

Engineering change in collection development

A techie liaison librarian's role in a Liberated Library campaign



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Introduction

In the shadow of a mountain overlooking Cape Town and the sea, on 9 April 2015, a statue of the politician and mining magnate Cecil Rhodes was lifted from its granite plinth by a truck-mounted crane and removed to storage. This was the culmination of a campaign that had started one month earlier amongst University of Cape Town students; it would spark a wider movement that is beginning to change university teaching and reading lists here in Britain.

'Rhodes must fall' was about more than just a statue (Chaudhuri, 2016); the wider issue was the continuing dominance of white, male viewpoints in higher education against a background of increasing diversity in the student population. An imperialist white-supremacist outlook drove much of Rhodes's practice and policies, and casts a long shadow over his charitable contribution to university education.

While there is a gradual increase in people from a Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) background coming to British universities, these students are less likely to complete their degree or achieve a first or 2.1 (HEFCE, 2017) compared to their white counterparts. Even those who persist and achieve good grades often find that course content and reading lists leave them feeling alienated (Mariwany, 2017). This translates to a negative impact on the overall student experience.

Emerging from the Rhodes statue protests, several universities in the UK have run successful campaigns to try and increase the diversity of authors being studied. A group of BAME students at University College London had already run an event titled 'Why is my curriculum white?' (Hussain, 2015), and this grew into a national campaign also known as 'Liberate my degree' that was taken up by students' unions at Bristol, Leeds and elsewhere. This second wave of campaigns had a library element built in, with student-nominated books being added to the shelves. As the University of Bristol BAME officer stated, 'It is important to recognise what whiteness is. It's not just a question of skin colour but of the overall dominance of certain ideas and cultural trends that go deep into every aspect of our lives' (El Magd, 2016). This is why these campaigns encompass authors from the full spectrum of gender and sexual orientation, disability and the global south.

There has been a predictable backlash from the conservative press: *The Telegraph* wrongly characterised an open letter by Cambridge students calling for more post-colonial writers to be included in the English literature curriculum as an attempt to 'purge' white authors (Hunt, 2017). This is not the case, but it serves as a reminder that actions which address historical racism or established power structures within the education system can meet resistance, such as an online backlash. Examining the social media 'culture wars' and post-truth politics, Hannan (2018) describes 'a new generation of conservatives equally as [sic] cyber-savvy as their liberal counterparts, but whose politics are driven by a burning, insatiable rebellion against liberal orthodoxy (p. 219). Here at Brunel, however, the Liberated Library project has been untouched by any 'trolling' or negative coverage. In reality the 'Liberate my degree' campaigns have a positive focus on bringing a more diverse range of authors into the curriculum, and adding them to the library collection is a move towards that.

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Fig 1. Liberated Library display stand

At Brunel University London the students' union is working on the Liberated Library alongside the Student Success Project (<https://www.brunel.ac.uk/about/student-success/About>), an initiative run by the Vice-Chancellor's office that aims to improve outcomes for those from a BAME background. Because of my functional role supporting specific user groups, the campaign team approached me in early 2017 to advise on the library element that would be central to their campaign.

Our launch week in February 2017 featured a display on the ground floor with a theme for each day, showcasing, for example, female authors from the collection. These displays were skilfully put together by library colleagues Sue Moody, John West and Khushkaran Baring, who used themed lists on the Goodreads website (<https://www.goodreads.com/genres/list>) to identify suitable titles in existing stock. The display was staffed during peak hours by library and campaign staff to answer questions and give out book suggestion forms. There was also an online form via Survey Monkey (useful to link to in Tweets), and participants were invited to include a short statement of why the book was important to them.¹ The final book display combining all the themes was kept in place for the rest of the four-week campaign.

A total of 64 book suggestions were handed to the library; our collections team went through them to identify any titles already in stock and to check availability with our supplier. At my suggestion eBook availability was also checked in order to increase accessibility for visually impaired users. A total of 44 purchases was made, and was paid for directly by the Vice-Chancellor's office. The books arrived from our supplier shelf-ready, although we did add a campaign sticker inside each one to help identify them for future borrowers. A note was also added to their MARC records to make them searchable in our catalogue and to protect them from any future weeding projects.

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Brunel University London - #LiberatedLibrary Book Suggestion Form

* 1. What is your name?

* 2. What is your student number?

* 3. What course are you currently studying? (Please state if it is an undergraduate or postgraduate course)

* 4. What is the title and authors name of the book you want to suggest?

5. What is the ISBN number of the book? (if known)

6. If the book is linked to a specific module, what is the module code and/or name?

* 7. What are your reasons for suggesting this book?

8. Would you prefer the book to be purchased as an e-book or hard copy?
 E-book
 Hard copy
 No preference

* 9. Are you happy for us to contact you with more information about the campaign or if your book suggestion is purchased?
 Yes - You may contact me with more information about the campaign or if my book suggestion is purchased
 Yes - You may contact me if my book suggestion is purchased
 No - You may not contact me

* 10. Are you happy for us to quote your above comments in any future advertising or information about the campaign?
 Yes - You may quote my comments
 No

Done

Fig 2. Book suggestion form

Owing to the Easter break and a wait for delivery, we were well into the final exam period before all the recommended books were assembled. We therefore opted to wait until students returned in September 2017 to put them on display. Sharing the list on Twitter (<https://twitter.com/ECandMLibrarian/status/910508768777134080>) helped to reach alumni who had made some of the suggestions. The campaign's profile within the institution generated interest from academics, one of whom got in touch requesting help compiling a book list for a class exercise; a group of social work students was discussing texts written from the perspective of the elderly or people with disabilities, so I was able to point them towards the genre lists on Goodreads (<https://www.goodreads.com/genres/elderly>) to help them make their own selections.

After the success of the first campaign, the second Liberated Library ran during November 2017. This was a more suitable time for engaging students, and a similar book display format was used for launch week. An evening event organised by the Student Success project, and entitled 'Diversifying the ivory tower', featured a panel discussion that included Brunel professor and poet Benjamin Zephaniah, and a talk by theatre students on their work to audit the diversity of the content of their own course. A total of 59 book suggestions

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resulted in the purchase of twenty-seven titles, and these were ready for display at the book launch event in February 2018, organised by student officer Iqbal Miah. Local poet, playwright and writer John Agard was on hand to give a talk and performance, followed by a student poetry slam.

As anticipated, Liberated Library experienced high engagement from arts and humanities students, both in terms of the number and the types of texts that have been suggested. The humanities cultivate an awareness of issues such as power and cultural politics and are heavily based on the study of the written word. As a liaison librarian for mathematics, computer science and electronic engineering, I was aware there was a danger that science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) students would not engage heavily in the campaign. STEM subjects have an acknowledged diversity issue and there are numerous organisations, such as Stemettes (www.stemettes.org) tackling this.

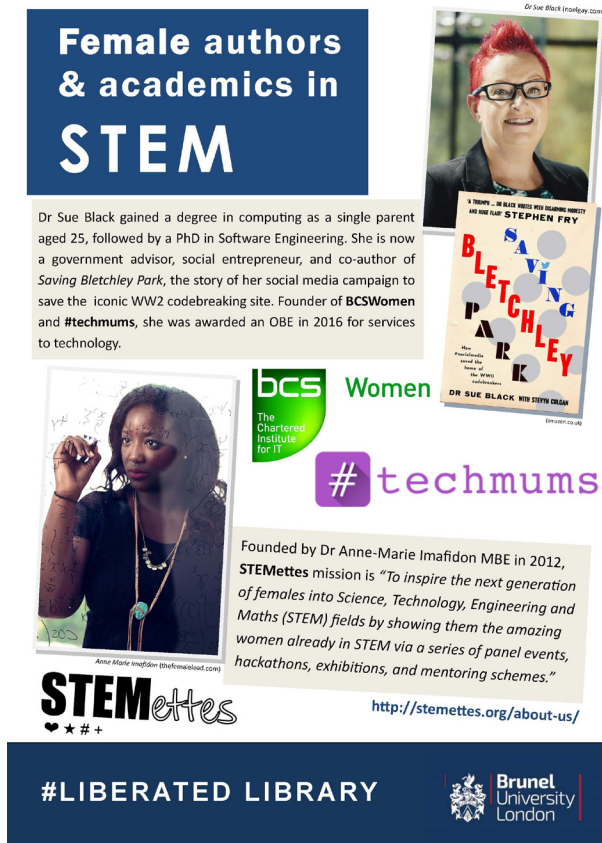


Fig 3. Female academics in STEM poster



Fig 4. Book suggestion Tweet

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In addition, these subjects as a whole do not have the same basis in reading material as the humanities, book authorship does not play the same role, and comments made by engineering academics suggest that their students are more conservative and less inclined to engage with union campaigns. In their study of a group of arts and science students' personality traits, Furnham & Crump (2013) found that those studying the sciences did fit the stereotype of being more conservative in temperament.

There are numerous engineers, scientists and mathematicians who do not fit the white, male, heterosexual mould, and recent years have seen several films and books emerge that celebrate them, such as *Hidden figures* by Margot Lee Shetterly (2016). During the second year of the campaign I made sure these stories were highlighted by Tweeting articles about non-white mathematicians and scientists (<https://twitter.com/ECandMLibrarian/status/931108304641757184>) under the hashtag #LiberatedLibrary. I also made sure texts such as *Hidden figures* were purchased and I produced several posters showcasing non-white and female scientists and mathematicians for the book launch.



Will.i.am honoured by the IET for his 'outstanding contribution' to engineering

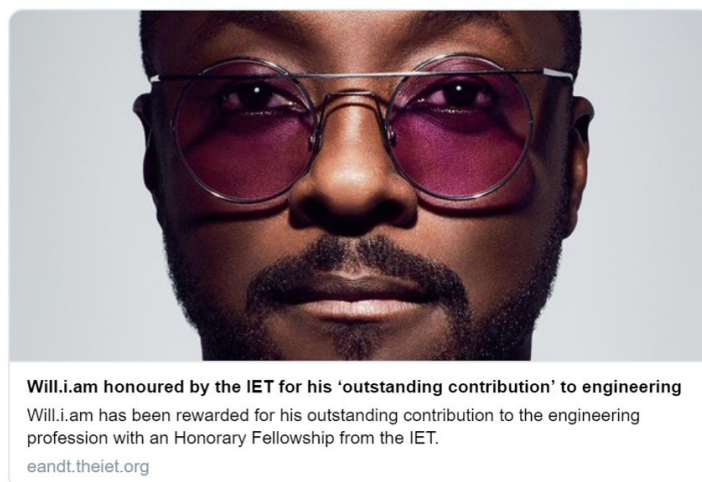


Fig 5. Will.i.am engineering tweet

This academic year (2018–19) has seen the final Liberated Library campaign at Brunel, with plans for a different initiative next year. Other universities have expressed an interest in developing their own versions. The priority this time round was encouraging the engineering and science departments to be more involved: the Vice Dean (Education) and Associate Dean (Equality & Diversity) for a group of engineering and science subjects met with me and the campaign team to find ways in which they could participate. The outcome was an audit of four reading lists selected by me and conducted by student officers to assess the diversity of authors. The deans also made a commitment to encourage the use of more practitioners who were not white, male, Europeans in classroom examples and case studies. In my own practice it has encouraged me to seek out more book titles written by BAME authors and ones that deal with issues of race, class and gender in the context of science and technology.

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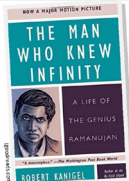


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B.A.M.E authors, academics and practitioners in STEM


Indian customs clerk S. Ramanujan stunned Cambridge mathematicians with his self-taught theorems in a 1913 letter. Invited to join Trinity College and the Royal Society, he continued to make several breakthroughs that still influence maths and computing today.




Margot Lee Shetterly wrote **Hidden Figures**: the untold story of the African American women who helped win the space race. Released in 2016, it was dramatized on screen the following year.



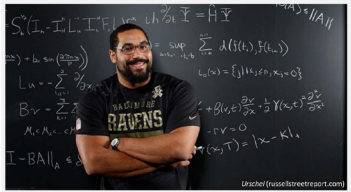
Katherine Johnson at NASA, in 1966



Mary Jackson at NASA



Author of six peer-reviewed journal articles, Canadian-born **John Urschel** left a career in American football (Guard position) in 2017 to pursue Mathematics. He is currently doing a PhD on spectral graph theory, numerical linear algebra, and machine learning at MIT.



#LIBERATED LIBRARY




Fig 6. BAME academics in STEM poster

Outcomes

From a student engagement perspective, on the basis of the suggestions received and titles purchased, Liberated Library has been extremely valuable as it gives students a new sense of ownership over the library collection and demonstrates our commitment to a more inclusive university environment. It is about much more than the numbers of books purchased; Liberated Library helps move the conversation forward about who can aspire to be an academic, scientist, engineer, mathematician or author.

Tips for other libraries

Let the students take the wheel

Liberated Library was driven by the students' union from the outset, and it was important for the integrity of the campaign that student officers had control of the displays, events and the book selections. The library was there to provide advice, suitable spaces and logistical support.

Use (and respect) colleagues' expertise

There were key people within the large university library department who had to be involved at certain stages: library assistants were invaluable in setting up displays, with checking the suggestion box and picking out books for the daily themes. Customer services oversee the spaces used for displays, so they needed to be consulted to avoid any clashes with other events. Collection services helped to guide us through the ordering process and made sure all the books and invoices were delivered to the right place.

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Small payout, big payoff

In terms of staff time and effort the liaison work was a bigger staff commitment than we had expected, because the campaign team were not familiar with internal library processes and our different areas of responsibility. However, the display stand for the launch was only up for a week, and the volume of books to be ordered was equivalent to two or three average module reading lists. In our case these were paid for by the Vice-Chancellor's office, around £300 for each year. For this relatively modest effort and expenditure, we were able to make a clear statement about the type of collection we wanted to build.

Be inspired

If you have the ability to make your own stock selections, then being involved in a campaign like Liberated Library can and should change the way you develop your collection, to include a greater range of perspectives and authors in all subject areas.

Samuel Piker is the academic liaison librarian for electronic and computer engineering, mathematics and computer science at Brunel University London. His functional role supporting users with specific requirements led him to get involved with a students' union campaign to increase the diversity of authors in the library collection, now in its third and final year. His aim was to bring a science and technology element to the campaign and engage students from these subjects in developing the collection.

Note

- 1 Student suggestion statement: Salvation army by Abdellah Taïa: 'The first openly gay Arab writer, and remains the only openly gay Moroccan novelist and filmmaker. To not have that type of representation in the library of a university that prides itself on diversity, is something that needs to be amended.'

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