

Designing and Curating EDI Book Displays at IALS

Abstract: In this article **David Percik**, Information Resources Manager at the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies, reports on a project at IALS to plan out and curate a series of book displays focusing on historically disadvantaged groups. He discusses how the themes of the displays were selected, the consequences of having two differing available spaces, and the work done by the library team to expand the displays beyond books on shelves.

Keywords: Institute of Advanced Legal Studies Library; collection management; diversity; equity and inclusion

INTRODUCTION

In March 2023 I was shown around a school library that had largely been designed and stocked by one of my friends. There were numerous interesting elements to this tour, but one that stood out was the book displays. Next to the enquiry desk was a collection of books that dealt with controversial subjects or were controversial themselves in some way, the idea being to prompt discussions between students and library staff. Elsewhere in the library was a temporary display created for International Women's Day. This one made me smile because my own library had set up an equivalent display, using very different books.

The Institute of Advanced Legal Studies (IALS) underwent an extensive refurbishment in 2019/20, including the entrance to the library moving to a different floor of the building. The new entrance incorporates a fairly sizeable glass display cabinet positioned so that visitors can't really avoid seeing it on their way in. There is, in addition, a set of shelves inside the library on the main floor, that is easier to ignore but on a main thoroughfare close to the internal library lift and the toilets. However, for the first couple of years after the refurbishment, far fewer students than normal visited the library, and these display areas did not receive very much attention. In August 2022, the shelves inside the library were empty, and while the cabinet contained an interesting and well-constructed display on notable women in the law, this had not been changed for some time.

A new librarian, Marilyn Clarke, started at IALS at the beginning of September 2022, and she asked the management team about our plans for Black History Month. We had to admit that we didn't have any. A process of consultation among the team produced a range of ideas, and a display was rapidly put together highlighting the fact that 17 Russell Square had been called a Colonial Centre during World War II and been used to provide accommodation for foreign students. This display was very impressive given the short period available to produce it,

and it received a lot of positive feedback from visitors to the library. However, it was clearly not an efficient use of staff time to give so much concentrated focus to this project, especially at exactly the moment when we were simultaneously gearing up for the key student induction period at the start of October.

The main positive of the experience was the demonstration that the library team collectively had a detailed knowledge of the collection, the skills necessary to curate the display, and the commitment to produce a good end result. At the same time, as the academic year started, it quickly became clear that IALS was receiving registrations approaching 2019 levels, and that therefore there were likely to be a lot more students coming to the library than in recent times. Management interest in boosting the inclusivity of the library, staff interest in a worthwhile and varied project, and a new and likely appreciative audience combined to show the requirement for a more formalised strategy for displays in 2023.

DESIGNING THE PROGRAMME

My Information Resources team had so far been responsible for the display spaces, so it made sense for me to volunteer to lead the project. It helped that I had ideas for a way to utilise the two different display spaces, and for how to select the themes that we were going to use throughout the year. Full disclosure: what follows is going to be a slightly sanitised version of the project, for the purposes of presenting the aim and the method. If I had been more organised, there might well have been a formal project team, with regular meetings and communication up and down the chain of command. In actuality, things were much more informal, with timing and content of displays changing in the course of the project. Most of the actual work was done by Katharine Radford and Carole Farmer, with them enlisting the help of other people within and outside Information Resources as and when that was needed. The

consistently high quality of the displays is entirely due to their work, all of which was undertaken in addition to their day-to-day jobs.

Projects of this nature are inherently worthwhile, and often library staff will find them interesting and satisfying, whether due to the subject matter, the work being different from the norm, or a combination of the two. But asking your team to take on extra responsibility always requires obtaining buy-in in advance. I find special projects very useful for appraisal objectives. Formalising the project in this way can be a useful reminder to the member of staff to dedicate time to this extra task, but a good, collaborative appraisal process means that manager and team member have talked through the project and designed the desired end result together.

The first task was to create a timetable for the displays. The focus of the project was inclusivity, and we knew that we would want to time displays to fit in with recognised celebrations and/or commemorations. It's likely that the most effective approach to a programme like this is to engage with the users of the library, in order to better understand their interests and concerns and perhaps identify patterns. However, this takes time, and the unusual nature of the IALS library user base adds complications. The vast majority of the students entering the library are actually members of other institutions, and while we do create individual user records, these do not currently include any demographic data. We do not know a great deal about our users, nor do we find it easy to obtain representative feedback.

I decided to look at a range of diversity and inclusion calendars, to see whether there was a general consensus among organisations about what should be commemorated. I mainly used calendars from universities in London, but added a couple of others for variety.¹ What struck me about this exercise was the lack of consistency in the events that were included, with different calendars focusing on different types of event. It wasn't clear to me whether these differences reflected the priorities of the teams designing the calendars, or was affected by the different demographics they were aimed at.

Between them, the five calendars had more than two hundred entries, of which only 21 appeared in all of them. Fully half of the total entries were only mentioned on one calendar. Of course, whatever list of themes we produced was going to be influenced by our own preferences and priorities – while it would theoretically be possible to produce 21 displays in a calendar year, I don't think something like that is feasible in our context, and I also wanted the displays in the glass cabinet in particular to be on show for significant amounts of time.

Before we decided on a programme of thematic displays, I had had another purpose in mind for the shelves within the library, namely the promotion of new books and serials. I've done these displays in previous jobs, and I'm not sure what the best approach is for updating them. Should individual books be rotated out when something exciting arrives, or should the whole display be changed at

regular intervals? On the other hand, one of the problems with the inclusivity displays was going to be the amount of work involved, raising the question of how many should be attempted to ensure variety within the presentation and that what was on display always felt relevant and topical.

As sometimes happens, the two problems solved each other. We decided to have big, statement displays for the key events we wanted to focus on in the year, which would utilise both of the available spaces. Material in the glass cabinet would then stay in place for roughly two months, while the material on the less prominent shelves would be swapped out for a smaller, interim display with a greater focus on material received in the last few months rather than necessarily a specific theme.

We settled on the following schedule for the first half of 2023:

Month	Display theme
February	LGBTQ+ History Month (20th anniversary of repeal of Section 28)
March	International Women's Day
April	New books and serials
May/June	World Refugee Day
June/July	75th anniversary of arrival of Windrush

Summer holidays and the busyness inherent in the start of the academic year mean that there will be less time for display work in the second half of the year, so the main effort will be put towards a statement display for Black History Month.

CURATING THE DISPLAYS

The display shelves within the library are accessible to users, and indeed the purpose of these is to encourage those users to pick up the books and serial issues. Therefore, little curation is necessary or in fact desirable. All that is required is signage indicating the current theme, consisting of an A4 sheet in the centre of the top shelf, and smaller signs on the ends of the shelving unit that are more conspicuous to those walking past.

Display items can be removed by library users, which presents the problem of how to ensure that they are returned to the display once the user has finished with them. This is actually quite tricky when it comes to books. Notes could be put on the item records so that library staff checking in borrowed display books know to replace them. However, a significant proportion of our circulation is through a self-issue machine, and in any case the majority of our usage is within the library, as our focus is on research and most students have very restricted borrowing rights. A list of display titles is maintained, and the shelves are directly opposite the main door providing access to the library staff work area, so most staff members will recognise at least some of the books.



An A4 sheet in the middle of the top row of the display shelves indicate the current theme – here it is World Refugee Day

We have achieved a better method for serial issues on display. Last year we received a donation of some bright red book blocks. These have been used specifically to indicate those titles where the most recent issue is on the display rack, so that if one is removed from the display and put on a reshelving trolley, it will become immediately obvious to the staff member reshelving the issue that it should instead be taken downstairs and returned to the display.

The curation of the glass cabinet requires more thought and more effort. We are not museum professionals, but we have come up with a few things that we consider important. Most obviously, only library staff can access the contents, and in fact the process is quite laborious, so that we would really rather not open the cabinet between changes of display. The main consequence is selecting material that is less likely to be needed by users of the library, and while we can and have used books that we have a second copy of, multiple copies are increasingly rare in the IALS collection. However, books that students are likely to want to use are not necessarily those most suitable for the cabinet displays. We want to tell a story with these, adding in appropriate labelling and relevant images. We have

commonly used print copies of legislation, where we would expect students to be using online resources.

The glass cabinet is also where we include material borrowed for display from the IALS archive, which needs to be kept secure. We have also had to consider the environmental conditions within the cabinet – the lighting is at the top, so a strictly chronological approach to displays would place the oldest material closest to it and make it more likely to suffer damage. Reverse chronological order was the obvious solution, but the team actually took the opportunity to make the displays more engaging by deciding which material was safest to put at the top of the cabinet, and then using playful arrows designed by one of the library's trainees to direct viewers around the display. This method has the added advantage over a more formal structure in that it matters less for the effectiveness of the display which item catches someone's eye as they walk past.

PROMOTION, OUTREACH AND ARCHIVING

IALS has an active social media presence across a variety of platforms. Most members of the library visit only



Viewers are directed around the displays in the glass cabinet with the help of arrows

rarely, with a significant number being based outside London and even abroad. With two of the aims of the project being promotion of the library's collection, and contributions to various celebrations of diversity and inclusion, we definitely needed to do more than have physical displays inside the building. The Information Resources team received assistance from the IALS Digital team, particularly Lindsey Caffin, in expanding the reach of the displays. Audio-visual content also allowed us to use different styles of presentation and incorporate different kinds of material.

Some of this work was very simple. There is a screen at the entrance to 17 Russell Square, which has a rolling presentation advertising opening hours, services and events. We have been adding content relating to the displays to this presentation, including cover images of the books used, lists of electronic resources that could be used to provide more information, and where possible scans of key items. This content, accompanied by photographs of the displays, has been published across the IALS social media accounts.

Our first attempt to expand this aspect of the displays was with the one for World Refugee Day. This theme was selected for the programme because IALS hosts a

Refugee Law Clinic, and we were hopeful that the team would provide advice and content for the display. While they liked the idea, lack of spare time meant that all they were able to provide was an advert for their services and a request for volunteers from the student body, which we incorporated into that display's slideshow.

We were more successful when it came to the most recent display, commemorating the 75th anniversary of the Windrush arriving in Britain. Such a significant numerical anniversary meant that many people were thinking about and producing work relating to this event, and conversations with librarians elsewhere in the University of London led to us seeking advice from several academics, including those organising a Windrush-themed conference at the Institute of Historical Research. IALS Digital were able to create a 20-minute video presentation collecting together speeches, interviews and poetry on the subject of the Windrush. This ran on a loop on a computer placed on the main library thoroughfare throughout the summer.

A related aspect of the project has been keeping records of the displays. We have saved lists of the material used in the physical displays, as well as the photographs and the screen presentations. The main reason for

this is simply as a historical record of what we have done. However, it is to be expected that the events that we have used as prompts for our displays will continue for many years. While we are keen to vary the programme in the future, we will almost certainly revisit themes at some point, at which time it will be beneficial to know what we have already done on a theme. That way we can either avoid the same material completely or, more likely given the rather narrow focus of our collection, use it as a starting point for the design of a new display. It's even possible that after a relatively short time we would have enough display designs saved that we could develop a recurring programme that could be maintained with significantly less work, while always allowing for new ideas to be incorporated.

PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

I'm very pleased with how this project has gone. We've created work that members of staff have found both interesting and rewarding. However, I have received feedback that due to the amount of work involved the Information Resources team would like there to be more of a contribution from the rest of the library. There are additional reasons why this is a good idea. We've seen that there are many possible themes for displays, and

while a large proportion of the library's user base changes every year, it would not be appropriate simply to use the same displays over and over again. Different members of library staff may well have different themes that matter to them, and that they have specific knowledge about. Luckily, I have also received feedback that there is interest in getting more involved from other departments within the library. So there should be a programme of displays in the library for 2024, and it should look different from the one we did this year.

We are also thinking about how we might obtain feedback and suggestions from our users, in the hope of making the displays more directly relevant to the intended audience. These discussions are at an early stage at the time of writing, but include comments books left by the displays, in theory allowing anonymous responses and reactions.

I want to end this by saying that when the IALS management team started discussing this project, I was worried that it would be challenging and time-consuming, and so it proved to be. However, these are not sufficient reasons for not starting a project, and especially one in the area of diversity and inclusion. It's also true that while pretty visible, and communicating a positive attitude, this work is ultimately cosmetic. There is much more work that IALS, and I specifically, can and should be doing.

Footnotes

¹ The following calendars were consulted for this project:

University College, London diversity calendar 2022-23 <www.ucl.ac.uk/equality-diversity-inclusion/equality-areas/religion-and-belief-equality/diversity-calendar-2022-23>

Imperial College, London equality, diversity and inclusion calendar <www.imperial.ac.uk/equality/activities/calendar/>

London South Bank University EDI calendar 2022/23 <www.lsbu.ac.uk/about-us/mission-vision-values/equality-and-diversity>

NHS Northern Care Alliance equality, diversity & inclusion events calendar 2022 <www.england.nhs.uk/north-west/wp-content/uploads/sites/48/2021/12/Interactive-Calendar-2022.pdf>

Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development inclusion calendar 2022

Biography

David Percik is currently Information Resources Manager at the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies, having joined the library in August 2022. He has worked in many different law libraries during his career, and also volunteered for numerous years in a variety of roles within the British and Irish Association of Law Librarians.