

What Are These Things Doing in the Library?

How a Library of Things Can Engage and Delight a Community

by Brendan Lax
Collection Development Librarian,
Hillsboro Public Library
brendan.lax@hillsboro-oregon.gov



BRENDAN LAX has worked at the Hillsboro Public Library since 2009, where he selects and maintains a number of collections, including the graphic novels, AV, board games, video games, and the Library of Things. His work life focuses on creating relevant and accessible collections for his community, and finding innovative ways to expand the reach of the library and promote its resources through digital engagement. Prior to working in libraries, Brendan was chief steward on an ocean-going tugboat.

On the surface, the difference between a Library of Things collection and any other collection in the library lies in the materials. We see traditional library collections as books, periodicals, sound recordings, video recordings, and the digital versions of these formats. A Library of Things can be anything beyond this, from air fryers and board games to fishing poles and Arduino kits. But if you look more closely, you begin to see that a Library of Things engages a community in a fundamentally different way than many of our traditional collections do. Through this unconventional engagement, libraries with special collections find new ways to have a meaningful impact on their communities. Good library collections do a number of things: they teach and instruct; they are representative and inclusive; they provide equal and open access to information; and they entertain. Special collections can certainly do all this, but they also afford us a unique opportunity to interact with our patrons through the materials we lend out. Certainly, some of the excitement for starting a Library of Things comes from the freedom to experiment and try out new models of lending, but there is the additional responsibility for us to make sure these collections are in alignment with the needs of our communities. When the Hillsboro Public Library was deciding on what to include in our collection of Things, we carefully considered our library's mission and strategic goals, asked our patrons what they wanted to see in the collec-





Library of Things items “in,” including a rack of cake pans and a white board where people can write what they would like to see us add.

tion, and did our best to ensure that these items would be as accessible as possible. Once the collection launched, we discovered that a Library of Things begins a dialogue with patrons, as they share with us their feedback, experiences, and ideas. We started hearing about the projects people were working on, what tools they needed, and what items they had lying around their homes that they wanted to donate to us for other people to use. While circulation numbers can tell part of a collection’s story, what really informs the success of a Library of Things and the impact it has on a community is how much the people we serve embrace it and make it their own.

Hillsboro Public Library’s initial move into non-traditional items began innocently enough. Many public libraries have long had non-traditional niche collections, like puppets or early learning toys. In 2014, we started experimenting with some new types of items, adding Arduino kits, board games, and cake pans to our circulating collections. We had received the Arduino kits as a donation, and it seemed like a great opportunity to see how a kit with many different parts and pieces would circulate. The West Slope Library, part of our county cooperative, had already successfully experimented with circulating board games and this inspired us to do the same. Bakeware had shown to be a popular experimental collection at other public libraries, and we decided it would be useful to provide them at both our branches. Initially there was no concerted effort to fundamentally change the way public libraries work, or to be part of a larger library trend or movement. We just wanted to offer some engaging and educational collections to our patrons.

As we were experimenting with these collections, Sacramento Public Library was just getting started with what they were calling the Library of Things, a name borrowed from a non-profit in the UK. Wanting to see how they were making this work, another colleague and I headed down for a visit, adding in a side trip to the bay area to see the Berkeley Public





Screenshot of @book.nosed post on Instagram showing the cake she baked. From: https://www.instagram.com/p/BuCsvkmm_r9/

Library and Oakland Public Library tool lending collections. I was already familiar with the local tool libraries in Portland, but was staggered to see public libraries circulating thousands of tools, and realize they had been doing this for decades. When we saw these collections, we realized that the little thing we had started at the Hillsboro Public Library could be the core of something a lot bigger, something with the potential to generate meaningful change in our local community. Seeing how well-used and appreciated these special collections were in California, it became clear, given the right access to the right materials and resources, special collections can transform a community.

What Kind of Deep Fryer and How Many Banjos?

Determining the scope and contents of this new collection was exhilarating and freeing, but also daunting. We were, after all, venturing into uncharted territory. For ideas of what to include in the collection, we examined what was on the shelves at other libraries, like Sacramento, Berkeley, and the Ann Arbor District Library (which was getting praise for their robust collection of musical instruments and audio gear). We also surveyed our staff, patrons, and community members, asking them what they would want to check out from a library if it could be almost anything.

With our new Library of Things, we wanted to know how we could positively impact our community. To do this we grounded the collection in our library's strategic plan. Specifically, we tied this collection to our strategic goals of providing new and popular materials that "stimulate the imagination and provide leisure activities and experiences," and promoting lifelong learning by offering the resources for patrons to explore topics of personal interest. Additionally, with our library's mission statement being *For Everyone*, we had a need to minimize as many barriers to access as possible. We wanted to ensure our community had equitable access to materials and items which they might not normally encounter in their day-to-day lives. One big step towards accomplishing this was by placing very few limits on how the items circulated, not requiring any waivers, and making a determined effort not to





Facebook screen shot from: <https://tinyurl.com/y5nwz85l>

be punitive with fines and fees. Finally, for items to be considered candidates for the collection, they had to pass a test. Selection criteria were developed to make sure each item we added supported our community and our strategic goals. We wanted the collection to:

- Promote experiential learning
- Support creativity and making, and empower patrons to do it themselves
- Provide access to resources patrons might not normally have contact with
- Generate more awareness about new and emerging technologies and ideas
- Foster better-informed consumers and support local businesses by giving patrons a chance to try out something before making a decision to purchase
- Create connections within our community by exploring shared interests and collaborating
- Help facilitate the serendipitous discovery of new and exciting things at their library

Before our official launch, we had to overcome some very practical obstacles. Every item needed to be cataloged, packaged, and labeled. Our technical services personnel rose to the occasion, finding ways to make disparate things of unpredictable size fit within the limitations presented by library shelving and the movement of our materials. Our name and identity also needed to be decided. Fortunately, Sacramento Public Library was more than



Patron uses Makey Makey to make bongo drums from bananas.

happy to share the name Library of Things. It's one of those phrases that could be construed as meaningless—isn't everything a Thing?—but ultimately, it conveys our vision for this collection to our patrons, a collection of anything and everything. With this name, a new logo, and some photos, we created a brand identity that is fun, compelling and easy to spot. The right branding and publicity are critical to ensure people take notice of a Library of Things and make good use of it.

Since launch, the day-to-day workings of our Library of Things presented ongoing challenges. Recently, I found myself laying out a 10' x 10' green screen cloth on the floor of our technical services area and removing an excessive amount of dog hair with a lint roller. Several hours later, I was using a letter opener to scrape congealed oil and salt from the crevasses of a commercial popcorn popper, trying to clean out as much as I could to prevent corrosion of the internal wiring. In the same week, we had a third therapy light stolen, a patron vented to me about the expense of 9v batteries, and I had more than one item appear on my desk for repair with a note saying “smells like cat urine.” But what helped me persevere and feel that my time was being well spent was knowing that because of these extra efforts, patrons in Hillsboro get to have something special, something unique to our community that at once fills a need and brings a smile.

One Thing Leads to Another: Measuring the Success of a Library of Things

Evaluating the impact of our Library of Things outside of the standard circulation statistics is no easy feat. Five years in, with almost 1,000 items in the collection and over 60,000 circulations, we know the collection is popular and well used. Seeing 30 people on the waitlist for mochi makers, we can determine that people in Hillsboro either really like mochi, really enjoy experimenting in the kitchen, or both. But we needed to hear from

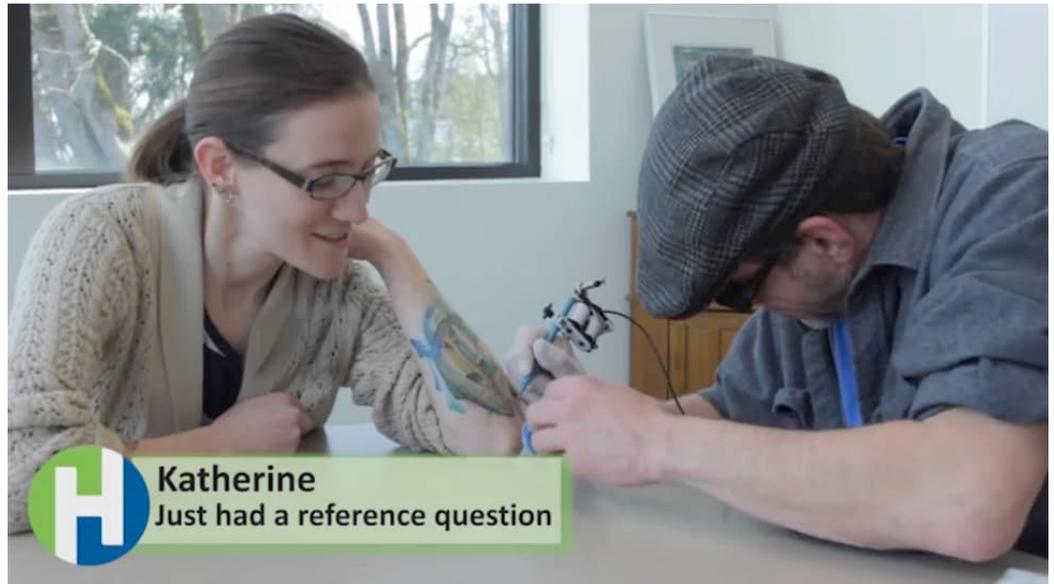




Tabling at PlanetCon 2019 in Hillsboro, Oregon, Facebook: <https://tinyurl.com/y3hfnqvt>

our community members to get the rest of the story, to understand how and why they are using these resources. Stories from patrons who have discovered and used our collection give us some of that insight. We've had photos shared with us of people gathered around chocolate fountains, decorating cakes, crocheting doilies, and making banana bongos with microcontrollers. We've heard stories from people thanking us for giving them the tools they needed to repair their home, digitize old home videos, learn to program an Arduino microcontroller, and find buried treasure in their backyard. Hearing about our patrons' experiences gave us that first bit of dialogue between a library and its community that a Library of Things so uniquely provides. Another part of the dialogue involves finding ways to collaborate with our community to develop the collection further. From the start we heard from many people who want to share projects they are working on, to explain why they wanted us to add an item or tool they needed. We put large dry erase boards where patrons could write in what they wanted to see in the collection, and soon we had purchase suggestion lists that contained hundreds of potential items. And people really wanted to donate to the collection, to contribute their underused belongings to the library in the hopes that they would find new life in the hands of their fellow community members. Selecting for the Library of Things became a back and forth process, and to this day it is constantly adapting to the changing needs of our community.





Screenshot of our Library of Things tattooing kit video for April Fool's Day 2017.
 Facebook post: <https://www.facebook.com/HillsboroPublicLibrary/videos/1481372988597353/>

While the Library of Things provides people with the items or resources they need to learn a new skill or complete a project, it is also true that patrons need to be self-reliant while learning to use that tool or item. A makerspace is the ideal complement to the Library of Things, providing a physical space for the community to gather and learn together, using a lot of the same tools and resources that you find in a Things collection. It is nice to come into one of our Fibers and Fabric meetups and get help learning how to use a sewing machine from fellow patrons, and then have the option to check out a sewing machine to complete your project at home. The popularity of the makerspaces in our library branches emphasizes the need people in our community have to share what they know and to learn from others. It reminds us that while we can empower people simply by putting the tool they need into their hands, often the best learning happens when people mentor each other and work together.

Beyond Hillsboro, it has also been great helping bring this new lending model to libraries around Oregon and the rest of the country. I have often spoken at conferences and emailed with other libraries, relaying my experiences and helping them take those first few steps towards Thing-dom. And while they are right to wonder what sort of impact a tool or a Things collection will have on their technical services staff, their circulation procedures, and their collection budget, I do my best to convey that the potential good far outweighs the challenges that may come up. I've watched the Library of Things movement grow leaps and bounds since we got started in Hillsboro, and it's been very rewarding seeing these types of lending libraries popping up all over the US, Canada, Mexico, Australia, and Europe. There have been several international Lending Library Symposiums in the last few years, with talk of the next one being held in Reykjavik for 2020. These conferences give like-minded people looking to affect positive change in their communities an opportunity to meet and share their experiences and ideas. After seeing firsthand the transformative power nontraditional library collections have on a community, it's easy to see why this movement



Patron bakes a snowflake cake, from post: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BQGijD9IYIO/>

is taking hold and growing. Certainly, tool and Thing libraries help create a more sustainable future for us all by providing a better way to share resources, promote reuse overconsumption, and contribute to the circular economy. But they also have the ability to empower communities, to give people the access and opportunity to learn how to do something new, to fix and repair their homes and belongings, and to improve themselves in ways they never thought possible at their local library.

A Library of Things is a powerful tool for engagement and change, and can accomplish much more than we ever anticipated when we started in 2014. It can be as simple as a patron getting a new library card and being astonished to discover the Library of Things, becoming excited by what a library can do for them and going out into the community as a public library advocate. Perhaps a non-library user might see a media article or one of our

silly Thing videos shared on social media and wonder if it's time to return to the library and see what they have been missing. They might feel like the library is being supportive and responsive by inviting them to engage with the Library of Things and to participate in how it expands and grows. Or maybe a patron checks out a disc golf set and uses the disc golf course map to explore places around our city and county they would normally never have seen, coming back to the library to tell staff their journeyed stories. One of the best indications of success for a library collection is seeing a community fully embrace it and make it their own, to allow it to change and improve their lives. With Hillsboro's Library of Things, we have accomplished this, while still leaving lots of room for the collection to change and grow along with the people we serve. 🌀

Resources

Hillsboro Public Library's strategic plan, 2014–17: <https://tinyurl.com/y3uo2we7>

Website for Hillsboro's Library of Things: <https://www.hillsboro-oregon.gov/libraryofthings>

Wikipedia entry for "Library of Things": https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Library_of_Things

Library of Things video playlist: <https://tinyurl.com/y2qjrja9>

Hillsboro Mayor Steve Calloway and City Council sing "My Favorite Things" at the State of the City address in 2017: <https://tinyurl.com/y58gs3so>

