



Using Evidence in Practice

Floating Collections at Edmonton Public Library

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Setting

The Edmonton Public Library (EPL) is a 17-branch urban public library system serving 782,439 residents (Edmonton, 2009) in the City of Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, which has a land area of 684.37 square kilometres (Canada, 2006). Edmonton has experienced strong growth in both population and physical size since 2001.

Both annual circulation and in-person visits at EPL are increasing, with a 23% jump in circulation from 2008 to 2009 alone. EPL's circulation in 2010 topped 13.3 million items, and in-person visits that year exceeded 5.6 million.

EPL's service model is, "We are one Library, with one staff and one collection. Every customer is my customer." The Library follows a Community-Led Service Philosophy, collaborating to understand and respond to individual and community needs for collections and services.

Problem

Edmonton Public Library customers may borrow items from, and return them to, any service point in the system. EPL historically employed a static "home library" model, in which all circulating items were returned to an assigned home branch upon check-in. In this model, items sent between service points required processing by staff at the receiving location before they were available for use.

With static collections, an overwhelming volume of items in transit frequently delayed customers' receipt of materials. EPL's growing circulation led to increased staff workload

associated with sorting, transferring, receiving, and shelving items. Frequent physical handling of materials caused items to wear out prematurely and caused ergonomic issues for staff. Inconsistent labeling practices at different locations detracted from customers' "one-library" experience.

A comprehensive process change was necessary to manage rising demands without compromising well-established public service levels and expectations. EPL began considering a floating collections model in 2004. Under this model, an item is shelved where it is returned: its home branch is the location where it is checked in.

Through floating, EPL hoped to:

- Reduce the handling of materials;
- Get materials to customers more quickly;
- Standardize labelling of materials;
- Give customers a consistent experience from branch-to-branch; and
- Promote and increase the use of the holds services.

Evidence

In considering the need for floating collections and the potential impacts on services, staff, and customers, EPL drew heavily upon the experience of other library systems and examinations of its own data.

Other library systems had reported achieving desirable outcomes such as substantial reductions in "in transit" materials through implementing floating collections. For example, Jefferson County Public Library reduced the volume of material moving among

its branches by 67 percent after floating its collections (Cress, 2004), and Sarasota County Library System reported close to a 50 percent reduction in material moving between branches a year after implementing floating (Sarasota County Libraries, 2009).

EPL generated data using SirsiDynix's Director's Station product, which allows customized analysis of customer, circulation, and collection data. The amount of material in transit, circulation figures, and patterns in customer holds were analyzed, as was the time required to fulfill customer holds of "on order" items and to process new acquisitions. Customer feedback was also closely monitored for comments about the changes, as well as the occurrence of word fragments like "float" and "collect," during and after the transition.

Implementation

EPL assembled a central Collection Standards Team to manage the transition from static to floating collections, comprised of the Director of the Collection Management and Access Division, three branch managers, two branch assistant managers, and one branch librarian.

Home locations are the divisions of a service point's own collection, e.g., Audio-Visual, Fiction, Picture Books, etc. Proceeding with floating collections required standardization both of home locations in use and physical labeling practices to ensure that all circulating items could float and be shelved anywhere in the system. The Team reviewed each home location and the number of items and service points using it to determine whether it should be retained, eliminated, or merged with another home location.

Changes resulting from the review of home locations included creating modifiers for genre fiction (e.g., FICROMANCE and FICMYSTERY) and merging the English as a Second Language and Literacy collections into a new home location, Literacy and English Language Learning.

Standardizing children's collections was challenging due both to collection size and the

number of home locations in use. Major changes in children's home locations included renaming the I-CAN-READ collection to the more inclusive EASY READERS, and eliminating the FAIRYTALES location to shelve these items with Children's Picture Books.

New home locations were created for collections such as graphic novels for adults and children which had previously been included in Adult Fiction and Juvenile Fiction, respectively. The new home locations distinguished the graphic novels as discrete collections that could be shelved separately.

EPL implemented floating in stages. While the examination of the collection was underway, EPL began floating small collections of unique materials, initially bestsellers, then videocassettes, through a range of formats until all adult and juvenile collections were floating. As new collections were added they floated immediately; video games launched as a floating collection when EPL began circulating them in December 2008.

Over a five-year period, EPL implemented floating across its entire circulating collection of 1.6 million items. The only circulating items that do not float are a local history collection, periodicals and some government publications, and a small number of reference titles.

Outcome

Overall, EPL's implementation of floating has been successful. Floating elicited little direct response from customers, and did not result in an appreciable number of floating-related customer concerns. More specifically, several desired outcomes were achieved, including:

1. A marked reduction of material in transit at the same time as EPL was experiencing a steady increase in circulation (see Figure 1);
2. A 68% increase in customer holds since 2008 (although floating collections is likely only one contributor to this trend) (see Figure 1);

3. Greatly standardized and centralized acquisitions and processing (necessitated by floating); and
4. More immediate delivery of new acquisitions to customers.

EPL continues to address a number of more challenging outcomes that have also resulted from floating collections, including:

1. Uneven distribution of materials among and within branches (e.g., a small branch might have a disproportionate number of mystery novels because of one customer's borrowing pattern);
2. Variation in the application of weeding guidelines between branches; and
3. The implications for staff of the shift to floating, particularly changes to workload and workflow.

EPL has adopted CollectionHQ software (<http://www.collectionhq.com>) as one tool to help with the first two challenges. Prior to CollectionHQ EPL used a locally developed web tool, the "Floating Dating Service", to manage the redistribution of items from crowded locations to locations that lacked certain types of materials. With floating

collections, however, using this manual system proved untenable and adopting CollectionHQ's automated, evidence-based approach became necessary. CollectionHQ allows intelligent redistribution of materials across the EPL system.

Associated issues revealed by monitoring floating include:

1. Determining the number of copies of a single title that are required/acceptable for a system of EPL's size;
2. Using book-lease programs as an alternative to purchase (which EPL is now using for some bestseller titles); and
3. Educating staff of the importance of not adjusting assigned home locations.

In terms of the cultural change inherent in floating, some staff perceived floating as a threat to the careful development of local collections. While most staff have embraced the "one library" philosophy embodied in floating, others remain tied to the older, more established vision of branch collections and retain a strong sense of ownership of "their" collections.

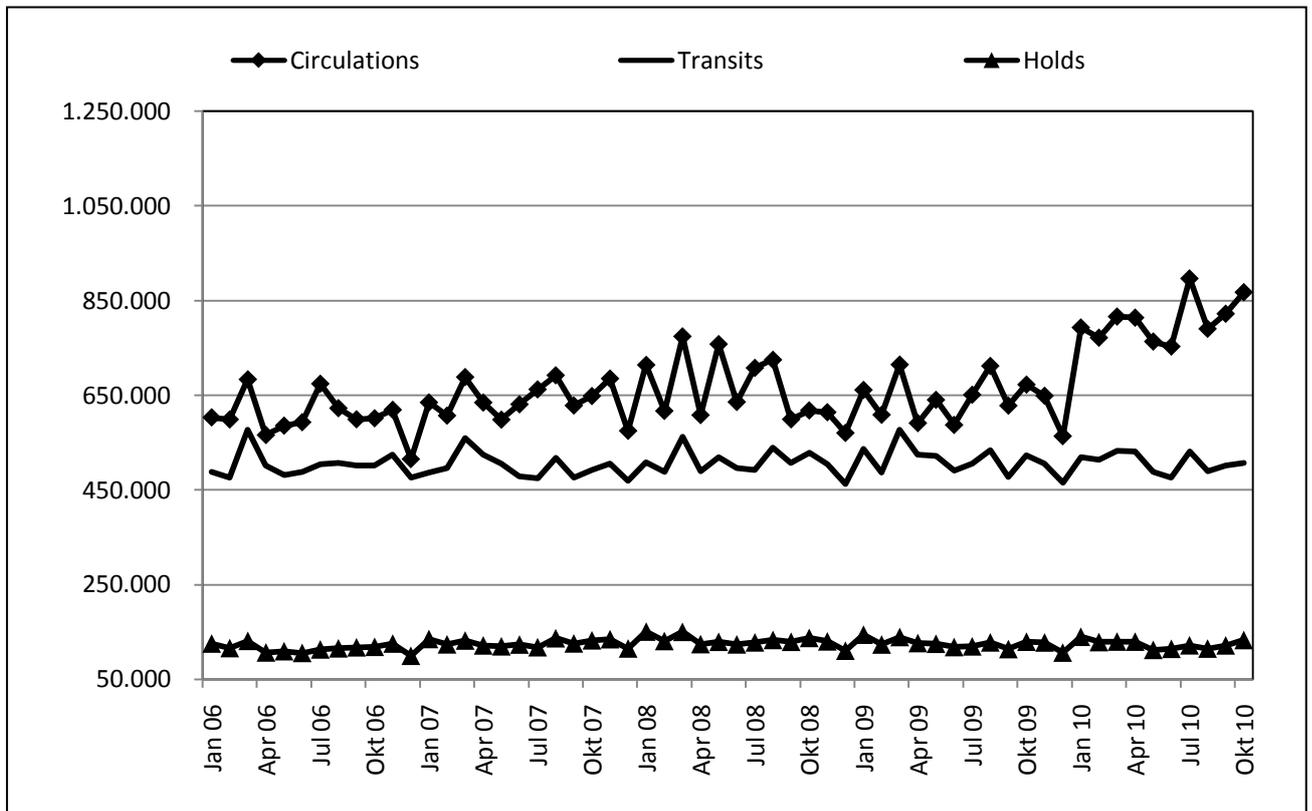


Figure 1
Circulation, transited items, and holds, January 2004–October 2010.

Reflection

It was immediately apparent that floating would reduce materials handling. As noted previously, almost immediately upon implementation of floating came the realization that rebalancing collections among service points would be an issue.

Director's Station helped us understand the extent of each service point's collection. However, having Collection HQ in place prior to floating would have been helpful in identifying items for withdrawal through its reporting capabilities. Performing an inventory of the entire collection prior to floating would also have been helpful, giving us a better understanding of our "true" collection.

A clean-up was essential prior to implementation to rid the collection of damaged, outdated, "grubby," and duplicate items. Because floating began with smaller collections, the process of preparing collections for floating became more routine by the time larger collections were floated.

EPL proceeded with floating despite obstacles and delayed implementation of floating for some collections, choosing not to wait until everything was perfect before launching. Although the transition to floating took place gradually, the Collection Standards Team found communicating the concepts and intentions of floating to staff to be more challenging than anticipated. Even now staff struggle with inconsistencies relating to floating, weeding, and other aspects of collection management at a branch level. An established rebalancing plan at the outset and greater time preparing collections prior to implementation would have made the transition easier. The Collection Standards Team continues to monitor, refine, and simplify (where possible) these processes, and address inconsistencies when they are identified; we expect this to be an ongoing Team focus.

Locally-relevant collections now take shape more organically at each service point; content, allocated shelf space, and shelf location change according to local use. Collections now strongly support the Community-Led Service Philosophy by reflecting individual community needs; items float to the service points with the greatest demand for them. For example, materials in Russian gravitate to libraries serving communities with higher proportions of customers using Russian materials.

EPL also integrated roving customer service at approximately the same time as floating in order to assist customers at their points of need, i.e., in the stacks, and can explain the changes associated with floating collections to customers, help them to find their desired materials, and provide guidance and instruction in using the catalogue to locate and place holds on items.

Floating has proved a successful initiative at EPL, and the results, both expected and unexpected, have been worth the work involved.

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