Yale Year of Reading (YYoR) was born out of discussions in July 2010 between the Learning Resource Centre (LRC) and the Essential Skills Teams at Yale College. The idea was inspired by the fact that both teams wanted to work more closely with curriculum areas to promote literacy skills and to help the college achieve the Basic Skills Standard but there was also a desire for both services to ensure that the whole College community could participate in the enjoyment of one of the most fundamental skills – reading.

Objectives

"The ability to read awoke inside me some long dormant craving to be mentally alive"
Autobiography of Malcom X

Our objectives remain to not only raise awareness of the value of reading but to increase access and enjoyment of this activity to the whole college community through a set of less traditional mechanisms.

We recognise that reading forms part of education but it can be so much more than just a task to achieve a pass grade and in recent times, with the advent of information technology and all that it brings us, we might question how it is that our students develop good reading skills. It is not automatic.

Summary of Project

The Year of Reading started on 27th September 2010 and will continue until the end of July 2011. The year is punctuated by events and activities that encourage staff and students to read a little or a lot more. From the outset, we knew that for many it would be seen as an onerous task - particularly if the most that was read on a weekly basis was the instructions on a microwave meal! However, reading whole books is not necessarily all that this project is about, rather the engagement with reading in whatever form that takes. Therefore our self constructed guidelines continue to exist to bring about as many occasions as possible where it would be necessary to get our community reading.

Target Audiences

From the very start, it was envisaged that the our teams would seek to place reading at the heart of the whole college community but to do this successfully, we needed to engage some key people who would help us drive this message across.

Within a few days of the idea of YYoR being discussed, around 50 of the College's key leaders came together for a 'Leadership Day' which has become a regular College event. At that meeting, the LRC Manager was given a few minutes to announce the idea and to give a brief outline of what shape it would take. The idea was welcomed by the audience and helped greatly by the fact that each leader was given a free book to share with their teams. A few months earlier, the LRC had been presented with 50 copies of the book 'Around the World in 80 Trades' by Conor Woodman and used these to present to leaders of teams as a token of what was to come.

Budget Breakdown

Costs for YYoR are kept within the general budget for the LRC and so far costs are kept low by maximising the use of in-house staff such as the graphic designer who produced the logo and by arranging events that are low cost. Most author visits have cost little more than travel and catering for example. Advantage was taken to apply for a grant for the 'Welsh Libraries Festival' which assisted the purchase of promotional items which can sometimes be a costly factor. The LRC has purchased other low cost prizes such as books and Amazon vouchers but also offered items such as print credits and pen drives which are readily available for quick promotions. The College has a shop on campus so items such as chocolate and sweets can also be bought quickly and cheaply and used in promotions quite effectively.

Promotional Activities

Prior to the launch of YYoR, we started to promote the year by casual messages and badges. At Freshers' Fair, students were able to take one of the promotional postcards and collect a badge which was linked to a prize draw. Badges have been used throughout the year and students collecting them will have the opportunity to claim small prizes during the Summer term.

Our early work was helped by the fact we had a logo and a large banner to use around the College – this has helped to spread the message.

We knew that despite our best attempts that not all staff would know what we were planning - September in further education is extremely busy and pressurised and so we produced an initial staff briefing and plan to bring out another two before the year has ended.

We are offering £50 of books to the department that has engaged most with the project to help stimulate staff interest and in addition, we are using a site on the College's VLE to place information about reading that will support tutors hopefully well beyond the year. Our partners, the Essential Skills team have a wealth of information that they are contributing to help with some basic literacy issues.

To keep YYoR alive, a number of activities were planned at the start of the year but several others have happened along the way thanks to the quick thinking and spontaneity of staff. Some of the key activities are listed below with a brief description.

Graphix

At the start of October we went into the 'Graphix' fortnight which centered around our collection of graphic novels. During the fortnight we had a visit from David Lloyd who is perhaps best known for his graphic work on 'V for Vendetta'. David gave a talk to students on his career and also kindly allowed the LRC to have some of his original artwork for display. Students were able to purchase books at the event which David went on to sign and in some cases, illustrate.

Halloween Reads

Local author, Sam Stone visited the LRC during October and just before half term. Sam writes horror, gothic and fantasy fiction – a perfect run up to Halloween and the LRC used this opportunity to promote fiction and films around vampires and horror.

Clare Dudman
Clare Dudman award winning author from Shropshire came into College on 8th November to promote her book 'A Place of Meadows and Tall Trees' and to talk to staff and students about her research which took her to Patagonia to find out about the harrowing experience of a Welsh colony in 1865.

Poetry Performance
Staff from the Essential Skills team organised a Poetry Performance workshop with some financial assistance from Academi and despite the fact that the attendance numbers looked low, the event was populated by foreign language students who gained much from the workshop. One of the poets has since contacted the team to offer to come in and to do some more work with the students.

Bibliotherapy Launch
The successful 'Books on Prescription' scheme, most notably available in public libraries in Wales has been of considerable interest to the LRC for some time. The College Nurse organised a visit by the local organiser of this scheme and it was decided that the LRC could launch the scheme in College. This was arranged for January and some key staff were invited to the launch who would be good ambassadors.

It was badged as YYoR to highlight the fact that the LRC offers books that could support a crisis and the scheme is available to staff and students.

Fancy That – Welsh Libraries Festival
The LRC was fortunate to receive a grant to participate in the Welsh Libraries Festival and used this to further promote YYoR. The event on the 27th January was well attended and the LRC used the opportunity to find out what students know about the services on offer.

Crocodile Joe
An event with 'Crocodile Joe' was organised in conjunction with the Biology Department and the LRC used this to promote its collection of books around the natural environment and conservation.

The Biology tutors, keen to be involved in YYoR have also devised a competition for National DNA Day and badged this as YYoR as students will need to read around the subject area.

Galaxy Book Awards

Staff from all over College were given the opportunity to borrow one of the Galaxy Books Award winners from the LRC and receive a free bar of chocolate to enjoy. This unsurprisingly, was a popular promotion and all the books were borrowed quite quickly. Those on a waiting list were not disappointed however, and also had the opportunity to borrow the book (and have chocolate). Even the children's book went out a few times as many staff have young children and/or grandchildren.

Storytelling

One of our tutors approached the LRC for help in getting her Entry Level students to be able to read out loud. Generally, students on this course find employment in the care industry as carers to young children or the elderly and so together we developed a project for the students to work on using children's books.

The LRC already has a collection of children's books which it lends to the College Nursery. The collection was added to and over 30 students began to borrow these to read. Initially, the students had to choose a favourite book and write a short review which was very successful. The LRC then funded a storyteller to come into College to work with these students to help give them skills to be able to read aloud.

The tutor was very pleased with the outcome but perhaps one of the most important aspects was that the students really enjoyed the project and hopefully gained some new skills for when they enter the workplace.

OCN English Class

The LRC was approached by a tutor from the OCN English group who was trying to engage students in reading but having some issues. The LRC was invited to come and talk to the students and organised a small competition based on writing a book review. The LRC bought in some titles that were requested by the students and at Christmas the best ones were awarded some Amazon vouchers. Even though this part is now over, the LRC regularly supplies the class with new reading material – it appears that giving the students choice rather than being very prescriptive has made a positive impact.

Murder Mystery Event

Tutors from across College organised a 'Murder Mystery' Evening in early December and the setting was an American Crime Writers Convention. The LRC was contacted for any possible 'props' which we happily supplied. We also had a few copies of a book about family skeletons left over from an event a while ago which we thought loosely fitted the theme and offered these as a prize to the winning team. The books were adorned with the YYoR logos and presented to the winners at the end of the evening. Although the LRC staff couldn't be present at the event, our involvement helped to remind staff of the project.

Christmas Market

The LRC has a bookshop function and decided to promote this as well as books that could be borrowed for leisure reading in the reception area of the main College campus in early December. This attracted mainly staff which were the target group in this instance and resulted in a number of issues and purchases which would probably not have happened if not for the temporary relocation.

Challenge Africa
Students and staff have for the last two years visited South Africa to see some of the poorest areas and the LRC sponsored book bags for the students to distribute to schoolchildren they are visiting. Just under 50 bags were made and sent out with the students when they left for Africa in February.

The Social Life of Books

We have had some success with placing books around the College for people to read and have started work on this again. One new location is the security cabin on the main College campus.

Reading Groups
One of the LRC team has established a student reading group which is gathering pace and will be a successful model for the future.

Press Coverage
As the year has progressed, the College's marketing department have become keen visitors to the LRC to find out what is next on the agenda and as a result, a couple of events have made the local press. The LRC utilises internal mechanisms to get the message across which includes the information board on the staff intranet, emails, meetings, the college radio, YTalk (internal newsletter) staff briefings and posters. Informal meetings also work extremely well as many staff are bombarded by information so word-of-mouth is by far the most effective communication tool.

Evaluation
Yale Year of Reading is not over yet and apart from some planned events, the LRC team are still quite spontaneous with ideas and quick promotions.

We can not be sure that the message has reached every corner of the College but we continue to work towards promoting reading and using the YYoR badge as frequently as possible. More tutors are finding time to talk to us about how they can become involved and many staff seem to be aware that YYoR exists. The College Principal recently contacted the LRC with an idea for YYoR which was pleasing that it has been recognised at the top level of our organisation.

Although the full evaluation of YYoR will take place once the year has finished, there are a number indicators that suggest this is a successful strategy

1. Working in partnership with another team has helped to strengthen the message.
2. The ability to 'announce' the year on a College wide scale gave the project the gravitas it needed.
3. YYoR is becoming a recognisable brand.
4. YYoR relates to key issues for the whole community around literacy.
5. YYoR is obviously spread over a long period which works well in this environment as we can target events at appropriate times.
6. YYoR has worked on an advocacy level, raising the status of the LRC and giving opportunity for the College to see that its role can be much wider and effective.

As with every project however, one is mindful of the aspects that are less positive. In this case the main issue centres around the staffing required for such a project. The LRC is a very busy service and staff have often worked beyond their normal duties to make events happen. Evidence so far

suggests that this project and its potential could, in the right economic circumstances, attract the efforts of somebody in a full time post however, LRC staff have had the opportunity to perhaps undertake some different activities that extend skills and provide a new and refreshing perspective.

The LRC has a history of event organisation under its belt which has meant that a number of potential pitfalls have been avoided along the way. Any event we plan which involves a speaker does need the assurance of attendance and so the LRC has worked closely with tutors to maximise this.

Generally, tutors are very responsive and grateful for this kind of resource. The College runs the Welsh Baccalaureate programme for a significant number of students and in-house events provide quite a wide range of opportunities. Where there hasn't been 'buy-in' from tutors then activities have not been as successful. The texting competition run by the Essential Skills team was one example but following on from the success of the Poetry Performance, there are plans to run this again.

Although some of the events have not particularly involved reading (a classic example being the 'Crocodile Joe' event), it has allowed the LRC to promote particular collections and to be regarded hopefully, as a proactive service. The Welsh Libraries Festival theme 'Fancy That' also encapsulated much of the spirit of YYoR.

We are not done yet……

The pressures on our services cease to wane but our desire to remain focussed on this project continues. With each month, new opportunities arise and there are still some ideas that have yet to be staged including a magazine swap and the launch of iChoose (getting students to vote on the books they think the LRC should stock).

Yale Year of Reading will reach its natural conclusion in July 2011 and a full review can then be undertaken which will detail how this work might be continued. However it manifests itself in the future, it is clear that there is an opportunity to build on the work undertaken and we hope that it's legacy will last.