading* established a learning experience that modeled the ease with which service-learning can be integrated into curricula. The impact of service-learning on student learning emphasizes the need for intentionally designed service-learning projects that move educators in closer proximity to community organizations and the populations they serve.

The incidental outcomes of an intentionally designed assignment are often beyond our line of vision. This article unveils an example of the full learning potential and unexpected reach of a singular assignment. A librarian educator created a typical assignment. She saw an opportunity for her candidate-curated book collections to be shared. She sought out a community partner who would assist her in gifting the collections to families in need. She excitedly shared the project with others. Professors in other disciplines were inspired to participate in the project. Candidates across disciplines

engaged in the project with great passion and innovation. Families embraced their new home collections. Young children began their life-long journey to reading.

The ripple effect of one initial assignment is evident within this learning community. An indirect service-learning project, *Habitat for Reading*, became a beloved initiative within the college. And, as it all began with an idea from a librarian, this should serve as a reminder of the impact a librarian's voice offers within a community, as the librarian is a conduit of information, teaching, and leadership for the school community and beyond.

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