

## The Role of the Public Library in a Democratic Society

### Overview

When asked to consider the role of and services provided by the public library, students may automatically stop at surface-level provisions such as books and internet access. In actuality, however, libraries “uphold and strengthen some of the most fundamental democratic ideals of our society; they not only make information freely available to all, but also foster the development of a civil society.” (Nancy Kranich) This resource is provided to assist teachers prepare for, lead and reflect on an interactive fieldtrip to their community’s public library, during which students not only explore the practical services provided by libraries, but also consider the library’s particular role in a democratic society. Throughout this resource, teachers will find sample discussion questions, a template for the creation of a Travel Journal, optional project ideas such as creating a 3-D model of “My Ideal Library,” and more.

### Grades

3-5 (this activity can be implemented with K-2 and 6-8 students if modified)

### Essential Questions

- What is the function of a public library and what role does a library serve in a democratic society?
- What specific services does a library provide and why are these important to building communities?
- What does it mean to be a responsible citizen/community member and how can a library help people fulfill this role?

### Materials

- Place Cards (These should be cut apart and placed together as a set, paper clipped or in an envelope.) Teachers will need one set for each small group.
- Travel Journal sample template, attached
  - Teachers should decide what and how many parameters to provide to students regarding their Travel Journal. The attached template is for example purposes and should be modified as needed to serve particular instructional goals. Additional examples of general Travel Journals can be found via an internet search (i.e., Pinterest examples can be seen [here](#).)
  - The attached 6 page template should be printed double-sided (teachers may need to set the copier to “rotate side 2” in order for the pages to all be right side up when copied.) With the pages stacked in order, fold them in the middle to form a booklet. When assembled correctly, the “Cover” will be the front page and the remainder of the booklet will be in order of the pages as marked.
- Art supplies for decorating Travel Journals (colored pencils, crayons, markers, etc.)
- Scissors, glue, magazines and other print materials (if completing the library collage brainstorm described in step 6 below)
- “My Ideal Library” assignment sheet, attached (optional for upper grades)
- Optional materials if implementing the “My Ideal Library” in 3-D: Clay, cardstock, cardboard and cardboard boxes, construction paper, pipe cleaners, straws, and other materials for creating a 3-D model. (Teachers can also have students create digital 3-D models if desired.)
- Related Books list, attached

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*This lesson plan was created by [Carolina K-12](#) and the [Chapel Hill Public Library](#) as part of the “Doing Democracy: Civic Engagement & Education at the Public Library” project, made possible by funding from the federal Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) under the provisions of the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) as administered by the State Library of North Carolina, a division of the N.C. Department of Natural and Cultural Resources (IMLS grant number LS-00-17-0034-17).*

## Recommended Teacher Pre-Readings

[Libraries & Civic Engagement](#)

[12 Ways Libraries Are Good for the Country](#)

### Procedure

#### **Pre-Visit: Community Services & the Importance of the Public Library | Introductory Ranking Activity**

1. As a warm up, divide students into partners or small groups and provide each group with a set of the attached “Place Cards.” (These should be cut apart prior to the activity.) Tell students that each card represents a place/service typically found in a community that is operated by the community’s local government (city or county.) Tell students you would like them to take 5 minutes to rank the cards in order of importance (in their opinion.) This will take critical thinking, discussion and compromise.
  - Teachers of younger grades may need to first lead a brief class discussion of each place/service to clarify what it provides for the community.
2. Once students have arranged their cards in the order of importance as they see it, allow students to share their rankings and explain their choices. The goal is to encourage conversation that not only highlights the services provided and places operated by local governments, but also to get students considering the importance of each. Allow groups to debate each other’s choices and pose follow up questions to further critical thinking.
3. As students discuss, focus in on the public library and where in each of their rankings they placed it. Encourage students to explain their reasoning for placing the public library where they did and note whether there were any commonalities or outliers for how students ranked the library’s importance.

#### **Pre-Visit: Introducing Travel Journals & the Field Trip to the Public Library**

4. Let students know that they are going to be focusing on the public library in preparation for a field trip to visit and learn about the services it provides! Let students know that in preparation for a trip to the public library, they will be creating their own Travel Journals in which they note their thoughts and questions (both before, during and after the visit) as well as document their experiences and observations while visiting the public library. The journals provide a creative way for students to respond to specific prompts, reflect, create illustrations, and synthesize what they learn. Teachers should decide prior to the assignment what and how many parameters to provide to students regarding their Travel Journal. A sample template is attached (and should be modified as needed to serve particular instructional goals) and additional examples can be found via an internet search (i.e., Pinterest examples can be seen [here](#).) The Travel Journal can be completed in brief increments over the course of several days, depending on the teacher’s desired timing. Student Travel Journals for the public library should include:
  - Cover (include title and student name) – teachers should determine when to have students decorate it (i.e., for homework before or after their trip to the library)
  - Pre-Trip thinking & predictions
  - Documenting the visit to the public library
  - Reflections Post-Visit

#### **Pre-Visit: Brainstorming & Discussing Services Provided by the Public Library**

5. Transition to a conversation about the public library:
  - What first came to mind when you saw the word library on one of your place cards?
  - What comes to mind when you hear the word librarian?

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- What services do libraries provide? What types of things do you think people do at the library?
    - Student responses will likely be practical at this point (i.e., books for check out, access to the Internet, classes, etc.) rather than theoretical/thematic (i.e., provide a public space for diverse people to interact, host community conversations, etc.) Teachers should pose follow up questions that encourage students to consider all the various services aspects.
  - Who can utilize the public library and why is this an important aspect of its services?
6. Direct students to the first page in their Travel Journal and provide time for them to reflect on this discussion and brainstorm further. Teachers can either provide open-ended prompts or more specific questions for students to address. (Responses throughout the journal should be encouraged in a variety of mediums, from writing to drawing to doodling.) Sample pre-visit prompts:
- Provide old magazines and newspapers and instruct students to continue thinking about their impression of the public library and the services it provides. They should search for images and words that match their concept of the public library and paste these in their journal.
  - Have students answer in their journal: What do you want to ask the librarian? Students should list out potential questions they would like answered.

### **Pre-Visit: The Public Library's Role in a Democracy**

7. (This next segment can be done directly following the conversation above, or in a subsequent class.) Transition the conversation beyond just the practical services of a public library and weave in the exploration of a library's role in a democracy and in terms of community/civic engagement. (Teachers may want to skim the article [Libraries & Civic Engagement](#) for ideas about this line of thinking.) Share one of the following quotes with students to copy into their Travel Journal in order to frame the conversation:
- "Bad libraries build collections, good libraries build services, great libraries build communities." R. David Lankes
  - "Perhaps no place in any community is so totally democratic as the town library. The only entrance requirement is interest." Lady Bird Johnson

Discuss and afterwards provide students time to further reflect on the quote and discussion in their journal. (For example, students might be instructed to illustrate their understanding of the quote underneath it.)

- What message is this quote conveying regarding the role of a library?
  - In addition to the services we've already noted that a library provides, what do you think the author of this quote would add to our list?
  - What role does the library serve in a democratic society? (Teachers of younger grades may need to omit or reframe this question, and/or utilize the question below instead.)
  - What do you think it means to "build communities" and in what ways do you think libraries can do this? Why is this important?
- Throughout the brainstorming discussion (steps #5, #6 & #7), encourage students to consider as many aspects of the public library and its services – both literal/practical and thematic/theoretical – as possible. Teachers can reference the following links for additional information and students will learn first-hand about the public library's services during their fieldtrip:
- [What Libraries Do](#) | [12 Ways Libraries Are Good for the Country](#) | [Libraries & Civic Engagement](#) | [Adult library services](#) | [Children's library services](#) | [Cultural programming](#) | [Services to special populations](#) | [American Library Association](#)

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8. Move on to further discuss and highlight the connection of the public library to the community and democracy by sharing the Urban Libraries Council’s recommendation of five roles that libraries can fulfill to lead the way in terms of civic engagement:

- **Civic Educator** – raising awareness of civics, civic engagement, and civic responsibility.
- **Conversation Starter** – bringing diverse people, including local government officials, and organizations with different perspectives together to build stronger communities.
- **Community Bridge** – bringing diverse people, including local government officials, and organizations with different perspectives together to build stronger communities.
- **Visionary** – learning efforts to develop a broad and inclusive community vision.
- **Center for Democracy in Action** – walking, talking, thinking, and acting as the place where democracy, civic engagement, and public discourse happen

Source: [The Engaged and Embedded Library: Moving from talk to action](#)

- Teachers in upper grades should share these roles with students and discuss examples of how a library might fulfill it. While this could simply be conveyed in further class discussion, teachers might also place students into groups and provide each group one role and its summary, and instruct students to brainstorm ideas/examples of how/what a library might do or offer that relates to the category assigned. Students with internet access could also research libraries around the state and search for examples of how particular branches are meeting these categories. Whatever way a teacher chooses to have students explore and process these concepts, ensure thoughts are captured in the Travel Journal.
- Alternatively, for younger students or for teachers who want similar but more tangible/less complex concepts, teachers can refer to the article [“12 Ways Libraries are Good for the Country,”](#) which notes examples such as:
  - **Libraries inform citizens.** “Democracy vests supreme power in the people. Libraries make democracy work by providing access to information so that citizens can make the decisions necessary to govern themselves. The public library is the only institution in American society whose purpose is to guard against the tyrannies of ignorance and conformity, and its existence indicates the extent to which a democratic society values knowledge, truth, justice, books, and culture.”
  - **Libraries break down boundaries.** “Libraries provide free family literacy programs for low-literate, illiterate, and non-English-speaking people. In addition, hundreds of librarians across America lead outreach programs that teach citizenship and develop multilingual and multicultural materials for their patrons. Libraries serve the homebound elderly, prisoners, and other institutionalized individuals, the homeless, and the blind and hearing-impaired.”
  - **Libraries level the playing field.** “Economists have cited a growing income inequity in America, with the gap between the richest and poorest citizens becoming wider year by year. By making all its resources equally available to all members of its community, regardless of income, class, or other factors, the library levels the playing field. Once users have access to the library’s materials, they have the opportunity to level the playing field outside the library by learning to read, gaining employment, or starting a business.”
  - **Libraries value the individual.** “Library doors swing open for independent thinking without prejudice. Libraries offer alternatives to the manipulations of commercialism, from the excellence of public-television productions to the freethinking of renegade publishers and the vision of poets and artists outside the mainstream business of art and literature.”

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- **Libraries Open Kids' Minds** Bringing children into a library can transport them from the commonplace to the extraordinary. From story hours for preschoolers to career planning for high schoolers, children's librarians make a difference because they care about the unique developmental needs of every individual who comes to them for help. Children get a handle on personal responsibility by holding a library card of their own, a card that gives them access to new worlds in books, videos, audiotapes, computers, games, toys, and more.

#### **On-Site: Field Trip to the Public Library**

9. Teachers should work with staff at the public library to determine the length and activities to be completed during a student field trip. Sample components of a trip might include:
  - Tour of the facility
  - Librarian "Meet & Greet"; sample questions for the librarian might include:
    - What are the most important services provided by the library? What types of programs are offered and why?
    - What is a typical day like for you at work? What is your favorite thing about your job and/or the library? What is the hardest part of your job?
    - How does the library decide which books to carry?
    - How does the library support the community?
    - Who pays for the public library?
    - What is your opinion regarding this library's responsibility in terms of promoting democracy/civic engagement? What are some ways the library meets this responsibility?
    - Why are some books "banned?" What is the library's stance on controversial books some people find offensive?
  - A book read-aloud and/or activity (particular books related to community, democracy, civic engagement, etc. can be selected; see the attached Related Books list for suggestions)
  - An activity (teacher-led or librarian-led) from "Doing Democracy: Civic Engagement & Education at the Public Library"
10. Students should fill out their Travel Journal throughout their visit, sketching, writing and reflecting.
  - Teachers might have them write specific prompts in their journal to answer, such as:
    - What types of things do people appear to be doing?
    - What do you see, hear, and feel while in the library?
    - Does the library feel welcoming? Why or why not?
    - What examples do you see of this library fulfilling a role of <<insert the categories from #8 that you want students to focus on; different students might be instructed to focus on different roles, or teachers might choose a handful of roles for all students to try and find examples of.>>
  - Teachers can also have students work on a small group activity together that they document in their Travel Journal. For example, teachers and/or library staff might lead a discussion about the nation's Bill of Rights as part of a conversation about the library's role in a democratic society. Students could then be given the following activity:
    - Considering everything you have learned about the library and its services for the community, create a "Library Bill of Rights" in which you summarize the rights community members should have in terms of access to, behavior at, and what is offered by the public library.

#### **OPTIONAL On-Site and/or Post Visit: My Ideal Library**

11. As an optional extension, either on-site or post-visit, have students consider what their "ideal" library would be like. Students can imagine the details of their "ideal library" either in their Travel Journal, or for a

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more extensive STEM-integrated project, they can be instructed to create an electronic design or 3-D model of their ideal library. See the attached activity sheet for details. Prior to implementing the project, teachers should determine the options available to students for the creation of their ideal library (i.e., electronic designs might be created in PowerPoint, Google Slides, Google Draw, Scratch, etc.) or physical models might be constructed out of cardboard boxes, clay, and other art supplies. Teachers should also determine how much class time and/or homework time will be provided for completion, as well as how students will present their work to the class. (Hosting a gallery walk, in which all students display their work then browse each other's projects, is recommended. This can be followed with brief summary presentation by each group, after which the class asks questions and provides feedback.)

### Post-Visit: Reflections

12. After the visit to the library, teachers should lead a class discussion to debrief what students observed and learned. Students should also be provided time (either in class or for homework) to reflect in their Travel Journal. Sample discussion questions and/or writing prompts:
- What did you find most interesting, surprising, fun, etc. about your visit to the public library?
  - In your opinion, why is a public library an important part of a community? What is the most important thing a library does/offers?
  - What role does a library serve in a democratic society?
  - What does it mean to be a responsible citizen/community member and how can a library help people fill this role?
  - How can the library be a cultural, political, and/or social hub for a community to come together and have important conversations?
13. Layer a quote for consideration into the conversation. Two possibilities include:
- "Libraries uphold and strengthen some of the most fundamental democratic ideals of our society; they not only make information freely available to all, but also foster the development of a civil society. They also provide comfortable, inviting, neutral, safe civic spaces conducive to democratic discourse – spaces where citizens can work together to solve public problems." (Nancy Kranich)
  - "The library card is a passport to wonders and miracles, glimpses into other lives, religions, experiences, the hopes and dreams and strivings of ALL human beings, and it is this passport that opens our eyes and hearts to the world beyond our front doors, that is one of our best hopes against tyranny, xenophobia, hopelessness, despair, anarchy, and ignorance." (Libba Bray)
    - If utilizing this quote for younger students, teachers will need to provide additional instruction to ensure students understand some of the more advanced vocabulary.
  - Discuss:
    - What message is this quote conveying? Do you agree or disagree and why?
    - What do you think Nancy/Libba would say if asked what the most important role of a library is?
    - Did you see any examples of the public library we toured doing or being what Nancy/Libba describes? Explain.
    - Does this quote and/or our visit to the public library make you think differently about the role of a public library in the community? Explain.
    - Based on this quote why it is important for all members of a community to own a library card?
14. For a closing thought, ask students to consider how life might be different if public libraries did not exist. (Students can discuss out loud and/or reflect in their Travel Journals.)

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Place Cards

<b>Public Library</b>	<b>Police Station</b>
<b>Town Hall</b>	<b>Animal Control</b>
<b>Fire Department</b>	<b>Community Center</b>
<b>Social Services</b>	<b>Public Works</b>
<b>School</b>	<b>Transportation Department</b>

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Name: \_\_\_\_\_

## My Ideal Library: A STEM Design Project

What is a library? A library is no longer a place just for books. They are community anchors that “uphold and strengthen some of the most fundamental democratic ideals of our society; they not only make information freely available to all, but also foster the development of a civil society. They provide comfortable, inviting, neutral, safe civic spaces conducive to democratic discourse – spaces where citizens can work together to solve public problems.” (Nancy Kranich)

With this in mind students will design an “ideal” library, created to ensure it meets a mission of civic education and engagement. What should the space of a library be like to ensure patrons can engage in civic discourse? What creative activities and spaces should a library offer to engage diverse users (from a makerspace, to book clubs, to a community garden...the possibilities are endless.)

### You will work in small groups to:

- 1. Brainstorm:** With your group brainstorm what an “ideal” library – and specifically a library that promotes community engagement and civic education – would look like and offer. Possible questions to consider:
  - What is the mission of the “ideal” library?
  - What types of engaging and creative activities are offered, and how do these activities serve diverse community populations? (Think about children, seniors, homeless populations, those in poverty, etc.) What types of special events might your ideal library offer and host and why?
  - What special features does your library offer that are unique and innovative?
  - What should you see when you enter the library? How are community members welcomed into the space and encouraged to interact with one another in kind, respectful ways?
  - What should you smell in the library? (i.e., Is there a coffee shop, a place to purchase pastries, a garden?)
  - What do you hear as you walk around the library? (You might hear different sounds in different spaces.)
- 2. Research:** As you brainstorm, you should also research current libraries to see what innovative ideas are out there that you might like to incorporate and/or improve.
- 3. Draft a blueprint:** Review your brainstorms and research and begin to make decisions on the design (inside and out) of your ideal library. Create a blueprint, a map of the library site, showing in vague shapes/outline what will be included and located where. Include labels that explain the physical structure and purpose of specific spaces and remember to design for the particular activities, programs, services, etc. your library will make available.
- 4. Create your final design:** Finally, create a digital representation or 3-D model of your ideal library. We will review the options in class for creating your final design. Notes:
- 5. Present your “Ideal Library”:** Students will present their ideal libraries to the remainder of class. After a gallery walk of all the final blueprints and final designs, each group will have up to 5 minutes to provide an overview of their library’s mission and design.

DUE DATES: \_\_\_\_\_

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## Related Books

- *That Book Woman* by Heather Henson
  - High in the Appalachian hills, a woman comes every two weeks on horseback to deliver books to Cal's family. Cal has no interest in reading, but he wonders what could possibly make her long treks in the snow and wind worthwhile? Young readers will discover a moving introduction to the story and courage of Kentucky's Pack Horse Librarians.
- *Tomas and the Library Lady* by Pat Mora, Raul Colon
  - Tomas, child of migrant workers, visits the town library to find stories like the ones told by his grandfather. There he meets a librarian who provides him with a cool place, stories and books, and friendship before Tomas and his family move on to the next place. Handsomely illustrated in earth tones, this touching story was inspired by the real life of writer and educator Tomas Rivera.<sup>1</sup>
- *The Librarian of Basra: A True Story from Iraq* by Jeanette Winter
  - In spite of looming war, librarian Alia Muhammed Baker was able to save the books from the library of Basra by moving them to safety. Simple forms and deep colors in a naïve style evoke the war without being explicit. The bravery and action of one person celebrates both everyday heroism and books a unifying force.<sup>1</sup>
- *My Librarian is a Camel: How Books are Brought to Children Around the World* by Margriet Ruurs
  - Have you ever gotten your library book by way of a camel, elephant, solar-powered truck, or boat? This book offers a fascinating introduction to the many kinds of libraries are to people no matter their background, as well as, of their own neighborhood library branch!
- *America Votes: How Our President is Elected* by Linda Granfield
  - Elections are anything but dull, and participation is very important in a democracy. Just consider what it might be like in places where citizens can't vote. This playful introduction to presidential elections provides a brief history of voting in the U.S. (including the "chad" story") and encourages young people to get involved.
- *Quilt of States: Piercing America Together* by Adrienne Yorinks
  - Quilts, a truly American art form, are used to illustrate each state in the order in which it was admitted into the United States. Short essays by state librarians provide the story, background, and information about each quilt and state, and are reflected in the handsome, unique, and colorful illustrations.
- *Shhh! We're Writing the Constitution* by Jean Fritz
  - Chronicles the hot summer of 1787 where fifty-five delegates from thirteen states huddled together in the strictest secrecy in Philadelphia to draw up the constitution of the United States!

# about <sup>the</sup> author

\_\_\_\_\_ 's self-portrait



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# My TRIP <sup>to the</sup> PUBLIC LIBRARY

SKETCH A PICTURE OF THE LIBRARY HERE:

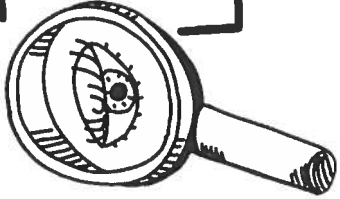
NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

# WHAT COMES TO MIND WHEN YOU THINK OF THE PUBLIC LIBRARY?



# REFLECTIONS ON MY TRIP



1. What did you find the most interesting/fun/surprising?

2. Why is the public library an important part of the community?

3. IMAGINE

a world without public libraries. How would that look?

# ★ BRAINSTORM your



(use words, phrases, doodles, drawings)



# ⚡ CREATE

a drawing or collage that represents your understanding of the


**PUBLIC LIBRARY.**



## QUOTE EXPLORATION:

Bad libraries build collections,  
good libraries build services,  
great libraries build communities.

~ R. David Lankes

What **MESSAGE** is this  quote conveying?

What does it mean to  
**"BUILD COMMUNITY"** and  
how can **LIBRARIES** do this?

# Create

your own

# Library

BILL of RIGHTS

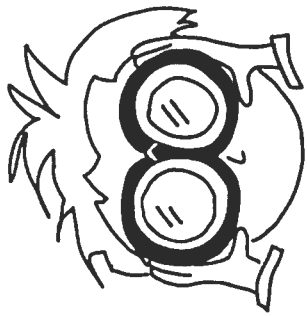
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③

④

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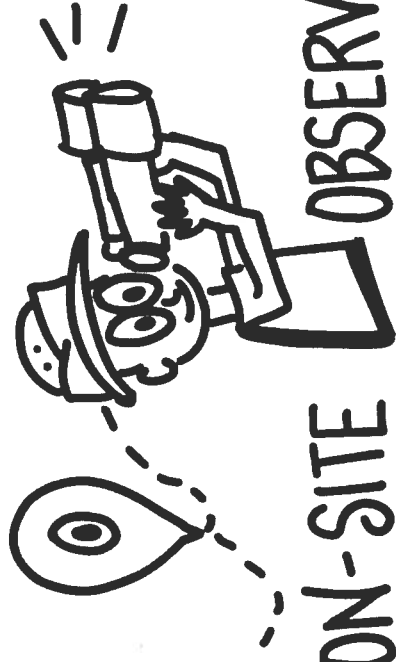


# OBSERVATIONS

OF HOW THIS LIBRARY IS SERVING  
AS A...

Visionary

Center FOR Democracy  
IN Action

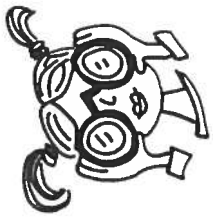


# ON-SITE OBSERVATIONS

WHAT DO YOU **SEE** PEOPLE DOING?

HOW DO YOU **FEEL** IN THE LIBRARY?

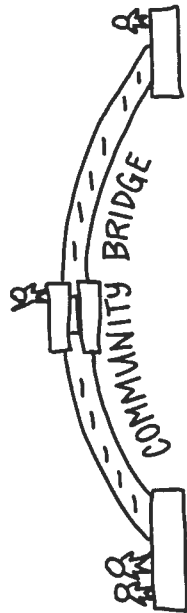
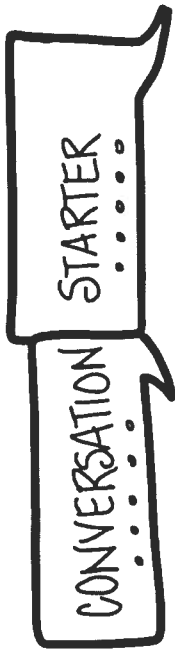
AN INTERESTING **DISCOVERY**?



# OBSERVATIONS

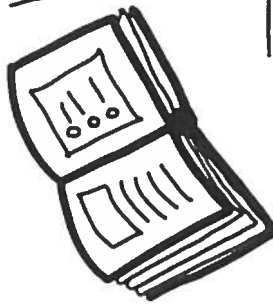
OF HOW THIS LIBRARY IS  
SERVING AS A...

*Civic educator*



QUESTIONS I WANT TO ASK:  
?  
?  
?

WHAT I LEARNED!



WHAT I FOUND MOST INTERESTING!

