



## Review of the Democracy Spark Grants

Microgrant Pilot in British Columbia Libraries

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# THEINTENT OF THE DEVICE RACY SPARK GRANTS

## Concept Proposal

To understand the Democracy Spark Grants' learning journey, we need to start with its original intent. In the fall of 2019, the Democracy Spark Grant program was an initiative launched by Simon Fraser University's Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue and the British Columbia Libraries Cooperative to explore the role of public libraries as democratic convenors. With advice from an advisory group of library staff and leaders, we offered libraries \$1000 to support patrons in playing an active role in their democracy by building social connections and participating in actions that can make a difference. The program would include an evaluation component to gain insight into the impact of library programs that use democratic convening practices to help patrons build social connections and participate in their communities. The ultimate goal was to make our democratic culture more resilient by identifying and spreading democratic engagement.

Inviting libraries into the Democracy Spark Grant pilot was inspired by their generally positive reputation in communities and their relationship with diverse members of their communities who may be underserved by other democratic engagement processes. Libraries were established as places of democracy—for all people—and several libraries are experimenting with participating more strongly in community issues and democratic engagement. For example, libraries have supported the Democratic Engagement Exchange initiatives to increase voting participation, Toronto Public Libraries has incorporated democracy into its strategic goals, and ALA's Libraries Transforming Communities program has created resources to encourage libraries and their staff to lead dialogue and deliberation efforts in large and small library systems.

Using funding from the Vancouver Foundation, the grants intended to support public libraries in co-design programming with their local communities and/or make programming more accessible for underserved communities. Libraries were expected to provide core funding to encourage the development of sustainable programming, but the grant could be used for staff time and supplies as well as support libraries to administer and submit back evaluation data. Results would be compiled and shared publicly to increase awareness and support for diverse democratic engagement opportunities.

In the first wave of applications, we said the programs must meet the following requirements to receive funding:

- Convene the community in ways that lead to tangible, face-to-face, community action (information sharing activities did not count)
- The development of the programming includes co-development with community members
- The program should include a minimum of 6 hours of engagement with the public. This can be over one or several sessions.
- Staff time will be dedicated to coordinating the evaluation of programming and submitting data to the SFU Centre for Dialogue

Data will be submitted to SFU Centre for Dialogue by June 30, 2019

In addition to addressing the topics of climate change, social isolation or local solutions, the programming should also have had the following goals:

- Build social connections among participants and their local community
- Increase participants' sense of agency through experiential, solutions-oriented, activities (even where these impacts are incremental)

We also intended to host a session at the 2020 Library Conference for grant recipients for library staff to exchange ideas and discuss how library staff can spark greater democratic engagement.

## The Reality...

Several factors affected the original intent of the program and its evaluation. These included the level of interest and the programming options proposed in library applications, as well as a global pandemic that closed libraries everywhere and the logistical realities of conducting and evaluation.

#### ... Of Covid-19

Covid-19 had an enormous impact on libraries across British Columbia. By the end of March, library staff across the province were laid off, including programming staff that had intended to run our Spark Grant projects. On March 13, 2020 the BC Library conference, where we planned to run review workshops related to the Democracy Spark Grants, was cancelled. All libraries closed their doors to the public, and most did not open in any capacity until September 2020. In summary, every aspect of our Democracy Spark Grants and their evaluation were impacted by the pandemic.

The majority of libraries we offered Democracy Spark Grants to in January 2020 were unable to start or complete their proposed projects. Throughout spring and summer 2020, we heard that in a state of emergency like Covid-19, British Columbia libraries were focused only on their primary services. They focused on safely resume book lending, rehiring staff, computer access, and children reading circles running again. Some were franker with us and let us know that with so much stress and so many things up in the air, our Democracy Spark Grants were "just too small" for libraries to care about at this time. We also heard that the pandemic was even causing some library staff to rethink their previous advocacy that libraries should be "resilience centres."

As libraries did re-open, most of the 5 libraries that completed their projects chose to use the Democracy Spark Grant to do what they could to help with social isolation and mental health issues in the communities in ways that complied with health orders.

requirements of the Democracy Spark Grants. We also noted if the projects involved top-down teaching or included dialogic interactions among participants.

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The analysis of interviews looked for patterns in what was said and similarities in how library staff expressed their answers. The interview analysis focused mostly on the role of libraries and project outcomes as well as connections to democracy. Finally, we reviewed emails and meeting notes from Fall 2019 to January 2020 to identify opportunities and sticking points from the project as a whole.

- 88% believe libraries have a major role to play in supporting the engagement of people in their communities.
- 95% indicated their involvement in the project gave them a more positive view of the role their library can play in supporting the engagement.
- 93% believed they had many chances to express their views in a way that felt comfortable.
- 97% felt respected and listened to by others in the program

Figure 1 illustrates the extent surveyed patrons were able to accomplish each outcome through their library project participation. Nearly all were able to develop relationships with other community members, hear a variety of voices, and learn about important local issues. The results demonstrate the positive experience experienced by participants

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Those interviewed as part of Wave 2 often asked if there would be more funding opportunities like the Democracy Spark Grants, showing they appreciated having funds to put on programs. Some also described the joy that doing the project brought to their staff during a difficult time. They also described receiving thank you cards, thank you Instagram posts, or in gratitude person.

## Completed Project Examples

The Democracy Spark Grants contributed to the Library staff's commitment to delivering good programming to their patrons on various topics. As we relaxed the requirements for Wave 2, they also provided the

## Superficial Evaluation Findings

The pre and post-program surveys asked library staff to identify their role in their community, rate their level of confidence in the impact their library can make, and what knowledge/skills they use to provide services to their community. While the survey results show libraries often strongly agreed with the questions we asked, our evaluation did not show, in any way, that participating in the Democracy Spark Grant might have impacted their opinions.

We asked all library staff that worked on a project to complete the pre and post-surveys. Libraries ed with the queeL2

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to create and deliver their project rather than co-develop with the community. When we looked at each requirement independently, we found only about half the projects met that requirement's original intent.

## What we thought would be easy, some libraries found hard

Interviewing the five libraries that completed projects in the second wave provided valuable feedback for the grants and reiterated how staff see the role of themselves and the library.

It is also worth reflecting that only 9% of British Columbia libraries submitted a proposal for the microgrants

to find. They appreciated being able to use the grants to respond to Covid-19 and the social isolation it caused.

We also heard feedback that it was difficult to judge the size of a project that could be completed for \$1000. It provided a real training and learning opportunity. On person described,

They went on to say they would use this experience to improve their future funding applications and program ideas.

#### **Evaluation Participation**

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We were somewhat surprised that Wave 1 library staff seemed very reluctant to participate in our pre-survey. When we offered them the award, they were sent a link to the survey with their SFU contract paperwork. After almost a month, only 2 of the 18 had taken the pre-survey. We decided to offer a \$20 online gift card to anyone who took the survey to help motivate the staff. Within a week of offering the gift card, 16 of the 18 libraries had taken the pre-survey. Completion of the post-survey required several follow-ups with some libraries and the inclusion of another gift card.

We did require libraries to share a post-activity survey with their participants. Several library staff wanted to 72activity survey in rnot cagiec 15.856 Td03

## CONSIDERATIONS

## Very strong library staff culture

Our interviews provided information and context about library staff's culture that built upon the information we received from our advisory group.

We started each of the five interviews by asking library staff what they felt was their library's role and their staff's role in their community. We asked them to reflect on how they would describe their role a year ago, before their project and Covid-19 and how they would describe it now (see interview guide in the appendix). No one described seeing their role or themselves dramatically differently after the project or Covid-19.

Librarians often used the same words to describe their role which points to a very strong ingrained culture among staff. They used the phrases "connect people," "help people," "access to information," "online access to government forms," and "connect community" a lot. Library staff from very different library systems talk, think and believe in the same ideals.

Asking, "what does democracy mean to you?" created an awkward moment in every interview. The question created awkward laughs, several seconds of silence, expressions of overwhelm, and a lack of confidence. For example one library staff person said:

With encouragement, the staff were able to connect their projects to democracy. Each connection was a bit unique to the specific project and generally fell into these general categories:

- Being a part of equity and the right to access information
- Creating accessibility to give people a voice
- Helping people who don't see themselves in the system
- Raising awareness of an issue in a fun way
- Helping people feel like they aren't alone

Below, one library staff summarized the connection between teaching seniors how to send funny greeting card videos to their family and a connection to democracy:

The staff person also alludes to a perspective that subtly appeared in several of our library interviews. Library staff see themselves as supporting, not necessarily creating, agency among their patrons. They grow

relationships between patrons and staff so that library staff can be seen as resources to accomplish individual goals.

The connections described by library staff suggest they often create fun activities to help people and lower barriers between staff and their patrons. For example, this staff person noted the seniors who participated in creating funny greeting cards, now come into the library to use computers and ask other questions. The participants now see the library and its staff as resources for further use of computers and exploring the internet. This story shows how programs grow relationships that can then be used to support patrons in how they individually want to act on their agency. Library staff would never tell people to write to their parliament members, but they are there to help individuals if that's what they want to do.

## Libraries are service providers first and foremost

Covid-19 helped clarify what the advisory members and library staff may have already known: that libraries are book service providers first and foremost. The pandemic made library staff recognize and stick to their priorities. In our interviews with library staff and informal conversations during the summer of 2020 it became apparent that libraries have a very specific order of priorities.

First, libraries provide access to books and reading materials. Second, they are a community service provider for internet and computer access. Third, they create fun programming to connect people and often in connection to the first two priority areas. Any other programming falls behind these top three priorities.

Our micro-grants not only fell behind these top three priorities and the small amount of money may also have been a factor in why libraries chose to skip applying or to end their projects. Our advisory was honest with us in July 2020 and let us know that, while juggling the top 2 or three priorities, an announcement for a \$1000 grant to do programming above and beyond the priorities might not be worth their time. As the pandemic closed and laid off library staff, we also experienced how these small program projects are the first to be cut and resulted in only 3 of our 18 funded projects being completed in their entirety.

### Democracy needs activities that are inherently non-political

As part of the evaluation of democracy spark grants and neighbourhood small grants staff have been conducting a brief literature review of non-political activities and public engagement. Leisure studies research and philosophy have explored how participation in local activities correlates to democratic engagement and strong civic behaviour. They do not necessarily need to overlap in the same program to support democracy.

In his book, Overdoing Democracy (2019), Robert Talisse writes, "the point of democracy is to foster valuable human relationships and lives that are devoted, collectively and individually, to meaningful projects that lie beyond the struggle of politics."

Despite the purpose of democracy, Talisse argues, our social lives have become structured by our politics and political identities. Where we go, who we engage with, and what we do in our everyday lives are increasingly geographically and socially segregated in ways that align with our political alignments. This increases polarization and decreases trust that those who disagree with us may also be rational, kind, whole human beings. To help this problem requires building what he calls "civic friendships," which are weak associations or awareness that those who differ from us are still full human beings. Civic friendships are best built by engaging with people through non-political activities that produce joy. Political respect, civic engagement,

skills for activating agency are often a by-product. Civic friendship helps create resilience when one is experiencing a political loss.

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We need to consider that libraries could be viewed as one of the few spaces not defined by political allegiances and should be protected as such. We could damage democracy further by creating an association between library staff and certain kinds of political beliefs, values, or allegiance. Library staff are strongly aware and protective of their community trust and neutral role as well.

When we evaluate the Democracy Spark Grant projects through a lens that supports why non-political activities matter, we firmly believe the projects positively impacted communities and thus democracy. They epitomized spaces and activities that help people to see one another as thinking, caring, and full human beings who are not alone—an essential ingredient for civil society. They lowered barriers to accessing library staff as resources, created some new relationships between libraries and schools and brought joy to many.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

## Try a socket wrench instead of a monkey wrench

It is a fact that our findings in this report can not be generalized. Our data is from a handful of libraries in very particular circumstances. It is also a fact that we experienced several struggles managing the project and evaluating its impact, which suggests that an open-ended micro-grant model may not be the direction we should pursue in the future.

With these facts in mind, the suggestions below should not be understood as concrete instructions, but rather a series of directions we should investigate further. This includes encouraging future demonstration projects based on what was learned in this pilot.

A pilot of micro-grants in libraries suggest the following directions to explore for future possibilities:

#### Invite libraries into larger projects

Invite libraries into larger projects and engagement activities with the opportunity for staff to tweak the program delivery details to suit their local needs. Library staff want to be a part of projects. They also resist re-inventing anything when they could borrow or reproduce it for less work. Instead of offering open-ended funding, we suggest incorporating libraries as a delivery or convening space for products and ideas connected to larger topic-based projects such as climate change, anti-oppression, or municipal policy planning.

#### Build on library staff's culture

Embrace approaches that build on the already-strong library staff culture of service, response and creating good feelings among their patrons. Library staff know how to lower barriers with their patrons through fun programming and prioritize supporting individual agency. To borrow the words of Dr. Karine Duhamel, they a serieLs as a delrdy d (good feexte0.0lot.)nsteac 18.637 Td57

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