

Libraries = Education: Your Key to Success Webinar Q&A Log

Questions from Live Demco Webinar, as answered by Valerie Gross, President & CEO
at [Howard County Library System \(HCLS\)](#)

February 23, 2017

Terminology

Q: Does calling a program a “class” turn off some people that might not have had the best experience in school?

A: Everyone who has tried this strategy reports *increased* levels of participation in the classes they schedule for students of all ages.

This is because your customer base attends not because of what you call it, but because they know it’s going to be fun and engaging—a worthwhile investment of their time. Also, they know it’s a class (because that is what it is!).

Calling it a class also helps educate those who *don’t* attend. They may not understand the educational benefits of, say, a children’s class that you currently call a storytime. They will not understand that it’s actually a class that will teach their toddlers the foundations of reading, rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, sounds in words, and any subject matter—including math and science—through children’s literature.

As for using the word “program” for adult classes: switching it out for class, seminar or workshop elevates the perceived value, so you’ll get more people attending!

It’s also important to understand that the evolution of moving from traditional vocabulary to the strategic terms and phrases is gradual, as in one or two years to fully move from one term or phrase to another. It starts by using both terms when speaking and writing, then gradually moving to just the strategic term or phrase. So it’s a gentle transition.

And once you’ve switched over, the entire community will recognize that your library is a unique educational institution, different from community schools, colleges, and universities, yet equally important.

Q: Does the use of the term “class” or “workshop” have the potential to deter children or young adults from participating?

Everyone who has tried this strategy reports *increased* levels of participation in the classes they schedule for students of all ages.

This is because your customer base attends not because of what you call it, but because they know it’s going to be fun, engaging, and a worthwhile investment of their time. Also, they know it’s a class (because that is what it is!).

Calling it a class also helps educate those who *don’t* attend. They may not understand the educational benefits of, say, a children’s class that you currently call a storytime. So switch the terminology and they’ll be there. You might even need to schedule a second session of “3, 2, Fun!”—oh, yes, you can use fun names for the titles of your classes to encourage attendance!

It’s also important to understand that the evolution of moving from traditional vocabulary to the strategic terms and phrases is gradual, as in one or two years to fully move from one term or phrase to another. It starts by using both terms when speaking and writing, then gradually moving to just the strategic term or phrase. So it’s a gentle transition.

Remember the example of “nutritious” and “delicious”? For teens, emphasize “delicious,” to continue the analogy. Use words like “fun” and “friends” and pose enticing challenges, such as “I dare you to join in to discover how tasty bugs can be!” Or call an initiative a cool-sounding name like Howard County Library System’s [HiTech: A STEM Education Initiative for Teens](#). It has education in the tag line (which gets parents and funders to pay attention), and it’s chock full of classes like “Build a Hovercraft” and “Engineer and Launch a Weather Balloon” that attract teens.

Try it and see! The terminology works like magic, attaining the full assigned value you, (and the class content you have worked so hard to develop), deserve.

Q: What about the terminology for Summer Reading Program? How could we possibly rebrand this to further the idea that SRP is an educational resource without turning it off to the children?

A: You’d like to keep the fun in Summer Reading—a terrific goal!

Some libraries now say “Summer Learning,” but we haven’t warmed up to this one . . .

At HCLS, we transitioned from “Summer Reading Program” to “Summer Reading Clubs” several years back to add some perceived fun (while, of course, still keeping it educational). This coming summer we’ll be trying “Summer @ Your Library.”

Regardless of what you call this fun summer curriculum component, everything about it is education. The initiative crosses all Three Pillars of Libraries = Education:

- **Self-Directed Education:** Collection items that students of all ages borrow
- **Research Assistance & Instruction:** Includes what we typically call Reader’s Advisory and classes we teach throughout the summer

- **Instructive & Enlightening Experiences:** The Summer Reading Kickoff falls under this pillar and any type of event or festival you might coordinate related to the theme

Q: Is “outreach” still a good term, or should we use something else?

A: You make a great point. In addition to being somewhat vague, the word *outreach* can cause people to think we are a social service. This is because the term is defined as the following:

- The act of reaching out
- The practice of providing help
- An organization’s involvement with or influence in the community, especially in the context of religion or social welfare
- To provide charitable services to people
- A program, as by a local church or business, for extending assistance, services, etc., to the community, especially as an act of charity or goodwill

To achieve the higher level of respect and funding we are seeking, libraries would do well—depending on what they intend to communicate when they say *outreach*—to replace it with

- marketing,
- public relations,
- community education,
- partnerships, or
- community engagement.

Here at HCLS, we used to have a position called Outreach Coordinator. The title was changed to Community Education and Partnerships Coordinator.

Q: I refer to myself as Miss Amanda in my story times. As a teacher in the library, should I start using Mrs. Place?

A: I personally think Miss Amanda is perfect, because the more casual title immediately conveys that you and your children’s class will be friendly, engaging, and fun! Do you agree? I’ve never gotten this question before! In fact, I tend to advise people to ask themselves the question, “Would the schools say/do that?” If the answer is no, review it very carefully before implementing or saying it. But this, I think, is an exception. Because we want to be viewed as inviting and friendly, and we deliver “informal” education at its best.

You can stick with what you’ve always done and make some small adjustments to your verbiage. For example, you could say, “Hello, everyone! I’m Miss Amanda and I’ll be your instructor today. Today’s class will focus on this giant red dog, Clifford, sitting next to me, the number 6, and this geometric shape, which is . . . a circle.” Then, the parents and students in attendance will be calling you their favorite “library teacher” — I would bet my island in Tahiti on it!!!

Funding

Q: What do you do if your funders do not think education is important? Or, if it is, it should be a private good, not one to be shared with everyone. An educated electorate would mean fewer votes for them. They don't want smart, they want cheap government.

A: We've addressed this at Libraries = Education workshops in New York and Kansas. The conclusion is that it's better that people know what you do (i.e., you are education) than people not know what you do (i.e., I get all the information I need off the internet, why do we need libraries?).

Discussions also point to the perception of mismanagement of funds and inefficiencies in some school districts. To counter this, align yourselves also with colleges and universities so that you are part of the entire education enterprise, which, indisputably, is the solution to all problems.

Use words like "efficiency" and "accountability" and "a smart investment for a great return," and use phrases like, "We partner with the hospital to advance and elevate health education in the community, leveraging funding and expertise."

Q: How do you answer the comments about libraries being obsolete?

A: In response to this absurd assertion, calmly respond, "That's an interesting comment."

Then add, "I wonder ... would you ever say that about schools, colleges, and universities?"

They will look puzzled, and slowly say, with an upward inflection, "No."

You continue: "Like schools, colleges, and universities, public libraries are educational institutions, and our vision is timeless. We deliver equal opportunity in education to literally everyone in our culturally diverse community at all stages of life. Our world-class curriculum comprises Three Pillars. The first is Self-Directed Education, which includes books, e-materials, and anything our experts make available to you, the customer."

Sensing that your audience is intrigued, you continue, enthusiastically, "Our second pillar is Research Assistance & Instruction. Our Research Specialists stand ready to assist you with your research needs, and our Instructors teach . . ."

Them, interrupting: "You have Instructors?"

You: "Why, yes! Our instructors teach a wide variety of classes for infants through adults. Our classes for infants through pre-K teach the foundations of reading, rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, sounds in words, letters, numbers and vocabulary, listening comprehension, creative skills, social skills, and any subject matter—including math and science—through children's literature. Our classes include Play Partners, Go Figure!, and Summer Science."

Your audience is further engaged, so you continue: "Kindergarten through fifth grade classes include Great Composers, Splash into Art, and Lemonade Science. And for teens? Everyday Engineering (they build things like spaghetti bridges), Chemistry in the Library, and Tech Chicks. We teach those at our branches and in the schools through A+ Partners in Education."

Their jaw has dropped, so you continue. “And for adults, we teach classes in practical matters and all kinds of subjects, such as health, art, gardening, history, and business. Classes include I Just Got A Dog, Now What Do I Do?; Acupuncture; and Job Searching 101. Oh, and there’s Appy Hour, a class for adults who just got an iPad and don’t know what to do with it.”

With your audience still right there with you, you conclude with: “And our Third Pillar, Instructive & Enlightening Experiences, includes our many partnerships, author events, cinema nights, and the community conversations we convene, anything we do that brings people together to discuss and experience ideas.”

Them: “Wow! I had no idea.”

You, silent, smile.

Q: Our towns always acknowledge our value as a community resource, but when funding is tight the library gets cut before other agencies like garbage, roads, etc. Do you think charging for a program is a viable option? Or would you recommend not doing so? We are a public association library, not a municipal department.

A: I would recommend adopting the entire Libraries = Education strategy to align yourselves with the value placed on schools, colleges and universities, as opposed to other “community services,” which is vague and includes roads, etc.

I would also suggest promoting “equal opportunity in education for everyone,” which means keeping everything at no cost to customers, including students of all ages, backgrounds, and means.

I can guarantee that if you implement the strategy, you will be able to convince sponsors to kick in money in addition to your operating budget. But do be careful here—keep that private funding for “the frosting.” Ask yourself: would the schools pay for it that way? You don’t want to be using private funds unless it’s for Amazon gift cards that are going to all of your Battle of the Books winners, the college scholarship going to your spelling bee champion, or a pilot initiative (maybe you are starting a ukulele curriculum component like we are, including the instruments and cases, books and videos on how to learn to play, classes with live instructors, and jam sessions, with the Friends providing some start-up money). Otherwise you may be setting precedence you’ll regret.

Public funding must fund public education. That includes both operating budget and capital projects (so for capital projects, use private funding for the extras only, like a statue or water feature).

Collaboration

Q: Any tips on ways to make local schools more responsive to collaboration? We find that schools ignore any library attempts at outreach (beyond class visits).

A: I predict that the schools are ignoring you for one simple reason: they don’t understand why they would want to partner with you—they see you as a “community service.”

I also predict that, once you reposition yourselves as a key component of the education enterprise and switch over to using strategic language, they will finally understand what they should have all along—that you are an educational institution with which they should partner because it is in their best interests! Show how teachers can benefit from library staff assisting their students with their homework assignments and pointing them to the library’s specialized online research tools (did you notice I didn’t call them the unremarkable term “databases”?). Overworked teachers will thank you!

Once the school staff begins to view your staff as a team of educators and support staff who aim to work with the schools to maximize student academic success, they’ll be calling you! They may even start calling you “adjunct faculty” like they do us!

Here’s HCLS’ [A+ Partners in Education Curriculum Guide](#) if you’ like to see it.

I hope you consider letting me know if these predictions are right!

I also would point you to Chapter 7 of the book [Transforming Our Image, Building Our Brand: The Education Advantage](#). It’s all about partnering with schools by first incorporating the strategic language, then moving forward.

Staff

Q: I am a branch manager and want to influence a change in attitude by the customer service staff at the library. What suggestions can you offer to help a branch manager implement such a transition and change in thought and attitudes?

A: Great! You’ll start to see benefits immediately.

If you’re a branch manager, I would suggest talking with your COO and CEO to make sure you have their support.

I would suggest first providing your team with an overview of the strategy (much like you experienced in this webinar). Explain what the vision is and why it works, and provide examples from other library systems who have already implemented the concepts. Even better, if you have [Transforming Our Image, Building Our Brand: The Education Advantage](#) in your collection, have them read it. Some will be on board immediately; use them to motivate others those who may be more ambivalent.

Involve your team by going to the meeting prepared to make suggestions, but let them make them. Then tell them you’re hoping the department will be willing candidates to be a pilot for your library system. Change some terminology and assess feedback.

What are their titles now? Circulation Clerks? How about starting by giving them the new title (assuming it’s new) of Customer Service Specialist. This will instill a renewed sense of pride in their work. The added benefit is that they will have higher expectations of themselves by virtue of their new title, and they’ll receive more respect from your customers, which in turn infuses pride and fun and meaning in their work.

Commit to swapping out a list of terms, including Customer Service Desk for Circulation Desk. Get your CEO to approve a new sign for your desk, or at least a temporary one to cover up the existing traditionally worded one.

Then commit to eliminating certain traditional terms. You could start with “circ” and “circulation” and move to saying “items borrowed,” “items loaned,” or just “loans.”

I’d also be happy to come out and present to your entire team at a professional development day. This could be the theme for the whole day, starting with an overview, some skits, exercises, and the development of a plan to move the vision forward.

In Kansas, their fall Kansas Library Association Conference will be themed “Libraries = Education.” I’ll be presenting a pre-conference session and will deliver the opening keynote. I would be delighted to do this for your state as well (or maybe you are Kansas, in which case I look forward to seeing you in October!).

Miscellaneous

Q: How are you integrating technology in this scenario?

A: We market IT as our backbone and a key curriculum component. Technology crosses all three pillars of our curriculum. We even encourage audiences at our events to send their questions to the moderator via texts and tweets, and we aim to be state-of-the-art with all of the latest and greatest in social media.

All of our IT staff now also have “Instructor” in their title (e.g., IT Specialist & Instructor), as most of them develop and teach classes (e.g., Appy Hour for adults, and classes for HiTech, HCLS’ STEM education initiative for teens, project-based classes that include computer programming, 3D animation, nanotechnology, music/video production, e-books, game apps, cybersecurity, green energy, and robotics).

If this doesn’t answer your question, please email me directly at Valerie.gross@hclibrary.org or valeriejgross@gmail.com

Q: Do you use a printed program/class guide? If so, how often do you print it?

A: We used to call our quarterly *Source* publication a “program guide.” Then, in 2007 or so, it became our “classes and events guide.” Here’s [the latest issue](#). You’ll see strategic vocabulary used throughout!

Q: Where can we get the shirts that say Libraries = Education? I would love to have one to wear during Summer Reading this year.

A: A fantastic idea! We’ll work on this. How about we all send emails to ALA and ask them to carry and sell them! Until then, you’ll need to commission your own. Feel free to use the [Three Pillars images here](#), including various versions and a template for buttons and stickers. Download and use!

P.S. While you're sending ALA emails about T-shirts, nudge them to start the movement of retiring the current national library symbol (the guy reading a book) in favor of the Three Pillars, the strong, powerful image that depicts all that we do!

Resources

- [Three Pillars](#) images (including a template for buttons/stickers)
- [Transforming Our Image, Building Our Brand: The Education Advantage](#) by Valerie Gross
- Lib = Edu applied at a [Candidate Meet & Greet](#) (Michigan)
- [Battle of the Books](#) pictures and video
- [Howard County Library System website](#)
- [Source](#), HCLS's quarterly classes and events guide
- Valerie Gross's website: [TransformingOurImage.org](#)