

COMMUNITY-LED WORK IN PRACTICE: EXPERIENCES FROM CANADIAN LIBRARIES

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Connecting Communities: Edmonton Public Libraries' epl2go mobile service

By Laura Young

In the 1940s, the Edmonton Public Library launched a streetcar and bookmobile to extend library service to the community. EPL has returned to a mobile model with a 21st century twist: the new epl2go service creates pop-up library spaces for learning, discovering and creating in communities where access to a traditional library branch is limited. More focused on programs and services than materials, epl2go is, as CEO Linda Cook describes it, “[a] food truck – but for your brain!”¹. EPL’s community-led philosophy and commitment to providing early literacy programming and digital literacy services deeply inform the work of epl2go throughout Edmonton. The program aims to break down barriers to library service for citizens of Edmonton.

How we roll

Currently, epl2go consists of one utility van and a range of technology, programming equipment and other resources, allowing us to bring library programming and services out in the community. Van equipment supports epl2go’s programming priorities and includes: early literacy manipulatives, storytime rugs, Bumbo seats and a small Storytime book collection to support early literacy programming; ipad kits, Little Bits, Makey Makey’s, Lego Mindstorm Robots, laptop kits and more to support digital literacy programming; offsite access to ILS to

enable check-in, check-out and card registration.

epl2go’s staff is comprised of one Community Librarian and two Library Assistants, overseen by the Manager of Youth Services. The staffing model is integrated, with epl2go library assistants working weekly customer service shifts at the branch where the epl2go offices are based. Library staff from other departments and branches are given the opportunity to work on the literacy van, building staff capacity for working with epl2go and ensuring that the service model does not become siloed.



Kids explore Little Bits and other maker equipment at an outdoor community event

The epl2go Literacy Van started hitting Edmonton streets in the spring of 2014. The Edmonton Public Library plans to expand the service in the future to four Literacy Vans and accompanying staff so that each quadrant of the city is provided service. Ongoing donations to the library support the purchase of Literacy Vans and the epl2go service as a whole.

Serving underserved communities

Deciding who epl2go will serve was one of our first big tasks. EPL's current business plan clearly states that Literacy Van services will be extended to underserved communities in Edmonton. From there, we undertook the task of considering what "underserved" means and how we would define the complex term within our own work.

With a small staff and one Literacy Van for the whole city, the term had to be narrowed down and priorities clearly set out. It was decided that geographically underserved areas would be the first focus of epl2go's community-led efforts. Communities more than five kilometers away from a library are the services target area. In Edmonton, that primarily means growing communities in the North, South and West of the city where housing is growing rapidly and community space and resources are generally lacking.

Community connections

With our service areas defined, we set about building connections in our target areas. Heritage Valley to the south, Pilot Sound to the North and Lewis Estates to the West are communities where Community Librarians have been building connections and providing services to grow epl2go and create a meaningful, community-led mobile service. From the start, we have built relationships in a variety of ways: taking requests through our webpage, e-mail address and phone; connecting to community leagues (which in the communities we're working have active members but no dedicated building); contacting

agencies, groups and businesses in the area; advertising our services and understanding the work of other groups in the area; using social media; door knocking.

Generally, community connections have been made in one of two ways: through a group or agency contacting us to attend an event or provide programming, or in my role as Community Librarian for epl2go, contacting a group or agency and asking if they'd be interested in the service.

In both cases, an initial in-depth conversation is an important tool for making a meaningful connection. Similar to work on the library desk, a conversation uncovers what the customer is really looking for. When groups contact us, they have already heard about epl2go through our website, mainstream or social media, or word of mouth, and they know the event they'd like us to attend, but often don't know exactly how the service operates and the range of things we can provide. In some cases, it becomes evident that we were contacted because the community member understands the epl2go service as the library's 'outreach department'. In these cases, letting them know that all EPL branches have a community focus and work in their local community, and connecting them with the Community Librarian at their closest branch is the best course of action. In these cases, epl2go has been an entry point for customers to better understand how EPL's community-led work can benefit them.

Two Library Assistants deliver the bulk of epl2go's programming. As the service has developed, it has also become clear that they do important community-led work at each site. Our service area is large and the bulk of my current work as Community Librarian is making initial connections to establish epl2go in each target community. As a result, the task of building ongoing relationships with the community week-to-week often falls with the Library Assistants. Their deep understanding of

EPL's community-led philosophy and their ability to communicate with customers and provide me with relevant information has been an invaluable part of ensuring that epl2go is community-led. EPL's philosophy is that community-led work is for all library staff, and epl2go's Library Assistants demonstrate that in their work every day.

Summer service

epl2go's summer service was focused on using outdoor spaces to provide Summer Reading Club programs and other library services to the community. Most new schools in Edmonton share school yards with City of Edmonton parks. Permission for use of the space was required from both the school's administration and the City of Edmonton Community Recreation Coordinators. School administration promoted the program to students and parents through newsletters, social media and outdoor school signs, and also allowed epl2go staff to present about the program to students. Community Recreation Coordinators also aided in promotion by sharing information about epl2go with Community Leagues and other contacts.

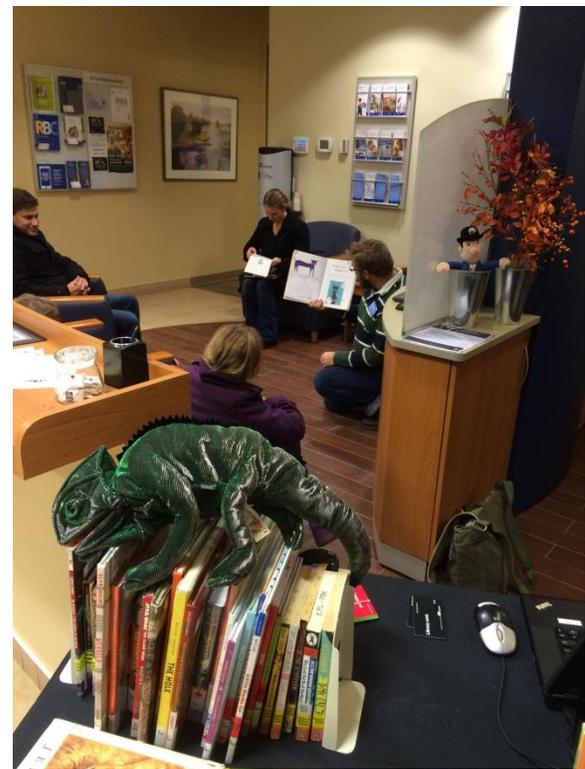
Although Community League members were not closely involved in the beginning stage of epl2go's work, our presence in their communities throughout the summer and conversations about the current service and future service grew into a strong connection, resulting in our attendance at several Community League Day events and ongoing discussions about future work together.

Large branded tents were set up in each school yard and three to four hours of Summer Reading Club programming took place each week. Being present for long stretches of time in each community helped raise awareness of epl2go's service. It also meant epl2go staff could connect with community members, have conversations about what community members wanted from the service and help establish

epl2go as a regular presence in the community.

Winter is coming

A unique aspect of epl2go's service is that our literacy van does not have internal programming space. Instead, we rely on building community connections to provide the service where it is needed. As August wound down, we knew that we'd need to look for indoor space to provide programming and services in the colder months. New communities share the challenge of having very little public space. The epl2go team had to think creatively about where our services could be hosted. I called grocery stores and show homes, churches, businesses and recreation centres.



Families enjoy impromptu storytime at the Pop Up Library in a local bank

We talked to community members whenever we could, asking what spaces and groups they

knew of in their neighbourhoods. The conversation was long and is still ongoing, but by reaching out and talking to the community, we were able to make some surprising connections. In one community, the local school was unable to host us for the fall, but the nearby Royal Bank was willing. Community members let us know that the local YMCA is often accessed by neighbouring new communities to the south, and they were willing to lend us a program room for a making program. Using the community's knowledge about itself, we were able to make new and

unusual connections that we couldn't have thought of ourselves.

As epl2go's winter schedule begins and we approach one year of service in Edmonton, we are continually learning from our experiences and from the information given to us by the community. The service will soon be expanding to include another Literacy Van and more staff, and we will continue to use community entry techniques, feedback from customers and the community's knowledge about itself to create a responsive mobile service.



The author

Laura Young is the Community Librarian with epl2go. She has been a librarian with the Edmonton Public Library for six years as both a Community Librarian and a Youth Services Librarian.

Notes

ⁱ Price, Gary, "'A Food Truck for the Brain': First of Four Edmonton Public Library epl2go Literacy Van Hits the Streets". *InfoDocket Library Journal*, July 24 2014, <http://www.infodocket.com/2014/07/24/edmonton-public-libraris-epl2go-literacy-vans-hit-the-streets/>