



## A Child of Books: Building Little Free Libraries with Student Partners in Teaching and Learning

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### **Author Biography**

Hayley Hoffman is a Ph.D. student in the College of Communication and Information at the University of Kentucky, where she studies instructional communication. She earned a B.A. in English from Centre College and an M.A. in Communication from the University of Kentucky. Her work has been published in print in *The Carolinas Communication Annual* and *It Works for Me with High-Impact Practices* and online by the National Communication Association and In Media Res.

# 2020 Pedagogicon Proceedings

## A Child of Books: Building Little Free Libraries with Student Partners in Teaching and Learning

**Hayley Hoffman**

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*The lack of equitable access to books for children has a lifelong impact on their literacy development. Pop-up libraries, such as the popular Little Free Libraries, are intended to address this divide by providing access to books year-round. Drawing from the author's previous experience with the project, this essay explores the ways in which building a Little Free Library as a class can allow students at various grade levels to act as partners in teaching and learning.*

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### **Introduction**

Decades of literacy research have arrived at the same conclusion: owning books is vital to a child's literacy development and their enjoyment of reading (Reading is Fundamental, 2020). However, not all families can afford the luxury of books for their children; two out of every three children living in poverty have no books to call their own (Reading is Fundamental, 2020). As such, children from low-income families are often several years behind their wealthier peers in terms of their literacy development. The nonprofit organization Little Free Library aims to address this literacy gap by providing year-round access to free books that both children and adults can claim as their own through public book exchanges. Building a Little Free Library alongside high school or college-aged students provides a unique opportunity to develop critical thinking, group communication, and problem-solving skills while also acting as partners in teaching and learning. This paper will explain the steps needed to engage student partners in the Little Free Library building process as well as offer insight into how the Little Free Library project can act as a capstone project for a service learning-focused class.

### **Program Context**

Each summer in Kentucky, approximately 1,000 high-achieving rising high school seniors are invited to take part in the Governor's Scholars Program (GSP). These students (or "scholars," as the faculty call them) gather on college campuses across the Commonwealth for five weeks, during which they take three

college-like classes: focus area, which is selected by the scholar and provides an in-depth look at a topic of interest to them; general studies, which is assigned at random and emphasizes service learning and group communication; and seminar, which examines common problems (e.g., college choice) faced by scholars. During the summer of 2019, I served on the faculty of the Centre College campus of GSP, where my general studies class, titled “A Child of Books,” centered on children’s literature and literacy development. I charged my scholars, in line with the class’s service learning goals, to assemble a Little Free Library of their own design for Toliver Elementary School in Danville, Kentucky.

## **Overview of Project**

The lack of equitable year-long access to books for children is an issue that has risen to the forefront of educational research in the past decade. According to the United States Department of Education (2015), children who have no books in their homes or access to books outside of the school day score far below those who own and access books year-round on reading proficiency exams. “The data and research are clear,” asserts the U. S. Department of Education (2015), “[that] children who have access to print reading materials have better literacy outcomes” (para. 3). This lack of access to books most often plagues families living near the poverty line, with at-risk homes containing the least amount of print of all the socioeconomic statuses (Trelease, 2013). These families are also rapidly losing access to libraries as public and school libraries in at-risk neighborhoods are open fewer hours than those in higher-income areas and often the first to have their funding cut (Trelease, 2013).

As such, children who do not have access to print materials outside of school see a marked stagnation and even decline in their literacy development as compared to their better-off peers. Children from low-income families have a much smaller vocabulary—and are exposed to 30 million words fewer—than their middle- and upper-class peers by the time they start school (Jensen, 2013). This divide only worsens with time, with children from low-income families scoring an average of 60 percent lower than children from higher-income families on standardized reading tests (Bhattacharya, 2010); additionally, children who attend schools in impoverished areas score more than 30 points lower than their wealthier peers (NCES, 2016). It is clear from these studies, among others, that “poverty is the largest correlate of reading achievement” (Cunningham, 2006, as cited in Bhattacharya, 2010). Of particular concern is the literacy development of children in the Commonwealth of Kentucky, which ranks fourteenth in the nation for the

largest majority of low-income students—55 percent of public-school students qualify for free or reduced lunch (Southern Education Foundation, 2013).

The pop-up library movement is one that strives to bridge this achievement gap. The placement of bookshelves and magazine racks, as well as the hosting of storytimes, in locations like barbershops and laundromats has become increasingly popular as the literacy contrast between low- and high-income families becomes more stark (Hauser, 2019). The most popular of these makeshift literacy hubs, however, are Little Free Libraries, which are located in a variety of locations, from front yards to parks, and provide access to books year-round. What began as a local book exchange in a front yard in Wisconsin has expanded into an international movement; there are currently approximately 100,000 Little Free Libraries open for use in over 100 countries around the world (Little Free Library, 2020). By providing 24/7 access to books, Little Free Libraries allow children and adults of all socioeconomic statuses to expand their horizons through reading and to have books to call their own.

## **Analysis and Assessment**

To address the literacy gap that exists in Kentucky, I asked my GSP scholars at Centre College to engage as partners in teaching and learning through the construction of their own Little Free Library. Below are the steps my scholars and I took to design, construct, and install their Little Free Library for Toliver Elementary School:

1. My scholars first *engaged in a low-stakes group project* to practice their group communication and problem-solving skills. I simply provided materials (masking tape and plastic straws) and the goal (build the tallest tower) before turning the project over to the scholars. Together, they negotiated new rules (e.g., the tower could be on the table and touch the ceiling) and judged one another's work to determine the winner—already taking on some aspects of their “partners” role.
2. My scholars then *got reacquainted with childhood* by playing with toys from their youth (e.g., Legos, Play-Doh) and taking a trip to a local park. While there, I asked them to reflect on their own childhoods, considering what kind of readers they were when they were younger. This activity encouraged them to consider what books, library designs, etc., might appeal to younger age groups before the design process began.

3. I then *introduced the Little Free Library concept* to my scholars through YouTube videos and newspaper articles. Together, they explored the Little Free Library webpage and began to form preliminary ideas of what these book exchanges looked like as well as what functions they served in various communities.
4. From there, my scholars *designed their own Little Free Library*. First in small groups, my scholars brainstormed potential designs for the library; among the ideas presented were libraries in the shape of a rocket and a castle. The scholars then reconvened as a class and negotiated the design amongst themselves, writing the measurements for each piece out on the whiteboard. They then separated themselves into functional teams—building, painting, etc.—to determine which roles they would each play in the construction process. As with their first group activity, I was merely the guide who asked questions and kept the conversation going—the onus of responsibility for designing a functional library was entirely on the scholars.
5. I then *acquired materials* for the library. In preparation, my scholars provided a complete list—from the size of the library door’s plexiglass sheet to the titles of picture books they wanted to add to the library’s collection—for my shopping excursion. It is important to note that I only bought what was requested by the scholars, and nothing more, so that the scholars might use their problem-solving skills to navigate out of the corners they would paint themselves into. If the scholars asked for a shovel rather than a post digger or staples rather than nails, I obliged—even if it would cause a logistical headache down the road.
6. My scholars then *built their Little Free Library*. Over a span of three days, they worked in their individual teams to assemble their three-foot-tall library. I served as a mediator and supervisor; I was there to make sure power tools were used responsibly and not to dictate how the library should be built. It was during this stage that the scholars assumed their full partner roles, leading themselves through this learning experience rather than relying on a teacher to guide them. They communicated clearly and effectively to resolve a range of problems, from resizing the Plexiglass door to redesigning the roof.
7. While the assembly took place, I asked my scholars to *write letters to future readers inside the books they would add to the library*. In writing about their love of Harry Potter and other books from their childhood, they shared their

enthusiasm for reading with another generation of readers. This task also kept all of the scholars occupied while final touches and adjustments by the building team took place. Writing letters from older to younger readers to encourage literacy development is practice I borrowed from Popova and Bedrick's (2018) *A Velocity of Being: Letters to a Young Reader*, where popular children's authors and illustrators shared letters encouraging young audiences to find a lifelong passion for reading.

8. It soon came time for the scholars to *install their Little Free Library*. Throughout this process, they worked with and depended on one another to resolve issues as they arose. Their chosen installation site, for example, was filled with tree roots; together, and with little input from me, they found a new site and began digging in shifts. Once the post was in the ground and the library sat atop it, the scholars applauded and cheered. It was incredibly moving to see the excitement on their faces as a project that was theirs and theirs alone was finally realized and completed.
9. While admiring their hard work, I asked the scholars to *reflect on this process*. I probed them with questions that encouraged them to call upon their partnership role and thus assess the success of the project: What went well? What was most challenging about navigating this project largely on your own? What would you change if you were to do this project again? Their thoughtful answers revealed to me that the scholars had indeed learned a great deal from this experience, meeting the desired group communication and problem-solving outcomes at the heart of GSP's general studies curriculum. The impact of the project was only further proven to me by the results of GSP's end-of-summer survey, in which the scholars noted that their favorite part of my general studies class was working together to complete the Little Free Library project.
10. Finally, I *added the Little Free Library to the worldwide map* available on the Little Free Library website. Adding our library to the map ensured that visitors would be able to locate it for years to come and exchange books with other Danville residents. Since its installment, the library has been well-used by Danville residents and Toliver families; I check it every few months to ensure the library is stocked for future users. Currently, the library is on temporary removal from Toliver Elementary School's front lawn due to the COVID-19 pandemic and will be reinstalled when it is safe for communal items, like books in a Little Free Library, to be in public spaces again.

## Discussion and Considerations

In terms of considerations, it is important to note that the supplies and books for my scholars' Little Free Library cost approximately \$400; fortunately, our project was fully funded by the Governor's Scholars Program. Due to the program's status as an educational institution, we were gifted a charter number (approx. \$50) by the Little Free Library parent organization and received educator discounts on books from local bookstores. Those worried about costs and seeking external funding for their own class's library can apply for the Impact Library grant program through the Little Free Library organization, which provides supplies, a charter, and a starter set of books free of charge to those building libraries in book deserts. Additional grants for projects of this kind are also available through home improvement stores and local banks.

Building a Little Free Library can certainly be an arduous project for a group of students to undertake but ultimately provides an invaluable opportunity for students to take on more responsibility in their own learning in a safe environment. It is a project best served in a service learning or problem-based learning environment, for it encourages students to work together and solve problems creatively while creating a book exchange for public use. Throughout the design, construction, and installation processes, students can truly take on a partner role in the teaching and learning process while also tapping into their unique talents and abilities.

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