
Volume 23
Number 4 *Sushi, STEM, or Goat Yoga:
Successful Library Programming*

4-6-2018

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Recommended Citation

Scheppke, A. (2018). The Art of the Trade: A New/Old Take on Resource Sharing. *OLA Quarterly*, 23(4), 12-15. <https://doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1917>

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OLA Quarterly is an official publication of the Oregon Library Association | ISSN 1093-7374

The Art of the Trade:

A New/Old Take on Resource Sharing

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Kids like me who grew up in mid-century rural Minnesota knew this for certain: winter playtime was all about ice. Ice hockey or speed skating or figure skating, children claimed their affinity early on. The kids who were serious about their chosen winter sport spent most of their time in the barn-like indoor rink at the county fairgrounds, but the city accommodated the recreational skaters by scraping snowfall from the municipal parks' softball fields into makeshift retaining walls, then opening up fire hydrants to flood the area. The rinks were resurfaced periodically throughout the winter by repeated glazings, no fancy Zamboni required. Year-round use of city parks was guaranteed, and families were able to avert cabin fever by heading out to the rink on frosty evenings and weekends. Skating was as much a part of my community's culture as lutefisk and lefse.

As sports go, skating doesn't require a lot of fancy gear, but it's hard to do it without, well, skates. Although most kids outgrew their skates from one year to the next, skates rarely wore out. To help families deal with this perennial challenge, the local hardware store opened up a skate exchange every fall. The concept was straightforward: outgrown skates could be traded for used skates that fit, and the store charged a small sum for sharpening blades, replacing laces, and running the program. Of course, it also stocked new skates, just in case.

I was reminded of my youth in the frozen north as I was planning, of all things, programs related to financial literacy.

The Salem Public Library had been awarded a grant from the American Library Association and FINRA, the Financial Industry Regulatory Authority. The award included a six-week installation of a traveling exhibit called *Thinking Money*, designed to introduce basic concepts of financial literacy to teens, tweens, and young adults. The 50 libraries that received the *Thinking Money* grant were charged with partnering with community organizations to create at least four programs based on the exhibit's theme.

Four copies of the *Thinking Money* exhibit were created, and Salem Public Library, along with three other libraries across the country, made up the very first set of libraries to host it. The exhibit consisted of four large free-standing displays decorated with a riot of comic-book-style characters illustrating lessons about money, two dedicated iPads, a variety of games, and even a couple of custom-made rugs that led users down the paths to financial independence or financial ruin.



The timing of the exhibit's stay at the Library proved to be a challenge. Scheduled for August 29 through October 6, it coincided with kids going back to school, a time of year when program attendance statistics are always low. Convincing teachers to bring classes to the library to view the exhibit turned out to be a hard sell. The budget for field trips in our school district is very small, and teachers were unwilling to use their funds right at the beginning of the school year. Add all this to the fact that, even though the exhibit's designers had put an incredible amount of creative energy into the high-octane display, it was still about money management—a topic that's hard to get people excited about.

Finding community partners was not at all difficult. Credit unions and financial planners were only too happy to conduct classes and give presentations, but I wanted to have at least one program that approached the topic a bit more obliquely, something that would soft-sell the benefits of good money management skills. Marion County Environmental Services turned out to be the perfect partner for this endeavor. MCES's basic charge is to keep materials out of the waste stream. Through their innovative outreach activities, they challenge residents to reduce, reuse, and recycle. Their program director, Jessica Ramey, and I hatched a plan for a back-to-school blue jeans swap, reasoning that conservation of resources applies as much to the environment as it does to families' wardrobes and bank accounts, and that people who would come to the library for free back-to-school clothes might not be the same people who would sign themselves up for a class on budgets or investments. Our

theory was that if we could get people into the building for free jeans, they would discover the fabulous *Thinking Money* exhibit and perhaps learn something new.

Our program plan was simple: encourage people to, ahem, drop their pants at the Library. Donors received a voucher for every pair donated that they could exchange for a new-to-them pair of jeans at the event. We started collecting jeans on the day of our Summer Reading Club's end-of-summer celebration in early August and accepted them right up to the time the event began two weeks later. The vouchers were transferrable, and several of our generous donors told us they planned to give them to other families who needed them more.



Happy patron. (Photo by Ean Perkins.)



We sorted the jeans by size as they were received, and by the day of the event we had collected hundreds of pairs. When the doors opened to the swap at 1:00 p.m., there were dozens of families waiting to swarm the merchandise to find the best deals, and within an hour, just over 150 families had claimed their “new” blue jeans. At 2:00 p.m., we opened the doors to those without vouchers and encouraged them to help themselves to the jeans that remained. We closed up shop at 3:00 and hauled the leftovers to Goodwill.

Throughout the process, Marion County Environmental Services helped us in many ways. Most importantly, they designed marketing materials and paid for an advertisement for the event in our local newspaper. Their Master Recyclers helped us sort the blue jeans and also provided a blue jean upcycling craft for kids to do while their parents shopped.

Since then, Salem Public Library has reprised the blue jean swap, again as a back-to-school program, and it has met with equal success. The program was recently awarded the Money Smart Week Bright Ideas award, and will be featured on the <https://www.moneysmartweek.org> website as a turn-key program.

After our success with blue jeans, the Library, along with our partners at Marion County Environmental Services, decided to try an arts and crafts supply swap. Patrons were asked to clean out their craft closets and trade their no-longer-needed supplies with other crafters. It was obvious that the one-item-donated=one-item-claimed formula that was used for blue jeans wouldn't work this time. Does a paint brush equal a box of crayons, and how much is a sheet of scrapbook paper or a skein of yarn “worth”? We decided to keep things simple. Anyone who brought in anything to trade could take home anything they wanted.

We started collecting art supplies two weeks before the event. This time, donors received a ticket that gave them access to the loot at 1:00 p.m. Donations were initially slow to come in, but the pace quickened as the word got out, and by the time the event began, our meeting room looked like the aftermath of an explosion at a Hobby Lobby. We had worried that some greedy soul would donate a dried-up marker, then swoop in to grab all the good stuff, but the sheer quantity of items on offer nullified that concern. Like the blue jean swap, at the end of the day, people who did not donate were welcome to cart away whatever they wanted. After a few hours of fast and furious trading, we were left with just a few boxes of materials to dispose of, and most of those were recyclable.

Those who are interested in trying something similar at their libraries should consider the following:

- What swappable commodity would your community members be willing to trade? School uniforms? Halloween costumes? Board games? Books? Sports equipment?
- Where will inventory be stored and sorted prior to the event? Fortunately, our library has meeting rooms that we were able to reserve for this purpose. If space is not available, libraries could consider a less ambitious event where items are not collected prior to the program.
- Will there be enough inventory to ensure that your swappers don't feel let down? Local thrift stores may be willing to “seed” the inventory with goods.



- What will happen to the leftovers? Those same thrift stores may be willing to take the leftovers. Or items could be saved for the next swap, or perhaps used for other library programs.
- Are there limits to what you want to accept for trade? Unfortunately, some people will see events like these as ways to get rid of their trash without putting it in the dumpster. Some of the jeans that were brought in were too holey to be accepted. And in retrospect, I wish we had opted to not accept any liquids or aerosols for the art supply swap. For liability reasons, some materials, such as bicycle helmets or child car seats, should never be traded.
- Is your staff up to the challenge? Although this is a fairly easy program to plan and execute, sorting materials before the event and day-of-event staffing was surprisingly tiring. One of our volunteers clocked more than five miles on her pedometer in her three-hour shift during the craft supply swap. For all of our swaps we used one volunteer to help us sort materials as they were donated. At the events, we employed one staff member plus four volunteers to do sorting and setup, assist swappers during the event, and clean up afterwards.

By their very nature, libraries are all about reuse; it's part of our DNA. By expanding our definition of "reuse" from items loaned to materials traded, we can provide a way for our patrons to save money, use fewer resources, and save the planet. ♻️



Arts and Crafts Supply Swap. (Photo by Jessica Ramey.)

