

The Last Taboo: *abolishing library fines*

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Abstract

Many libraries have implemented progressive policies to encourage and increase library usage. In this context of change this article looks at the small but growing number of libraries that have abolished overdue fines in favour of item replacement charges similar to those found at video rental outlets, and encourages other libraries to do the same.

Keywords

Fines, Overdues, Circulation, Library Patrons, Policy

A Changing Landscape?

The time for the end of the "shushing" librarian stereotype is long overdue. In the past decade we've seen its decline, and at the same time its power over us as a cultural symbol has also diminished. Now in the library community many of us poke fun at ourselves by paying tongue-in-cheek homage to our old icon. In a virtual reference chat forum, one of my colleagues recently offered to electronically "shush" a troublesome patron. Perhaps even a few of us own the Nancy Pearl librarian action figure with "amazing shushing action!"

Yet, while we try to leave these symbols behind, it's worrisome to see that other relics of the past still linger. These restrictions manifest themselves in many ways:

- The signage that spells NO in half a dozen different ways: No Talking; No Beverages; No Cell Phones; No Chat Rooms; No Email.
- The belief that the library is still a place of thoughtful silence.
- The imposition of limits on computer access. No downloads and no wi-fi.
- [Insert draconian policy of choice]

As the "shushing" spinster goes the way of the oxcart, so too do many of these ideals. Conference sessions these days are rife with discussions on freeing access to public terminals, and remodelling library facilities to compete with, or perhaps complement, those of the neighbouring coffee shops and big box bookstores. There is little to complain about in a place where you can be comfortable and find what you are looking

for. But when it comes to progress, there is another obstacle that stands before us, receiving little attention for all its supposed intractability.

Do we really need overdue fines?

At a recent meeting, as part of a larger discussion about purging unused patron records from our ILS, a colleague of mine decried a plan to waive fines for a select group of patrons who had not been to the library in years. The logic went something like this: "They run up fines as children, stop using the library for a while, and when they come back years later we can get them".

Rather than talking about "getting" patrons as though they were villains or bandits, we should reframe the conversation and focus on why they are not coming into the library. Surely the presence of fines plays a role in this.

Not all fines stories invoke hysteria but it is surprisingly easy to find tales of families being denied mortgages, facing arraignments (Siegler), or even prison sentences ("Serious About Overdues" 30), all stemming from overdue library books. The fact that we tend to laugh at them only highlights how outrageous they are.

These examples, although extreme, detract from the image of the library. Here the shushing librarian becomes an enforcer, a new taxman or bad cop to be feared.

Commonly, fines are defended as a revenue generator, or as a lesson put forth by the library to encourage responsibility. Such lessons are the purview of teachers and parents. And when considering possible economic opportunities it is important to remember that there is a cost in applying fines, especially when it comes to collecting them. This fact is well recognized by Indiana based "library collection specialists" Unique Management Services--a company that tracks down delinquent patrons so you don't have to--and their growing number of clients. But regardless of who generates the notice, or who calls at night, the effect on patrons is the same: a negative view of the library, and decreased use of its services.

Admittedly, abolishing overdue fines is not possible in all jurisdictions, but at the very least, urban libraries that count on fines as a revenue generator are capable of coordinating regular amnesties in exchange for food bank items. Some may worry that patrons will conspire and hold out if can they can count on amnesties. Some funds will be lost, but the goodwill to be gained from the community, while not always measurable, can offset such losses. At the Pemberton and District library, for example, the absence of fines revenue has not been missed, due to the steady flow of donations (Ellis).

As the business model of library governance becomes increasingly entrenched, it is important to remember that a library is neither a business, nor for that matter, a government. This viewpoint was perhaps best expressed by Charli O'Dell in her critique of Library fines:

"If you need income, try getting a little fridge and selling bottled water" (O'Dell).

How libraries consider reducing or eliminating overdue fines is a complex question with numerous approaches. Thankfully much of the ground work has been done.

Few libraries have gone this route, but those that have share some common ground in applying a no overdues model that still allows for replacement charges on lost or unreturned items. Examples include the North Plains Public Library, Forest Grove Library (Forest), the Dover Public Library (Dover) and a recent Canadian convert to the no-fines philosophy, The Pemberton & District Public Library (Pemberton). By and large overdue fines policies at these libraries reflect those recently instituted by some of the large video rental outlets; showing us the influence of the retail industry on the library-- this time in a positive manner. Under this model if an item is late, the library allows for a limited number of renewals. Once those have been used up, the patron is barred from checking out additional items until the item is returned. Here the spectre of a replacement charge looms as near, or as far, as the library desires. Gone too is any attempt to justify an additional fee, as without processing there's no need to add insult to injury in the form of a processing fee.

As a reward for a lifetime of hard work, or perhaps as a favour to those on fixed incomes, many libraries waive fines for seniors. Too few extend that policy to include other fixed income groups, fewer still go the final step and waive fines for all patrons regardless of their ability to pay. Too often those who are least able to pay fines are those who accrue them. Yet we see that patrons of all ages and demographics avoid the library because they have overdue fines and items still in their possession.

If instead of punitive threats to patrons, we invited them to simply return their overdue items, we'd have what every library needs to be successful: more items on the shelves, and more patrons passing through our doors.

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