

They always come back- the popularity of student created books

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Abstract:

The Children's School of Rochester maintains a collection of over two hundred books published by our elementary students as part of an annual school project. The ever-changing collection reflects books that were donated to the library by our students, and are then returned to the students with our thanks as they leave our school. Autobiographies, fantasy, historical fiction and superheroes are just a few of the creative ways children share their own stories and dreams. The student body is balanced between refugees and native-born students making student published books the first English language books that many of our students read. These books are circulated to other schools in our large urban district and are some of the most popular in the library. An unexpected result is that we find students respect these books more than any other type of library material, allowing for an unprecedented return rate.

A new addition to the project this year is to have students create video book reviews of these and other books that are then being uploaded to our District library catalog. This has, so far, been found to not only encourage use of the online catalog, it is helping teach students skills such as public speaking and positive uses of social media technology. Both projects are easier to implement and more cost effective than first considered. They are a benefit to any school or public library.

Keywords: Student publication, collection development, collection management

Introduction

The Rochester City School District in Rochester, NY is located next to Lake Ontario. Sadly despite its beautiful location and rebounding county economy, it is the fifth poorest city in the United States with one of the highest child poverty rates (Doherty, 2013). The Children's School of Rochester (CSR) is a unique school within the district of 32,000 students. CSR provides education for local students, refugees, and immigrant students, maintaining a 50-50 ratio of native speakers and English languages learners in an immersion model of education. Within the school library is a collection that currently consists of 353 books published by our own elementary students, shared by all students and inter-library loaned to the larger district upon request as well.

Student publication collection

Our student created book collection began as an annual school project by the school resource teacher. With a shift in her position, servicing different grade levels annually, the books range in breath from fourth grade autobiographies to a set of second grade books on superheroes. The project typically starts during the second semester of school and continues over several weeks during their English language learning time in the classroom. The teachers help the students develop the plot, give time for multiple revisions, read former student books and teach the students how to edit each other's work. Within the library, students discuss genres, read books by former students and conduct any research necessary for non-fiction books. Throughout the project we talk about plagiarism, copyright, the importance of citations and work on cataloging the books when they are completed.

As part of the book publication project students learn to share their creations by donating them to the school library. At first, the students are very excited about being benefactors until the reality sets in and they realize they are not able to take their hard work home. This is very difficult for most students since at the beginning of the project, they are excited to share their stories, however the closer they come to completing their projects, the more difficult it becomes for them to let go of a work they have invested weeks in. Time no longer permits the creation of a second copy, as it did when we created the original core collection, so students are not happy to hand over their prized books at the end of the project.

Beyond the core collection, the current collection created by still-enrolled students is returned to them with thanks as they leave our school. The most important library circulation requirement of student created materials is preventing students from borrowing their own books. After the first two "author" loans were not returned, we had to adopt the policy that students may not borrow their own books. They cannot legally be retrieved, since they are, essentially, "on loan" to the school. Therefore, there are no author checkouts. They are welcome to bring family members in to view and are constantly reminded they will get it back when they leave. These wonderful books include a wide range of genres from autobiographies, fantasy, historical fiction and non-fiction animal books.

Since our student body is balanced between refugees and native-born students, the student published books are often many of our refuge students first attempt at writing English, as well as the first books they are able to read. An unexpected result is that we find students respect these books more than any other type of library material, and they have a 98% return rate.

The few books lost were found to have been taken by the authors themselves. Digital projects are one way to avoid having to restrict borrowing. However, digital projects, while they are easy to upload and share copies of, can be troublesome to students for different reasons as well.

Digital projects

Two years ago we begun working on having students create video book reviews of their books and other books in our library catalog. The local public television station has been recording Rochester City School students for years as part of a homework help segment, making digital recordings of our students doing book talks a regular occurrence. When our library automation system started to allow us to digitally upload student content, we began to look at non-physical content similar to the idea given to us by these homework help segments. Non-physical content would have fewer restrictions for circulation than our student created books and increase visibility of student work.

Visibility of student work helps promote our school as a school of choice in our school district and is a good advocacy tool when seeking additional funding. Student's benefit by practicing such skills as public speaking and learning various ways to positively use social media technology. We soon discovered digital projects are easier to implement and more cost effective than when we first considered digital projects. They are a benefit to any school or public library as they showcase student work and provide essentially free content to improve your collection. However, in spite of the benefits, students lost interest quickly when it was mentioned that their work would be posted for public consumption.

Digital productions are not as favoured by students as they are hesitant to produce content that may be viewable (and therefore up for negative criticism) by peers. The advent of social sites and increase in cyber bullying has created a socially sensitive student body that is more resistant to producing work to share online. Forcing creativity by making it a large part of a student's grade leads students to create video productions of indifferent quality that are on average not as in depth as former work produced in previous years.

Time Constraints

Librarians choosing to replicate student publications project solely in the library are recommended to ensure plenty of time by overestimating the length of the project by at least three weeks. In the Rochester City School District, we typically see classes for 30-40 minutes a week, which time must include book circulation. Encouraging the students to work outside the school on the project is a priority if you expect to finish before the students become bored with the project. Shorter student created publications, such as video or written on-line book reviews, can also enhance your collection and become popular alternative projects for your students.

I allow three-four months for picture book creation and at least three weeks for something as basic as a Wordle review. Wordle is a web based cloud creator that is simple for students to use and provides immediate results. Sites such this are good choices for time-constrained librarians. Videos require more time than word cloud creations and much less than student books since scripts are shorter and do not require illustrations. A good quality short video may be made in less than two months, even less if done as a collaborative project with another teacher.

Conclusion

I highly encourage librarians to consider working with their teachers and students to create student publications for their library. Despite the lessons learned shared in Appendix A, the benefit to the students and library makes it well worth a librarian's effort to deal with any issues that may occur. Student awareness of their responsibility to share knowledge and ideas with others is an important component of digital citizenship that student publication projects may teach.

Encouraging students to create high quality work is possible by using a variety of strategies, including, but not limited to, making the student publication completion some type of challenge, encouraging group work (versus a more risky individual project) making the donation of the work optional, and uploading the work to a site that does allow ratings. The students' social awareness as impact on their work would make an interesting topic for a future paper. Regardless, the students' perceptions of the social impact of their creations must be kept in the forefront of any librarian's thought that wishes to maintain such a collection.

Acknowledgments

My thanks to the staff and children of the Children's School of Rochester for all their hard work in creating student content for our library.

References

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Appendix A

Lessons learned

Acquisition of student work- in the dawn of the digital age, retaining student enthusiasm for creating publications was much easier. With the advent of the social media sites and the increase of cyber bullying, students will shut down rather than produce work that may be judged by their peers on the Internet. Interestingly, this is only in reaction to peers observing their work and not adults.

Material circulation- limits must be placed on student loans as each year I have increasing attempts by students, to remove their materials from the collection. Parents are supportive of their children's books being in the library and the majority support efforts to prevent their removal by their children. The small amount of parents who do not support student loan limitations are responsible for the only losses in the collection.

Public opinion- They majority of reasons I receive for attempts to reclaim their loaned materials is that they do not want other students to see their work. I would like to ascribe this to the old adage that artists are their own worst critics, however, they will qualify that they do not want anyone to make "fun of" their efforts. I plan to hold a discussion of this topic with students and staff to see how it could be resolved as the quantity and quality of student work is decreasing ever year.

Legalities- In New York State, video release forms must be obtain for any child who is videotaped for on-line posting. Included in this is reassurance that no last names or other identifying information will be posted on the child. Materials such as student work that features no photographs or other identifiers may be posted as exemplars. Any video release forms may be overridden at any time at the request of the parents. To maintain a solid core collection, consider starting with exemplars rather than forging ahead with works such as student videos that could be recalled.