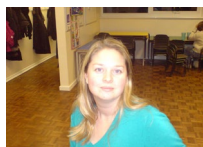


Dealing with donations

The experience of the University of East London



Kelly Travers

Academic Services Librarian
Library and Learning Services
University of East London
k.s.travers@uel.ac.uk

For many years, subject librarians at the University of East London (UEL) were faced with the dilemma of how to deal with donations to the library. You could accept them with a smile and add them to stock immediately... or work out how to say 'thanks but no thanks' in a way that made the donor feel valued for making the offer but not utterly rejected and believing that you and / or the library were ungrateful.

Space issues had meant that it was often not feasible to accept more copies of existing titles or old textbooks that had passed from usefulness in current teaching. Additionally, a clear-out from an academic's office or a graduating student's bedroom would often include worn-out books or the just plain inappropriate (books on the latest fad diets or celebrity autobiographies). A variety of arrangements were used to deal with these 'gifts'. They included adding them to stock, turning them away, or accepting them to avoid an awkward encounter with the donor, and then leaving them on a trolley for years while deciding what to do with them. These options were unsustainable in the long term, but should that mean we should stop accepting all donations and risk looking ungrateful, when some might be useful additions to stock?

Meanwhile, while we ignored / grappled with this problem, we initiated a reading for pleasure scheme entitled 'Relax with a book'. We purchased some fiction and popular non-fiction books to start a small collection with the aim of encouraging students (and staff) to read outside their module reading lists and get back to enjoying a book for its own sake (something many students subsequently told us they hadn't done since school days). Our small start-up budget was enough to buy a few popular books, but the bulk of the first fifty or so items in the collection came from library staff donating their own unwanted fiction.

Launched on World Book Night in April 2015, it immediately proved a popular scheme. As part of the event, students were encouraged to tell us their favourite titles so we could purchase them for the collection in the future. We decided to present a free book on launch day to those students who had shared their favourite title and taken part in a quick quiz. And the gift books that we used for the giveaway? Correct! The trolley load of unwanted donations that had built up over the years. It was the classic 'kill two birds with one stone' solution.

The 'take a free book' idea quickly became incorporated into our plans for a library stall at the Freshers' Fair in September. We had enough stock left over to see us through another event (even one that lasted four days), but decided to supplement it with books from a Newham shopping centre pop-up shop, which rescued unwanted books from landfill and charity shops (Cooke, 2015). At this point we were still concentrating on fiction in the giveaway, but it became apparent from conversations we had during the fair that students were very interested in receiving an academic book that would help them in their studies. At this stage we decided to actively seek out donations from our academics and students.

For the first time in a long while, we welcomed all donations, either fiction or academic books, either to add them to the 'relax' collection or to pass them on to other students at events. Indeed, we enthusiastically advertised for them in university online publications. Donors were always informed about the possible future destination of their books, and all have been happy to proceed. Feedback from academics donating to the 'free books' giveaway follows a similar line to that given by Dr Helen Powell, principal lecturer in psychosocial studies:

I am delighted to participate in the 'free book' scheme at UEL, as I value all students being able to gain access to a wide range of textbooks to enhance their learning irrespective of their backgrounds and financial

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situation. Students should be able to build a tangible relationship with their texts, and anything that can be done to build this relationship is integral to effective learning. That my book donation can enhance in some way the student experience is wonderful and is a step towards inclusivity.

Donations now come in throughout the year, but especially at the end of the summer semester, so we have set up special drop boxes for students and staff to deposit their books when library staff are not around. A section of shelving at each of our campus library offices has been cleared for storage of donations, which are kept until our two annual giveaway events in April (World Book Day) and September (Freshers' Fairs).



Kelly Travers

Book donation box, Stratford Campus Library



Annamarie Burchett

Library Freshers' Fair stall, Stratford Campus



Annamarie Burchett

Library Freshers' Fair stall, Stratford Campus

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The buzz around our stall at Freshers' Fair last September was much better than in previous years when we offered the usual freebies of pens and bookmarks in the hope of luring students into conversations about impending research needs and databases. This time around, we had genuinely lovely chats about favourite books and which topics might come up in the first semester of teaching (it helped to have some subject librarians on the stall!) – all of which led to helping them choose the free book that might be most useful to them. They were sincerely grateful for their gift book, so much so that we had to get a new zap banner with the words 'Please choose a free book' emblazoned upon it, in the hope that we wouldn't have to keep explaining there was no charge or catch!

All librarians aspire to making meaningful contact with new students, and this venture has been critical to the success of our efforts. The fact that we can also recycle our donated books has been the icing on a particularly satisfying cake!

Reference

Cooke, P. (2015) 'The Stratford store that saves books from the scrapheap', *Newham recorder*, 6 November. Available at: <http://www.newhamrecorder.co.uk/news/the-stratford-store-that-saves-books-from-the-scrapheap-1-4299895> [accessed 22 August 2017]

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