

The Big Read: how shared reading transforms lives



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Wendy Morris explains how a joint reading project at Kingston University to make students feel part of their new community has raised the profile of library services and is growing into partnerships in the community and with other universities.

SOMETIMES something comes along with such an unexpected impact that it takes your breath away. It turns out that the shared reading project at Kingston University was one of those things. I had heard of similar schemes on the big college campuses in the US, where every student is sent the same book to read before they enrol. The cynic in me said it could never work here. But you know what? It was sensational. The 'KU Big Read' took Kingston by storm. Students loved receiving a book as a gift and it gave them an instant topic of conversation with fellow first years. Academic staff used the book to establish a relationship with their students and for imaginative teaching and formative activities in subjects ranging from nursing to engineering, and support staff based entire teambuilding exercises around its themes. But perhaps most significantly, the university began to reach out into the community to encourage reading together in groups – working to empower local women struggling with literacy and boosting confidence in the homeless. It also stimulated that most rare of occurrences. A regular collaboration between library professionals working in different sectors. Public meets academic. With homemade cake.

Big start

The original funding was for a student / staff development project in 2014 – through Kingston's Student Academic Development Research Associate Scheme (Sadras) scheme, aiming to improve the prospects of those who have not traditionally thrived at university. It was proposed and led by Associate Professor Alison Baverstock – a long-term advocate for the benefits of shared reading and founder of Well Worth Reading (now part of The Reading Agency) and resulted in overwhelmingly positive feedback. The book chosen for the pilot year was *About a Boy* by Nick Hornby – an



alumnus of Kingston. Bespoke editions of the book were sent out in July or given on arrival to every undergraduate, post-graduate, home and international student starting with us in the autumn. We encouraged them to discuss the book when they got here, attend author events and join reading groups. It was an instant success. Over 86 per cent of student responders to a follow-up survey said they felt it was an effective initiative for new students. Heart-warmingly, one international student said she had never received a book as a gift before. Many said it helped them feel included and made them more likely to enrol.

Academics were asked to try to embed the book in the early weeks of teaching, providing a common link across all faculties. We didn't know whether they would buy into this. The themes of the book – adolescence, bullying and depression – lent themselves easily to areas such as social work and education and it was always going to be easy to discuss a novel in languages or journalism. But civil engineering? Really? I kid you not. What also wasn't predicted was the way support staff threw themselves into the scheme with LRC staff playing a leading role as KU Big Read champions during information literacy sessions, using the book as an example when introducing the catalogue, searching databases or managing references.

A balloon debate followed – chaired



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The Big Read display.

enthusiastically by our University Chancellor Bonnie Greer – where representatives from different sectors of the university talked about the relevance of the book to their professional and personal interests. The KU Big Read gave our Welcome Week a real buzz; a joined-up ‘wired’ feeling with heaps of books constantly disappearing.

Big decisions

About a Boy had been chosen quickly so the scheme could be implemented as soon as possible. But this year the research team wanted the selection of the new book to be owned by the whole university community and a request for suggestions from students and staff resulted in over 100 titles. With a nod to Man Booker they produced a shortlist. With a nod to Amazon they adopted an algorithm.

Again developing the project as staff-student research, they discussed what key criteria the chosen book must meet:

- accessible to all
- short book
- short chapters
- an author (or representative) who was willing to come and meet the students
- gender neutral cover.

They were not looking for a worthy and challenging tome but rather a well-written page-turner with contemporary issues to generate lively discussion. They weighted criteria according to priority and ran the list

through some innovative software devised by a data analyst working with them and ta dah! A shortlist of six. LRC management agreed to fund multiple copies of the shortlisted titles into all campus libraries and in a cloak and dagger operation, we got them prepped and loanable five minutes after the VC’s public announcement of the list without anyone finding out beforehand. Everyone had two months to read the titles and feed back via posts on social media and LRC noticeboards. The Selection Committee (a mix of staff and students from all faculties and directorates) then chose the final title – *The Humans* by Matt Haig. Themes: surviving in an alien environment, depression and adolescent angst. Ideal.

Big profile

Chances are you think that the LRC would be embedded in a reading project like this right from the get go. And you’d be right. But what we didn’t anticipate was how it would raise the profile of library services right across the institution. LRC involvement in this project began because the research team, on advice from communications colleagues, thought that asking staff to collect a book, rather than simply receive one, would encourage participation. The library was an ideal pick up point and our cross-faculty presence was invaluable, enabling us to network the scheme through subject boards and staff-student committees. The invisible matchmaking role we often play between the movers and shakers became more apparent – particularly to

our academics. It never does any harm for library professionals to help out with the odd pan-organisational operation.

Big collaborations

Our second year also saw huge spin-offs in terms of collaborative partners. Edinburgh Napier University had seen a conference presentation on the project and asked to participate, joining us at the Selection Committee stage. An institution like our own with large numbers of students not living in residential halls, they valued an inclusive project which would make students feel part of their new community. With our differing demographics, we are now looking forward to analysing the possible effects shared reading has had on student enrolment, engagement and retention. The University Design team created customised copies of *The Humans* for both institutions, mailed with an inspirational letter from Matt Haig inside – pointing out that they were on the cusp of the biggest adventure of their lives. The see-through package meant that parents of prospective students noticed the book and regularly joined in discussions within the family before their putative scholar jumped ship. So we ended up in pretty frequent contact with our library colleagues in Edinburgh and we were stealing (I mean sharing) ideas about marketing and promulgation quick as a wink.

But one of the most valuable professional collaborations took place much nearer to home. We contacted the borough’s public library service to see how they might help



The Humans author Matt Haig signing a copy of his book.

promote 'big reading'. It transpired that our Royal Borough of Kingston colleagues were based in an office not 500 metres from our own. A brisk walk and we could rendezvous in about five minutes. So we started with a joint library staff seminar looking at shared reading initiatives on both sides. We invited speakers from each service to reflect on best practice and then had small group breakout sessions mixing up the public and academic representatives. We had a lot

in common. We were both independently running separate reading groups, but our public service colleagues were much more experienced in rolling out stock and discussion material, so we were tremendously grateful for their expertise and advice. Likewise they were more than happy to be part of the publicity events surrounding *The Humans* and we soon had KU Big Read talks in place at branch libraries.

Big communities

Spreading the word out into the community was also tremendously important to us. Throughout 2016 we have worked with local schools, colleges, youth groups and U3A to promote the shared reading experience. But one particular outreach initiative really stands out. Alison Baverstock, by now Project Director, approached a homeless organisation in Kingston – the Joel Community – and asked whether their residents might be interested in taking part. We discovered that on average 30 per cent of their guests experiencing homelessness are still in full-time employment. They just need a roof over their head. They are often well-educated and – along with those without a job at present – may be keen to engage with a sociable activity which involves intellectual input. They invited us to come and talk to them and hand out copies of *The Humans*. Following a lively discussion of reading preferences, we asked them whether they would like their next session to be led by the author himself. A regular supporter of World Book Night, Matt Haig

was already involved in promoting reading for the homeless by handing out free books and he was delighted to be involved at Joel. We began to see how shared reading could actually change lives. How being part of a reading group run by the local university might just give you the confidence to apply for a new job and is likely to be seen by a prospective employer as an asset on your CV. And how the collective energy of a support group has a hugely positive effect.

Big future

This is going to run and run. We already have at least two further universities interested in coming on board for 2017 – any other takers? We are also unifying all the reading projects at Kingston to encompass smaller groups already in place using KU Race Equality Charter Mark funding, operating in schools, youth organisations, and places such as Hillcroft College underpinning improvements in women's literacy. Kingston's retention rate has improved and a longer-term impact study will look at the influence so far on encouraging student enrolment and engagement, not to mention the potential of another development project on the need for a national reading charity for the homeless.

So let me just finish by saying this. Because I am amongst friends. We all know – don't we – that some people are inclined to think that there's not much in librarianship which actually transforms lives. But the KU Big Read? It's really making a difference. Boom! 📖

