Getting Our Communities Moving, One Library Program at a Time

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When I first sat down to write this article, I was aboard a Boeing 767-300, enduring a nine-hour flight on the way back from Berlin, where I had been giving two separate presentations on physical literacy at the library. Luckily the conference I was attending was being held in English because my German consists of little more than *danke* and *damen toilette*. I mention the plane ride because sitting for long periods of time in cramped conditions is not something my body is used to or that my mind particularly enjoys. Though, admittedly, it does force me to sit still long enough to get some work done.

You see, on top of being a library director, I'm also a yoga teacher and physical literacy researcher. I plan, execute, and monitor movement-based programs in my library, and I teach library staff all over the world how to deliver similar programs in their own communities. So naturally I move *a lot*. During a long-haul overseas flight (even a red eye), I'll typically get up to stretch and walk every forty-five to sixty minutes—which is why I usually request an aisle seat, to the relief of my neighbors. I also bring along a yoga ball (or lacrosse ball or tennis ball or whatever I can grab) to do some self-massage and keep my circulation moving. Realizing on the flight over that I'd forgotten my favorite red ball on the passenger seat of my car back in Canada, I immediately found a store in Berlin (a geriatric nursing-supply store, from what I could tell) and bought a nice squishy massage ball from Theraband. Shifting and rolling my butt around on top of a ball in cramped quarters next to a stranger? Yes, I'm *that* person. Bear with me, I have a point.

While most people will complain about the forced confinement of a long plane ride, the reality is that this is how many of us *willingly* spend our days. If the average working day in North America is eight hours long (about the length of my flight), and the average office worker spends much of it sitting (I'm not talking about people who spend all day on their feet doing manual labor—*bless them*—they have their own issues) and then also sits during their commute and during their meals, and then is so mentally exhausted at the end of the day that they plop on the couch with Netflix or curl up with a good book, well . . . I think you can see we've got a problem. And if the steadily rising obesity rates and predictions of how the millennial generation will be the first to die younger than their parents are any indication, it is more than a problem—it's a full-blown emergency.[1] Things have gotten so bad that in 2018 the World Health Organization added physical exercise to its global mandate after already warning us in 1997 that exercise is the *single most effective means of influencing health and well-being*.[2] More

than smoking cessation, more than diet, more than a visit to a therapist (though those are all important contributors to health), just moving your body every day, preferably in as rigorous a way as you can handle, will significantly improve your quality of life.

So, you may be asking, what exactly is the library supposed to do about this? Aren't we working hard to provide comfy chairs and couches for people to lounge about with newspapers and magazines, quiet study rooms where people can hunch over books and laptops, banks of computer workstations, theaters where people can sit and watch films, lectures, and performances—all the while urging, *here, take this book home, I think you'll like it*? Aren't we just compounding the problem by pushing a sedentary lifestyle on people who already aren't moving enough? Now we're supposed to get people to exercise? Don't we have enough to do?

This is where my work comes in. For the last decade I've been asking library, school, and museum staff to look at how their programs are offered, their materials chosen and promoted, and their spaces designed and organized, all with the hope that while we promote textual and digital literacy, we also increase our students' and patrons' *physical* literacy. I've also studied and interviewed numerous librarians who are promoting movement-based programs in their own libraries, and guess what? The results are spectacularly in favor of positive returns for both patrons *and* staff. But I'll get to that good stuff, with the help of my friend and Let's Move in Libraries colleague Dr. Noah Lenstra, in a moment (I know, I know—librarians *love* statistics—be patient).[3]

Walk through the doors of many public libraries across the continent today and you are bound to find their stereotypical image—quiet places where everyone is hunched over a book or computer, or silently browsing the stacks—blown to smithereens. Perhaps quite literally—with a Nerf blaster or water gun—if you happen to wander into my library in Woodstock, New Brunswick. Or you might be surprised to find a local running group stretching in the parking lot, a belly dance class happening in the activity room, teens doing their homework at treadmill desks, a senior Wii-bowling event taking place in the media center, or staff checking out free gym passes at the circulation desk. Wait! What is going on here? There seems to be a movement afoot (sorry, pun intended!) of public libraries offering all kinds of fitness and wellness-based programming and materials as we move more and more toward the model of being community centers. As library services focus on addressing whole-person literacy, the needs of our community, and connecting with our patrons on a variety of levels, movement-based programs have become a necessary and rapidly expanding trend. Libraries are no longer just there to meet a patron's standard literacy needs; we are now helping people improve their physical literacy skills as well, which in turn improves other aspects of their lives, like sociability, mental wellness, and school readiness.

Physical literacy can be thought of as "bodily intelligence." Like cognitive intelligence or emotional intelligence, physical intelligence is being aware of our bodies and how they move in time and space. It is something we are born with and is shaped by our early environment, and it is also something we can work to improve at any age. I officially define the term in my book *Get Your Community Moving: Physical Literacy Programs for All Ages* as "the motivation, ability, confidence and understanding to move the body throughout the lifecourse as is appropriate to each person's capacity."[4] The development of fundamental movement skills that permit a person to move with confidence and control in a wide range of actions, such as throwing, skipping, or balancing, and environments, like on snow, grass, water, in the air, or on ice, also applies to people with disabilities or exceptionalities. The throwing motion of someone in a wheelchair is going to look radically different from the throwing motion of someone who pitches for the big leagues, but they may not be any less physically literate.

To deepen our understanding of movement-based programs in public libraries, Dr. Noah Lenstra and I began reviewing past programming surveys and media articles that touched on movement-based library programs, and in spring 2017 I helped him design an online survey that he distributed to public librarians in the United States and Canada. Here are the results, in his own words:

> 1,157 public libraries [Figure 2] said that they had "offered any programs or services that include [movement]." Among respondents, approximately 60% reported offering yoga programs [Figure 1], 50% reported music and movement programs for early literacy, 40% reported gardening programs, and many reported many other types of programs. Only 5% of the survey respondents said their libraries had not offered any movement-based programs, and among those, 50% said that they were planning to offer such programs in the future. Among respondents, a majority reported that their programs had brought new users into their libraries and had also received coverage in the local media. Most reported being extremely or very satisfied with participation rates in programs offered.
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> What does all of this data tell us? It tells us, first, that somewhere between a quarter to a half of North American public libraries have offered movement-based programs (a finding confirmed in a 2018 survey of Pennsylvania libraries, which found that "a little under 50% of libraries said they offered physical activity programming at their library and several respondents noted specific programs (e.g., Tai Chi, outdoor recreation) in the open-ended portion of the survey" (personal communication with Dr. Eliza Davenport Whiteman, University of Pennsylvania Center for Public Health Initiatives). Second, it tells us that these programs are being offered for all ages. Third, this data tells us that these programs tend to be popular when they are available. Finally, the data tells us that a wide variety of programs are being offered, everything

from library gardens to yoga classes to Wii bowling. Librarians are experimenting with diverse and innovative ways to encourage movement in their communities, and these experiments appear to be paying off.[5]

That same year I administered a less comprehensive survey of my own to the members of the American Library Association's newsletter with similar results.[6] Lenstra and I were convinced something big was happening. It was amazing to discover that what I had thought was a decade-long personal passion and pet project (family and friends might say "obsession") was actually on the minds of librarians all across the continent. We'd reached a tipping point in watching the health and wellness of our patrons decline (not to mention our own), and we were mobilized to do something about it. How exciting!

If your library isn't already one of the libraries taking part in offering movement-based programs, where should you start? If your administration isn't already on board, show them this article, the Let's Move in Libraries website, and my book or one of my websites.[7] Make sure they are aware this is happening in libraries all over the world and that there are tried-and-true program models just waiting to be adapted to your unique location and audience. Visit the abovementioned sites for program ideas or my blog for the ALA's Programming Librarian website.[8] Once you've decided on the type of program you'd like to deliver (let's use a one-kilometer fun run event for a big complicated example), you will also need to consider your target demographic (we say it is for "all ages"): Who is going to lead your program? Do you have a runner on staff, or an eager volunteer who is active in the running community? Can you partner with your local running club to help organize the event?

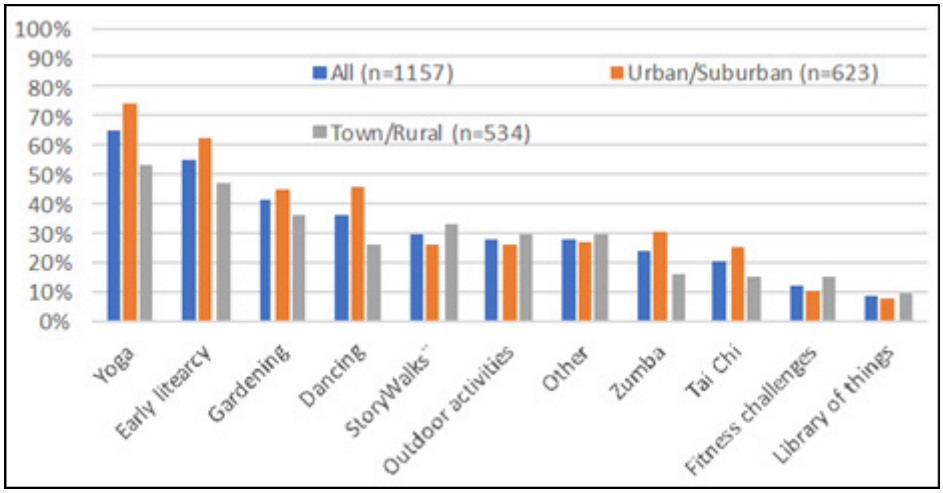

Figure 1. Reproduced via Creative Commons license from Lenstra, 2017.

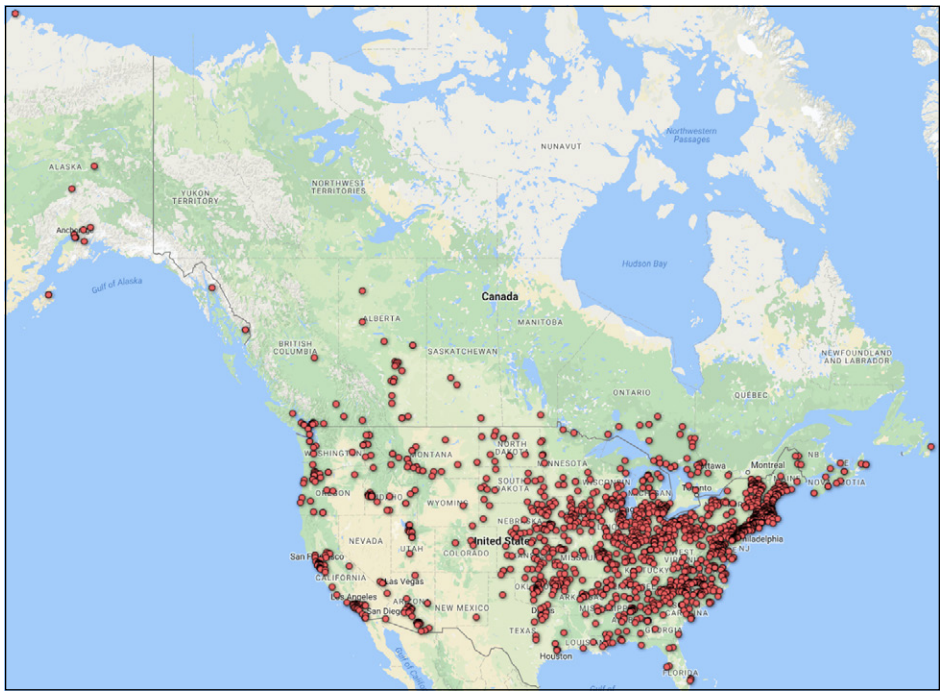

Figure 2. Reproduced via Creative Commons license from Lenstra, 2017.

Once you have those details sorted out, then you need to nail down the logistics of the date (don't forget a rain date!), time, and location. You will need to advertise the event with a poster, social media postings, and mentions on your calendar of events (online or paper). It will be important to decide if you want the event to be a drop-in or require preregistration. You may need to work with your local municipality and police department to block off a route near the library, or you might take the event to a local park or track instead. Then consider recruiting volunteers to be stationed along the route wearing visible vests, whether you want to provide refreshments, and if there will be prizes. And then think about how you are going to pay for it. At our library, we give out free books instead of finisher's medals, sponsored by local businesses in exchange for having their logo on our

poster and Facebook event. We ask local farmers' markets and grocers to supply us with fruit and water, and the local running club volunteers to help set up the course and blow their air horn for a starting gun. I provide a warm-up stretch to all participants. You could apply for grant funding through your local wellness or health organizations. Invite the press, or have a volunteer ready with a camera; your participants will want shots of themselves crossing the finish line. Don't forget to have everyone sign a photo release form and liability waiver.[9] We also make the local fire department and ambulance service aware of the event, and they will usually send a few first responders just in case someone gets hurt (thankfully no one ever has). You can also provide a short paper or online evaluation form after the event to gather feedback.

This is a big, beautiful example of a community coming together to create a joyful event that boosts fundamental movement skills, encourages reading, brings families together and away from digital devices in the fresh air, and even provides healthy food choices to those who may be food insecure. This model can easily be applied on a smaller scale, for example, by adding a mini-run to a summer reading club program, or turning it into a walk for seniors, or a weekly running club. The most important ingredients, regardless of the sport or activity, are:

1. Picking a date, time, and location
2. Finding someone qualified to run the program and recruiting volunteers as necessary to help
3. Gathering the required materials
4. Sourcing funding to pay for the program or working with community partners for sponsorship (or donated time)
5. Advertising the event
6. Doing the paper work: registrations, photo releases, liability waivers, and evaluation forms (if you're using them)
7. Having fun!

If you don't feel equipped or don't have the time or training to offer movement-based programs in your library, consider some other ways to encourage your patrons (and staff!) to get moving:

- Bike or treadmill desks
- Standing workstations
- Movement-based learning stations, like a hopscotch mat in the children's department or a dress-up center for dramatic play
- Collection development and displays focusing on sports, fitness, or wellness (don't forget DVDs, audiobooks, and digital materials!)
- Alternative circulating collections (such as free gym passes, yoga mats, fit kits, snowshoes, and the like)
- A yoga room or corner
- Outdoor play equipment
- A community garden or seed library
- A weaving wall or sensory bins
- Activity cards, such as yoga card decks, or fitness dice left out in common areas

I hope that this article has helped inspire you to try your hand at movement-based programming in your own library, and I hope you'll share your ideas with us at Let's Move in Libraries! If you have any questions or concerns that can't be answered by the resources I've shared, please feel free to reach out at librarianjenncarson@gmail.com. I can't wait to hear what you've come up with!

References

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