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Non-Traditional Lending Libraries in Oregon

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Breanna Weston is a part-time adult reference librarian at Woodburn Public Library. Recently having made the jump from academic to public libraries, she is enjoying doing more reader's advisory and sharing her love of books. Her long term goal is to open a library in her small town of Lafayette, Oregon. In addition to librarianship, she owns Digital Natives: Technology Coach which teaches technology to senior citizens.

In the last several years, amid tough economic times, a variety of new, non-traditional libraries opened in Oregon. While these libraries may or may not allow patrons to borrow books or information, they have collections as varied as power tools, canning equipment, telescopes and seeds. When I first heard of these libraries popping up, I was excited and started to wonder how they compare to textbook definitions of a "real" library. Non-traditional lending libraries offer an innovative look at the library model; they borrow the structure and general purposes of education, sustainability and community, but get creative with the type of items and services inside.

The variety and dedication to these libraries is impressive. Some of these libraries are funded from grants, like the North Portland Tool Library and Preserve and Serve, a kitchen library. For all, donations and volunteers are what make these libraries successful. The non-traditional libraries operate similarly to traditional public libraries. To be able to borrow items, a person must prove identity and residency, and then sign a membership agreement and liability waiver. A few have nominal membership fees, some based on a sliding scale. There are limits to how many items a person can checkout, along with overdue fines for returning items late. Many of these libraries are generally open one evening during the week and Saturdays.

What's in These Libraries?

There are four tool libraries in Portland (North, Northeast, Southeast and Green Lents neighborhoods) lending out gardening, automotive and home repair tools. The Portland Seed Library started in the Northeast Tool Library, and has expanded to the North and Southeast Tool Libraries. The Seed Library is an exception in that borrowers return seeds from the plants they grew with the original seeds. The other seed library is located about 18 miles south of Coos Bay, in Coquille and is membership based.

North Portland Preserve and Serve, Home Goods Library and Kitchen Share Southeast lend canning equipment and serving equipment for large gatherings. The local food movement has made the niche interests of canning, gardening, home brewing and winemaking popular. More and more people are interested in trying these activities and these services allow people to try it out without investing a lot of money. Additionally, the





How Sharing Shapes Communities

In the main article, I pose the question of whether or not these libraries meet the definition of “real libraries,” but what may be even more important is that no matter what they are called, these places build community. As these founders emphasize:

“The more we experience sharing, the less attached we tend to be to possessions and the less separate we see ourselves, creating connection with others!”

— Dre Davey,
Preserve & Serve Founder



Preserve and Serve class attendees learn important safety steps for water bath canning in these low cost food preservation classes.



Hands on, small group classes bring neighbors together as they learn the simple steps of home canning.

serve collections go hand in hand with the Portland’s movement to improve recycling and sustainability, like their Portland Recycles! plan with a goal to increase recycling to 75 percent by 2015 according to the Office of Planning and Sustainability (n.d.).

The Independent Publishing Resource Center (IPRC) in southeast Portland has a zine library with over 6,000 self-published items, with many of those items produced in whole or in part at IPRC. In addition to this impressive collection, they have the workspace and tools for individuals to self-publish their books. IPRC have computers with graphic design and desktop publishing programs, a binding machine, letterpress and Yeti Research Station. These workspaces and equipment are available to the public for a small fee based on to a sliding scale. A variety of workshops are available as well as orientations that are required prior to using some of the specialized equipment.

Rose City Astronomers (RCA) and Street Books are both in Portland. RCA lends out books as well as telescopes to patrons who have been members of at least three months. According to telescope librarian David Horne, the RCA library offers telescopes, eyepieces, equipment and large astronomical binoculars for loan to members at no cost. Street Books is a bicycle-powered mobile library for people living outside. In Hood River, Gorge Kids offers a toy library and in Bend, Central Oregon Disability Support Network offers disability equipment for loan.

Are These Real Libraries?

However excited and fascinated I am about these organizations, my question still remains, are these real libraries? According to Foundations of Library and Information Science (Rubin, 2010), a popular introductory library science textbook, public libraries have five fundamental characteristics: supported by taxes, governed by a board, open to all in the community, usage is voluntary and basic services are free.

Supported by Taxes

The short answer to this criteria is no, however I do believe these organizations should be given the benefit of the doubt. First, several libraries are funded by grants, which are funded by taxes. In a roundabout way some of these libraries fulfill this criteria. For example, the North Portland Preserve and Serve is funded by a grant from the Office of Planning and Sustainability, City of Portland.





How Sharing Shapes Communities

“At a small, volunteer-run library like Kitchen Share, members understand the trust we offer them and have an excellent record of returning items in good condition. Our members are communicative and honest with us. These simple threads of trust help weave the fabric of a healthy community.”

—Robin Koch,
Founding Director of
Kitchen Share Southeast



Longtime patron Eric was a regular at the street library from 2011–12. He is now on hospice at a facility in northeast Portland.



Mark H. checks out a book.



Street Librarian Laura Moulton pedals to her next spot.

Outside at the Street Books library, passersby often peruse the book selection and say things like, “Wow, you’ve actually got really good books here.” I think this surprise might come from an assumption that people living outside aren’t interested in reading quality literature, or philosophy, or religion. In fact, what I’ve found after three years of checking out books to people who live outside, is that their interests vary widely, that many are very well read, and plenty request challenging reading material from me. There have been many spontaneous conversations between my Street Books patrons and the larger, housed community, about favorite books they have in common. This is exactly what I hope will happen: a conversation about literature that transcends one’s personal circumstances. Whether someone lives indoors, or sleeps outside on a piece of cardboard, literature has the power to change one’s outlook and life, and it can ultimately reveal what we have in common with one another.

Laura Moulton
librarian@streetbooks.org
<http://streetbooks.org>





Building Community

“When I look at the Kitchen Share library, I don’t just see cabinets of appliances. I see hundreds of projects—from canning and dehydrating to cider pressing and baking—that my neighbors have been able to complete without purchasing their own equipment. I see community members sharing skills with one another, carrying on traditions passed down from their grandmothers, or expressing themselves with creative new recipes. I see a thriving community growing healthier together.”

— Robin Koch, Founder
Director of Kitchen Share
Southeast

Photo by Jan Kiecki, Rose City Astronomers.



RCA Library: RCA member Richard Berry browses through books offered for checkout before a Rose City Astronomers general meeting. Berry, a former editor of *Astronomy Magazine*, considers the lending library one of the most extensive astronomy libraries he’s seen.

Photo by Jan Kiecki, Rose City Astronomers.



RCA Telescope Library: Members can check out a variety of sizes and types of telescopes before monthly Rose City Astronomers general meetings. Telescope librarian David Horne and many other board members are available to discuss the scopes and help members determine the best fit for them.

Second, libraries did not start as tax based institutions. During the late nineteenth century, one of Andrew Carnegie’s requirements was for towns to fund 10 percent of the library operation, in order for him to donate a building (Murray, 2009). This led to an explosion of public libraries in the United States during that time. It took a long time for libraries to evolve into public libraries. These new libraries may need time before a similar evolution occurs.

Third, public library funding is unsecure, which was made painfully obvious during this last recession. Rubin’s definition is narrow and may potentially in the future exclude even traditional public libraries. Many public libraries are diversifying their income to avoid future issues. These non-traditional libraries are starting out with diversified funding.

Board of Directors

Most of these organizations are non-profits registered with the State of Oregon and federally recognized as 501(c)(3) organizations. While a board of directors is not required for these statuses, many do have them.

Open to Community

The non-traditional libraries fall into two groups when it comes to who can borrow materials: residency or membership requirements. For those with residency restrictions, the neighborhoods are typically smaller than the community restrictions from traditional libraries. The non-traditional libraries serve neighborhoods, where traditional libraries serve towns or cities. Some non-traditional libraries impose age restrictions due to liability issues, while others, like the RCA Telescope Library, let younger members check out equipment for themselves, but they must provide information on a parent along with contact and identification information. Similarly, many traditional libraries have age restrictions for borrowing materials. Membership libraries may require a small fee, sometimes on a sliding scale, to join. Overall, yes, the non-traditional libraries can be defined as open to community, in fact, community





Building Community

“Stepping into a collaborative consumption system via these alternative libraries invites us to rethink the relationship we have to our stuff and those around us. People’s mindsets shift from scarcity mentality to abundance mentality after experiencing this alternative to owning. When we find ourselves in abundance, we start to wonder “What more can I share.” When we experience need, we see the potential of sharing and ask others to share with us. This shifts us from a state of independence to interdependence and therefore brings us into a role as co-creator of community.”

— Dre Davey,
Preserve & Serve Founder



building is central to the vision of most of these organizations. For example, Steve Couche, with mentorship from the Northeast Portland Tool Library, founded the Southeast Portland Tool Library precisely because he wanted to try to build a better sense of community within the Southeast Portland neighborhood (personal communication, October 3, 2013).

Usage is Voluntary

No one is required to use any of these non-traditional libraries, just like with traditional libraries. The purpose is sustainability and the greater good of the community. All the libraries fit this criterion.

Basic Services are Free

Interestingly, many of the non-traditional libraries fit this criterion better than public libraries, because they do not have imposed taxes. As long as you live within the defined neighborhood, a person can use the services, which makes basic services truly free. For those that require a membership fee, the fees are nominal, some based on a sliding scale, and at a much lower cost than buying or renting the item.

This criterion is misleading and contradicts with the taxes criterion. Public libraries are tax funded as we discussed above, the services are not really free, which some of us explain to our patrons or as they may tell us. More accurately, basic services are covered by taxes, but even this does not describe the membership based libraries. This criterion depends on the library.

Many of these libraries fulfill four out of the five criteria Rubin indicates as fundamental to a public library. So, they might not quite be a public library yet, but they are certainly on their way. In regards to intent and purpose they are definitely following the spirit of public libraries.

The Learning Curve

What I think is great about these libraries is the reciprocal learning between these organizations and traditional libraries. The tool libraries have developed their own tool cataloging program called Tool Librarian, where they can track members, tools and tool loans. According to Steve Couche, Southeast Portland Tool Library’s catalog was developed by “A great, unpaid, retired ophthalmologist from Massachusetts who got rid of his tools when he moved ... he wanted to get involved and developed the website and revamped the database and developed his own, simple to use database that is now being used at a tool library in Philadelphia and one in Australia as well as other tool libraries in Portland” (personal communication, October 3, 2013). Currently, three of the four tool libraries in Portland are using this database and it will be interesting to see if and how they develop an inter-library loan system.

Traditional libraries might take a look at these non-traditional libraries to see what they can learn and change. For example, many of these non-traditional libraries advertise the sustainability portion their organizations by emphasizing recycling and reuse. Preserve and Serve patron Nicole Morris, a child and family therapist touches on one aspect of sustainability when she says “Rather than having a hundred people all own a pressure cooker which is pretty big or a steamer which is pretty expensive or a hundred pieces of serving ware, I can just go ahead and share that with other people. I don’t have to store that stuff either, which is really nice.” (D. Davey, personal communication, October 7, 2013). The public library is by nature a green concept, however traditional libraries do not tend to include anything about this in their promotional materials. Due to the popularity of the topic of recycling in Oregon, it would be great to promote the fact that libraries are sustainable institutions.



Building Community

“Within one month of opening, there was a man standing at the back door entrance to the tool library asking for a stud finder which was checked out at the time. As he was talking another man walked up behind him and, hearing that he needed a stud finder, said he had one at his house that he would loan. As it turns out, they lived two blocks from each other and there are many more stories like that, of people getting to know their neighbors by using the tool library.”

— *Steve Couche, Founder
Southeast Portland
Tool Library*

If non-traditional libraries continue to grow they may eventually receive tax based funding, and the implications for the future are quite interesting. The definition of a public library could change from a place dealing in information to an access model. It could create new sections of ALA dedicated to these kinds of libraries. The need for catalogers would increase and the field of cataloging would expand to develop new classification schemes and subject headings. It is interesting to look at librarianship, subject specialization, and instruction through the lense of the non-traditional library. For example, Preserve and Serve has a Librarian. When asked what distinguishes a librarian from other people who work at P&S, founder Dre Davey explained “Volunteers handle checkouts and checkins. [Our Head Librarian] runs the program and provides informational services. She is well versed in food preservation and our mission and can act on behalf of the non-profit” (personal communication, October 8, 2013). Reference librarian carpenters, chefs, telescope-fitters, gardeners and food preservationists ... think of all the possibilities! 

Table 1 List of non-traditional lending libraries in Oregon.

Library	Website
Central Oregon Disability Support Network	http://www.codsn.org/equipment-for-loan.html
Coquille Valley Seed Library	http://coquillevalleyseedlibrary.org/
Gorge Kids	http://www.gorgekids.com/community_new_parent_services.asp
Green Lents Community Tool Library	http://tools.greenlents.org/
Home Goods Library	http://knowthyfood.com/homegoods-library/
Independent Publishing Resource Center	http://www.iprc.org/
Kitchen Share Southeast	http://www.kitchenshare.org/
North Portland Preserve & Serve	http://preserveandserve.org/
North Portland Tool Library	http://northportlandtoolibrary.org/
Northeast Portland Tool Library	http://www.neptl.org/
Portland Seed Library	http://portlandseedlibrary.net/
Rose City Astronomers	http://www.rosecityastronomers.org/index.htm
Southeast Portland Tool Library	http://www.septl.org/
Street Books	http://www.streetbooks.org/

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