

Liberated Library at Brunel University London: An ongoing campaign

Samuel Piker is the Academic Liaison Librarian for Computer Science, Design, Electrical and Electronic Engineering, and Mathematics at Brunel University London. He also provides liaison support to Liberated Library, a student-run campaign that began in 2017. Here he outlines the background to the campaign, the way it has developed over the last three years and how it is evolving in response to the George Floyd protests of Summer 2020.

From Rhodes to Colston: A Tale of Two Statues

A line of progress runs from the grounds of The University of Cape Town all the way to Bristol Docks. On 9 April 2015, a month-long campaign started by South African students culminated in the removal of the Cecil Rhodes statue, lifted from its plinth by crane and sent to storage. For the Rhodes Must Fall movement, this statue epitomised white supremacy and institutional racism (Chantiluke et al., 2018) in a country that is trying to move forward. The lived experiences of Black students (Kessi and Cornell, 2015) tell of degrading stereotypes, a sense of alienation and a lack of academic role models.

After decades of polite requests to remove a statue of the notorious slave trader Edward Colston, Bristol City Council was finally overtaken by events. The Black Lives Matter movement was reignited in Summer 2020 by the death of George Floyd sparking mass protests in cities across the United States and worldwide. On 8 June 2020 the Colston statue was torn down, dragged to the dockside and tipped into the water. It was lifted out three days later but it is destined to remain in a museum. A once-potent symbol, oppressive to many Bristolians (Olusoga, 2020), has been removed from its place of prominence.

Liberated Library at Brunel University

At the midway point between these two toppling events, in January 2017, my own institution embarked on a project called Liberated Library. It was inspired by a series of Students' Union campaigns such as 'Liberate my degree' or 'Why is My Curriculum White?' in Bristol, Leeds and London, part of a wider decolonising movement that can trace its roots back to Rhodes Must Fall. Decolonisation aims to challenge whiteness as "a phenomenon in which certain forms of knowledge are considered morally and intellectually superior to others." (El Magd, 2016), to make the academy a more welcoming and open place for people across the spectrum of race, gender, sexual orientation, and disability.

In a move that is very characteristic of Brunel, the Students' Union chose to collaborate on their campaign with our Student Success Project (SSP), a branch of the Vice Chancellor's office. Like many of its counterparts in other Universities, the Brunel SSP was set up to tackle the attainment gap experienced by Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students, reflected in lower grades, rates of retention and progression to postgraduate degrees (HEFCE, 2017). This meant that Liberated Library had the backing of the students, the blessing of the directorate, and a books budget from the outset.

As well as being the Librarian for a group of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) departments, my functional role is supporting specific groups such as international students

and users of the Disability & Dyslexia Service. As this made me a natural fit to be the point of contact from the library side, I met with the SSP lead and their student intern in January 2017 to plan the campaign. The overall aim was to bring more BAME, female, LGBTQ+ and disabled authors into the collection, based on student recommendations. We launched in February 2017 with a week of themed displays to showcase some of our existing relevant material, using a display stall staffed by our Library Customer Champions and student reps. Book suggestions were gathered throughout that February using paper and online forms, leading to a total of 44 new purchases (Brunel SSP, 2018), while the Students' Union and SSP ran a series of author events and creative activities to raise awareness.

The positive reception to Liberated Library encouraged us to run it again over the next two academic years. I published an article during the third campaign (Piker, 2019), which gives a detailed account of how the project was run and deals with some of the challenges of making it relevant to STEM subjects. Over the three years, we purchased 137 books from student suggestions and by the end of the academic year in 2019 this selection had a total of 396 borrowing instances.

The real pleasure came in seeing suggestions for titles we would never have thought of, or even heard of, and knowing that our users were engaging with the collection on a personal level.

The impact of Liberated Library

During the 2019 – 2020 academic year we decided to focus on showcasing the books already purchased, assembling them together in a display shelf along with some posters of author profiles. The SSP was also keen to do some analysis on what kind of users had borrowed the Liberated Library purchases and get some feedback from them. Our Systems team worked out what user details the library could hand over without breaching data privacy: passing on a basic list of names and student ID numbers was okay, without any details of which books had been borrowed. In the end the national lockdown and other internal developments disrupted any further work on user analysis.

Over the last three years I have felt this project impact on my own collection development practise, particularly where I have book funds to use at my own discretion. I find I pay more attention to, and actively seek out, any media coverage of BAME or female scientists and engineers, living or dead, which I then use to hunt down any books authored by or about them.

Summer 2020...

The suggestion forms for Liberated Library asked people to state their preference for print or online format, but everyone opted for the former. This was fine, because it felt right to make a real physical impact, to have print copies we could put on display for people to browse through. I was always looking for ways to involve my subject areas in the process of diversifying the collection too, and myself and a colleague who supports STEM subjects had some success in finding individual academics who wanted to collaborate with us on their recommended reading. It was hard to find any appetite for a wider strategy though.

The explosion of Black Lives Matter in summer 2020 had an immediate impact at Brunel, with a public statement from the Vice Provost outlining our support for the movement and its aims (Leahy, 2020) and a virtual event for staff on race equality in Higher Education with external speakers sharing their experiences. In one of my more conservative and reluctant academic departments, at

their regular staff meeting, their Head spoke about the event and how it had broadened his understanding of white privilege. His department has now introduced 'Diversity' as a standing agenda item.

With campus closed, I decided to put together a Black Lives Matter E-Books reading list, using the many BLM book lists from various magazine sites and newspapers as a basis. The list was initially published in an internal Information Services bulletin, but it was also useful for sharing in other contexts: a member of Human Resources was interested in compiling reading to support groups covered by anti-discrimination legislation, so the BLM list made a good starting point and I was able to promote our Liberated Library collection there too.

This autumn the Union of Brunel Students approached me to produce a LibGuide for Black History Month, using a selection of titles their campaigns team had picked out, several of which were already part of the Liberated Library collection. By this point our Head of Library Academic Services had decided to dedicate a book fund to these kinds of projects, as a way of embedding diversity more firmly into our collection development.

Where to next? The case for decolonisation

The idea of decolonising higher education can make some practitioners feel uncomfortable and there are real problems with taking a top-down, prescriptive approach to diversity in reading lists or the wider collection. Levy (2020) argues that selecting books on the basis of an author's ethnicity, for example, is often not feasible or even helpful. The way books are chosen in this context, though, is often a very organic process, relying on personal interactions between students, librarians and academics. Where reading lists have been updated at Brunel to increase diversity it has been an entirely voluntary and considered process on the part of the module leader.

It is also worth pointing out that the inequality of outcomes in Higher Education follows a definite set of demographic patterns and campaigns such as Liberated Library carry a very clear mandate to address this through book selection. In this context, trying to increase the diversity of your collection while ignoring authors' race or gender is nonsensical.

The Black History Month LibGuide (<https://libguides.brunel.ac.uk/c.php?g=685746>) provides a good basis for a more permanent online presence, a showcase of material that demonstrates our commitment to building a collection that makes every reader feel welcome and empowered.

Decolonising your library collection: Some recommendations

Engage with activists

The same energy that has brought down slaver statues can be enlisted to drive a student-run campaign in collaboration with the library. As librarians we are natural networkers, so use your contacts within the Students' Union and just ask them what practical steps would help achieve their goals. Look out for academics in any subject who want to diversify their material.

Don't overthink it

In conversation with colleagues from other institutions, I hear tales of campaigns that never get started through fears of tokenism or 'death by committee'. There is a difference between a token gesture and a statement of intent and if you can let the students take the lead (see above) there will be a natural driver to make it happen.

Use your resources strategically

Even if there is no dedicated budget, most subject librarians find themselves with surplus book funds that need to be spent at short notice. Gather a stockpile of suggestions and pay attention to media coverage related to your subject areas. I have often discovered BAME or female scientists through radio documentaries or magazine articles.

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