Read with Me: My personal experience with a LIS 641 service learning project

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By Mary Ann Griffin

Introduction

At the University of Southern Mississippi's School of Library and Information Science, LIS 641: Public Libraries has an emphasis on service learning and community relationships. Service learning "allows students to meet community needs by applying theory and course content through activities implemented by the students, faculty, and community partners" (Creel, 2013, p. 157). In an all-online program, service learning can be challenging and part of that challenge was for the students to initiate their own service learning project.

As director of the Sunflower County Library System (SCLS), I work to promote the library's services to the communities in Sunflower County, an economically depressed area located in the Mississippi Delta. Regardless of the fact that the county suffers from economic decline, poor K-12 educational programs, high risk health problems, and high levels of poverty, there exists an agency that is trying to make a difference in the community (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014; Promise Neighborhood Grantee, 2012). The Indianola Promise Community (IPC), modeled after the Harlem Children's Zone and sponsored by the Delta Health Alliance, is a community based initiative that provides children with opportunities to succeed in school, graduate high school, and attend college. One of its goals is to help children enter kindergarten ready to learn and become proficient in core academic subjects while in school (Delta Health Alliance, 2014).

In January of 2013, the library system was awarded a $15,000 Library Service and Technology Act (LSTA) grant administered by the Mississippi Library Commission to create early literacy centers in three library branches. These centers were developed to provide literacy experiences to children age birth to five years old (Image 1 and Image 2). The centers contain resources such as AWE computers (Image 2), Lego Duplo kits, puppets, drawing and writing materials, and comfortable seating areas allowing caregivers of young children to implement the five components of early literacy development: Talking, Singing, Reading, Writing, and Playing. (Image 4).

Image 1: Early literacy center

Image 2: Early literacy center

Image 3: AWE computer station

Image 4: Sign for Talk, Sing, Read, Write, and Play

Then under the direction of the IPC, Indianola became an Excel By 5 Community. "Excel By 5 sets forth a variety of standards involving parent training, community participation, child care and health programs to help communities focus on supporting young children and their families. The certification process also identifies available resources and existing best practices to help Excel By 5 - Early Childhood Communities reach the goal that all of their children will be ready to learn when they start school at age five" (Excel By 5, 2012).

As director of the library system, I had the opportunity to share information about our literacy centers with the IPC and the Excel by 5 Committee. Since the library system and IPC share a common goal—to provide resources and opportunities to encourage life-long learning and literacy development, a partnership was developed so that we could pool our resources and work toward that common goal. IPC had the network of support members and the library had the network of resources. This was a prime time to promote the community project, *Read with Me*.

Project Description and Explanation
The *Read with Me* project was part of the LSTA grant implementation plan. The project was to provide library resources to parents and caregivers of children age birth to five years old. The grant provided the means to set up literacy centers and resources to inform these caregivers about the importance of early literacy development through the use of the *Every Child Ready to Read* (Image 5)

program produced by the Public Library Association and the Association of Library Service to Children to promote early literacy opportunities in the library (Ash & Meyers, 2009).
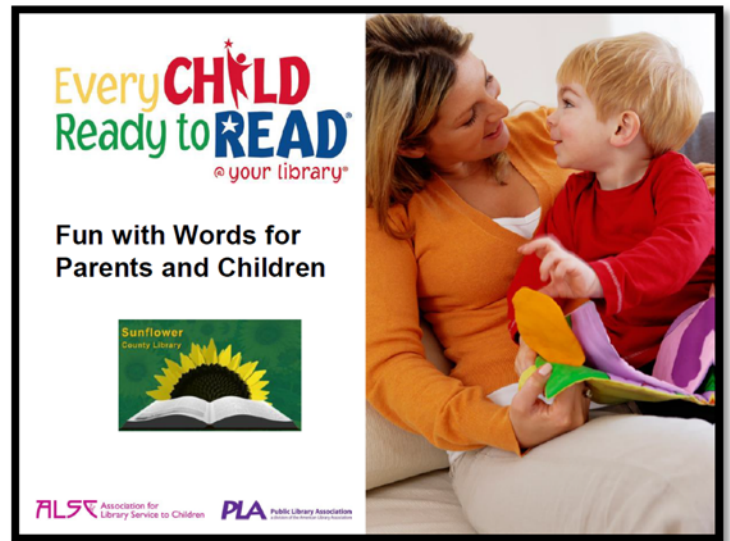

Image 5: Every Child Ready to Read @ Your Library (Association for Library Service to Children, 2011)

The goal of the service project was to inform the community of these available resources. There was a need to deliver this information directly to community agencies and demonstrate what the literacy centers can do for parents and caregivers in the community; this meant that I had to take the *Every Child Ready to Read* literacy workshops out into the community.

A marketing plan was developed to introduce the *Every Child Ready to Read* workshops to the community. First, letters and information brochures were sent out to every childcare center, but the letter campaign resulted in no response, so I decided to hit the streets with my project. I became connected with the IPC and became a member of their planning committee. I also became a member of the Indianola Excel by 5. By serving on the committees, I made contacts with other agencies in the community who were focused on early childhood development. Some of these agencies included Parents as Teachers, C.A.R.E.S Mentoring Program, The Literacy Coalition, Excel by 5 Community Involvement Committee, and the Mississippi Low Income Childcare Initiative

Agency	Date	Time	Location	ECRR Requested Workshop
Parents as Teachers	October 29, 2014	3:30 p.m.	Henry M. Seymour Library, Indianola	Fun with Words
MS Low Income Child Care Initiative	November 1, 2014	9:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.	Scout Hut, Indianola	Fun with Words

Table 1: Scheduled events

Program's BEST (Building-Educating-Sustaining Through Training). I also met with agencies affiliated with the Sunflower County Department of Human Services such as Healthy Homes Mississippi.

Information about the *Every Child Ready to Read* workshops was provided to each of these agencies, and I encouraged them to allow me to conduct any of the workshops for the clients they served. I also went out into the community to a local community fair, the Ruleville Roast, and set up an information booth. Using donated books as giveaways as an incentive to those visiting my booth, I was able to make contact with two additional agencies, Save the Children: Ruleville Head Start and Mississippi State Department of Human Services Resource Specialist of Bolivar County. This in-person marketing phase resulted in scheduling 2 workshops (Table 1).

The *Every Child Ready to Read* tool kit was a perfect tool for library staff to use in this project. It provided PowerPoint presentations that can be edited to include individual library information or can be edited to fit the need for any library programming focused on early literacy. It also provided resources and book lists and even a script to follow when conducting the workshops. I was able to easily edit the presentations to make them fit my workshop activities. I used the suggested booklists from the program but also made a "shopping list" for parents and caregivers so they would have a guide of books to use when they visited the library (Appendix A). The entire intent of the project was to introduce parents and caregivers to the available resources at the library and encourage them to use the resources to help their children develop early literacy skills.

In addition to creating the shopping list and modifying the presentation, I collected books from our library's collection and organized them to fit the different activities in the workshop. For example, one activity was to show parents how they can utilize wordless books to develop oral language and vocabulary in their young children. I provided a demonstration on how to talk with a child and allow the child to talk about the pictures in the wordless book to develop "the story" and pointed out how wordless books allow creativity and critical thinking.

After sorting and organizing the books and materials for the workshop, I prepared the meeting room with workshop materials the day before the workshop. I practiced the PowerPoint with the libraries technology equipment to make sure all components were working properly. I created an attendance sheet for parents to sign and an evaluation form for parents to complete at the end of the workshop so I could collect feedback on the workshop to improve future workshops. I also prepared copies of our "Permission to Photograph" form, so I could use pictures of the workshop participants in future presentations and public relation documents.

The Results of the Project
One major challenge that I experienced was the marketing of the workshop. People were open to the idea about an early literacy workshop, but they didn't follow up with the library to request a workshop. Getting out in the community, making connections with community leaders and decision makers took a lot of my time and effort, but it paid off in the long run. Two workshops were scheduled within the service learning project timeline, and two planning meetings were scheduled with community agencies to conduct future workshops.

The Parents as Teachers Educators brought in their clients, who were young mothers of children ranging from 7 months old to 3 years old. There were 12 participants, 5 PAT educators, and the director of the program present for the workshop at the library. We also had a library patron join us with his daughter. He had observed my preparation for the workshop a few hours earlier and was interested in learning what he could do to help his daughter. The workshop activities explained the importance of developing a large listening vocabulary and showed parents how to do this by reading to their children. I demonstrated how to talk about the illustrations in wordless books and showed the parents various types of materials such as wordless books, picture books, predictable books and books that contained poetry. For interactive activities, I encouraged parents to read the various books with their children anywhere in the library (Images 5 and Image 6).

Image 5: Parents implementing techniques learned at workshop.

Image 6: Parents implementing techniques learned at workshop.

After each reading session, we all convened in the meeting room, and I directed the parents to record the various words they and their children discovered during the activities as we developed our workshop word wall (Image 7). This was an excellent visual for parents to see the number of rich vocabulary words they could expose their children to by simply spending five to ten minutes a day reading to their child.

Image 7: Parents reflecting on interactive activities conducted with their children.

The workshop conducted at the "Childcare Matters Family Fun Day" was more of a presentation of the library books rather than a training session. The course of activities and the layout of the various information booths arranged in a very small room didn't provide the best environment conducive to a training session. Parents meandered through the booths and the traffic of people caused a challenge for those listening to my presentation. Three parents did sit in on the presentation, and one childcare provider listened in as she monitored her booth. In order to be flexible to the environment, I altered the workshop session to merely explaining the different types of materials we have at the library and how these materials could help develop pre literacy skills in young children.

At the end of each workshop, I asked participants to complete an evaluation form that requested information about the effectiveness of the workshop, what could be done to improve it, and what additional information the participant may want from the library. All of the participants strongly agreed that they learned or were informed about the necessary action steps to develop early literacy skills

in their children. A few participants stated that there wasn't enough time to discuss ways to work as a group to help get children ready to read. All of the participants thought the activities allowed them to interact with their children and utilize the techniques demonstrated in the workshop. They thought the workshop information was very helpful, and they requested more workshops like this one. There were a few participants that stated the library needed to improve getting the word out about the workshops so more parents could participate.

This feedback was helpful and will be used to refine the workshop presentations. For example, future workshops need to be created so more time is allotted to implement the activities. So instead of covering all five practices for early literacy development (talking, singing, reading, writing, and playing) in one workshop session, I will focus on a series of workshops to conduct over a time period of possibly five days: one day to demonstrate the talking activities, one day for the singing, etc. This may work better for the parents involved with the Parents as Teachers group, as most of them do not work. The short sessions could be conducted at times that are more convenient for them and the children's feeding and napping schedule.

One major challenge with this project is having the personnel to conduct it on a continual basis. Our library system is in desperate need of a children's librarian that can devote time to conducting the project. Until funding is secured for this staff position, I will continue this project with the community as the need arises. For instance, a daycare provider has requested more information about the *Every Child Ready to Read* workshops, so she can have them at her parent training sessions. Although this project is a worthy cause to meet the needs of the community, my role as director of the library system has me spread thin already, and this project requires a lot of preparation and implementation time. Another small challenge is knowing what to expect from the different public groups for which the presentation is conducted. I believe that overtime and by conducting workshops to different community groups I will be able to accommodate for the different group dynamics.

Conclusion

"Public libraries can be ideal places for service learning projects to occur because they are characterized by diverse services customized for diverse populations" (Brzozowski, Homenda, and Roy, 2012, 32). This service learning project allowed me to engage with my community to provide a library service that was geared to meet the community's goal concerning early literacy development and getting the children of the community ready to start school with the necessary literacy skills that lead to learning success (Image 8).

Image 8: Family using early literacy center

It allowed me to learn what it takes to implement a project of this nature so that I, as a public library director, can better train my library staff.   The project provided me with a true picture of what is expected of my staff when they take on such a project. It allowed me to connect with the community and develop partnerships with community members so we could supplement our resources to achieve common goals.

I experienced many of the same observations as was pointed out by Brzozowski, Homenda, and Roy (2012)—including the challenge of overextended library staff trying to provide additional services such as early literacy workshops, implementing concepts learned in my MLIS courses, and becoming more familiar with the community.   This project allowed

me to realize that librarians must do more than exist among the stacks with hopes that the world will flock to the library seeking the treasures within the four walls of the library building. Public library service is more than that, and we as public librarians must embrace this concept and be prepared to do community outreach services. I agree with the authors that service learning projects provide a win-win situation for all (Brzozowski et. al, 2012; Creel, 2013). By doing so, the community receives an added service, especially if the project is implemented adequately, and the library earns increased visibility in the community resulting in more service opportunities to the community.

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Appendix A: Fun with Words Shopping List
Wordless Books
Anno, M. (1977). *Anno's counting book.* New York: Crowell.

Carle, E. (1971). Do *you want to be my friend?* New York: Crowell

Lehman, B. (2008). *Trainstop.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Lee, S. (2008). *Wave.* San Francisco, California: Chronicle Books.

Raschka, C. (2011). *A ball for daisy.* New York: Wade Books.

Spier, P. (1977). *Noah's ark.* Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc.

Wiesner, D. (2006). *Flotsam.* New York: Clarion Books.

Picture and Board Books
(Great to use like wordless books.)
Angela, J. (1994). *Joshua by the sea.* New York: Orchard Books.

Bowman, C. (2007). *My Thanksgiving prayer.* Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zonderkidz.

Bridwell, N. (2011). *Clifford cares.* New York: Scholastic.

Burton, J. (2002). *My kitten friends.* London: Buster Books.

Carlstrom, N. W. (1997). *I love you, mama, any time of year*. New York: Little Simon.

Carlstrom, N. W. (1994). *Jesse Bear's tum-tum tickle.* New York: Aladdin Books.

Carlstrom, N. W. (1994). *Jesse Bear's wiggle-jiggle jump-up.* New York: Aladdin Books.

Carlstrom, N. W. (1994). *Jesse Bear's yum-yum crumble.* New York: Aladdin Books.

Chorao, K. (1994). *Peekaboo! Was it you?* New York: Random House.

Hills, T. (2009). *Duck & Goose find a pumpkin*. New York: Schwarz & Wade Books.

Kenneth, C. (1996). *Pooh, guess who!* Racine, Wisconsin: Western Publishing Co.

Marley, C. (2011). *One love*. San Francisco, California: Chronicle Books.

Oxenbury, H. (1995). *I hear.* Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press.

Russell, S. P. (1967). *Up down and all around*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House

Shaw, N. (1986). *Sheep in a jeep.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Weiss, E. (2012). *Playtime for twins.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

Predictable Books

Aardema, V. (1975). *Why mosquitoes buzz in people's ears.* New York: Dial Books.

Bang, M. (1983). *Ten, nine, eight.* New York: Greenwillow Books.

Brown, M. W. (1975). *Goodnight moon*. New York: Harper & Row.

Carle, E. (1984). *The very busy spider.* New York: Philomel Books.

Carle, E. (1987). *Have you seen my cat?* New York: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers.

Dewdney, A. (2005). *Llama, Llama red pajama.* New York: Viking.

Eastman, P. D. (1960). *Are you my mother?* New York: Beginner Books

Fleming, D. (1993). *In the small, small pond.* New York: Henry Holt & Co.

Gag, W. (1928). *Millions of cats.* New York: Coward, McCann.

Galdone, P. (1972). *The Three Bears*. New York: Seabury.

Ginsburg, M. (1980). *Good morning, chick.* New York: Greenwillow Books.

Hall, M. (2010). My *heart is like a zoo.* New York: Greenwillow Books.

Henkes, K. (1988). Chester's *way.* New York: Greenwillow Books.

Hutchins, P. (1986). *The doorbell rang*. New York: Greenwillow Books.

Keats, E. J. (1971). *Over in the meadow.* New York: Four Winds.

Martin, B. (1986). Barn *dance!* New York: Henry Holt Books.

Rosen, M. (1989). *We're going on a bear hunt.* New York: Margaret K. McElderry Books.

Board Books to Develop Listening Vocabulary

Bondor, R. (1994). Frosty *the snowman.* New York: Golden Book.

Brown, M. T. (1995). Arthur *goes to school.* New York: Random House.

Crews, D. (2001). Inside *freight train.* New York: Harper Festival.

Dewdeny, A. (2012). Llama *Llama zippity-zoom.* New York: Viking.

Fry, S. (2002). Clifford's *Christmas presents.* New York: Scholastic.

Haskamp, S. (2003). Eight *silly monkeys.* Los Angeles, California: Piggy Toe Press.

Little Simon. (1980). A *little book of numbers.* New York: Simon& Schuster, Inc.

Murphy, C. (1997). Shapes*.* New York: Little Simon.

Numeroff, L. J. (2008). *Time for school, Mouse!* New York: Laura Geringer Books.

Prince, A. J. (2013). Dig *In!* New York: Abrams Appleseed.

Sirett, D. (2009). My *first farm book; let's get working!* New York: Dorling Kindersley.

Walt Disney Productions. (1984). Walt *Disney Productions presents Mickey and the haunted house*. New York: Random House.

Wheeler, J. (1985). The *city mouse and the country mouse.* New York: Grosset & Dunlap.

Story Books

Birney, B. G. (1994). Oh*, bother! Someone's jealous!* Racine, Wisconsin: Western Publishing Co.

Eastman, P. D. (1997). *Go, dog, go!* New York: Random House.

Falconer, I. (2007). Olivia *helps with Christmas.* New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers.

Fernandez, R. (2008). Diego's *family Christmas.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

Gay, M. L. (2005). Caramba*!* Toronto: Groundwood Books.

McCloskey, R. (1948). Blueberries *for Sal.* New York: Viking Press.

Milway, K. S. (2008). One *hen.* Toronto: Kids Can Press.

Books That Play

Allen, C. (1994). What's *the monster making?* Racine, Wisconsin: Western Publishing Co.

Bailey, L. (2007). *Goodnight, sweet pig.* Toronto: Kids Can Press

Boynton, S. (1995). The *going to bed book.* New York: Little Simon.

Dewdney, A. (2012). Llama *Llama hoppity-hop*. New York: Viking.

Geisel, T. S. (1956). If *I ran the circus.* New York: Random House.

Marzollo, J. (1998). I *spy little animals.* New York: Scholastic.

Meyer, E. F. (2012). *Happy Hanukkah, Curious George.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Platt, C. (2010). Happy *Thanksgiving, Curious George.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Sendak, M. (1976). Chicken *soup with rice.* New York: Harper Trophy.

Seuss, D. (1997). The *shape of me and other stuff.* New York: Random House.

Seuss, D. (1974). There's *a Wocket in my pocket!* New York: Beginner Books.

Silverstein, S. (1974). Where *the sidewalk ends: The poems and drawings of Shel Silverstein.* New York: Harper & Row.

Yolen, J. (2002). Time *for naps.* New York: Little Simon.

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http://www.sunflower.lib.ms.us/