

It was nice to have a break - Oral Presentation

Bringing life into our University Library - Simple, playful and cultural activities
Liège, Erasmus Staff Week – July 2, 2025

1. Introduction

Hello everyone.

Thank you for still being here at the end of this hot day.

My name is Jacques Mignon.

I work as a scientist in the ULiège Library, at the Faculty of Agronomy in Gembloux, seventy kilometres from here.

The Gembloux Faculty of Agronomy is housed in an old abbey. The library is located in the former abbey palace. It's great !

As you know, the library's tasks are divided into different divisions.

One of these is the User Services Unit.

As the number of tasks assigned to the "User Services" unit is considerable, the unit has been divided into four working groups (WG).

The one we are interested in today is the WG Activities in locations

Together with the team, we have tried to make the library not only a place of study and silence, but also a place of fun, conducive to well-being, creativity, culture, curiosity and sometimes even laughter.

2. Why do we organise activities in the library?

Today, I'd like to share with you how we bring life into our library through a variety of activities — some playful, some cultural, and some quite unexpected. I hope this presentation will give you ideas. Let's start with a simple question: why animate a library?

Students spend long hours in the library — reading, writing, revising. It's a place of focus, but also of pressure. We realised that offering small, meaningful breaks could help students breathe, recharge, and reconnect with the joy of learning.

These activities also allow us to highlight our collections in new ways.

And let's be honest — sometimes, we just want to see students smile. That's also part of our mission.

3. Activities in detail

Let's now dive into the heart of my presentation: the activities themselves.

You will see.

Communication is always important.

It can be via social networks, posters or the library website.

We've grouped the activities into three categories: playful and relaxing activities, activities that highlight our collections, and cultural or critical thinking events.

Let's begin with the playful ones — who said libraries can't be fun?

3.1 Playful and relaxing activities

Board Game Night:

The Gembloux library has a collection of serious games - board games related to agronomy and the natural sciences. To promote them, we have organised various games evenings. Students, assistants and teachers could come along, play and learn the rules. It was a great ice-breaker and helped students feel more confident about borrowing the games later. We were amazed at the interest shown by the scientific staff... And by their competitive spirit.

Here are some photos of the evenings

(As well as a games library, we also have a comic book library.)

Ugly Christmas Sweater Contest:

Another relaxing activity...

In December, we celebrate the end of the year with a small competition (a contest) to find the ugliest Christmas sweater. Every student who wears one gets a chocolate. Staff also have to dress up in a Christmas sweater. Everyone had a big smile.

(This competition is part of our study leave with a focus on well-being. We'll talk about them right after)

Exam preparation period:

During the study leave or the exam preparation period (in Belgium we say Blocus), we offer micro-activities.

This period, when thoughtfully planned and coupled with a focus on well-being, can be a valuable tool for students to enhance their learning and exam preparation.

These might include the Christmas sweater competition, relaxation sessions or chair yoga but also a break table with puzzles, mandalas to colour, crosswords, and even simple cooking recipes. The problem with the puzzle is that students often stop “just for five minutes” and end up staying for half an hour.

On the whiteboard you can see tips for stretching exercises, riddles, the ability to request an appointment with an academic advisor, a cooking recipe, etc.

Golden Ticket Hunt:

Another little activity that works well is the golden ticket hunt.

On social networks, we post a riddle that students have to solve to find the golden ticket in the library.

The golden ticket is usually hidden in a book from our collection, but it can also be in a board game or a comic book.

Students usually search in small teams. For us, the challenge is to write a good riddle.

(Not too easy, but not too difficult either)

The winner (or the winning team) receives a basket full of snacks, sweets and fruits.

This is very cool.

3.2 Activities that highlight our collections

Now we come to the activities that showcase our collections.

First of all, the thematic book tables

Thematic Book Tables:

Three times a year (or more often), we create thematic book displays.

The books are curated with care and generally accompanied by a digital gallery.

Let's explore some themes:

“Women in Science,”

“How to Succeed at University”

“Soft skills”

“Authors from our institution”

“Halloween”

“Water”

But also selections of books linked to events.

This was the case during the Spring 2015 festival dedicated to the solar-punk movement.

Note that this festival was a student project.

The library hosted a booth during the two-day festival. Afterward, the most relevant books were exhibited in the library.

The previous year, the library participated in the “Rêve général festival” ... the “general dream festival”...

After this festival, the most relevant books were presented online in four thematic galleries.

It's a very nice showcase of our collections.

Seed Library:

The environmental library, located in Arlon, hundred kilometers from here, has developed a seed library. It's a cosy corner where students can take or donate seeds. It's a collection of seed packets freely distributed. Next to the seed library, books from our collections allow you to discover how to produce your own vegetable seeds.

It's a way to talk about biodiversity and sustainability.

It's also a great way to showcase our collections.

In addition, this seed library was passed from library to library throughout the spring.

Meet the Author:

The principle is to invite a scientific author to present his book and the path from which it originates. It's a great opportunity to connect research with storytelling. These public readings are intended for both internal and external faculty members.

For example, the Architecture Library invited Claudine Houbart to present their book “From monument to city”.

More recently, they invited Fabien Denoëland his editor for a public reading of his work "Liège, from drawing to drawing".

Here are some photos from the event.

As you can see, students participate in these meetings. They discover or rediscover our facilities.

3.3 Cultural and critical thinking activities

As part of more intellectual activities, we organised, among other things, a collective book reading and a debate conference.

Collective Reading (Arpentage):

About the collective book reading, we hosted a collective reading session — an “arpentage” — of the book “La tentation écofasciste” by Pierre Madelin.

Do you know what an “arpentage” is?

An “arpentage” is performed with fewer than 10 people.

The chosen book is physically separated into different parts of equal size.

Each participant reads part of the book and must summarises it orally.

In two hours, the entire book was presented.

There was a lot of discussion about the most important concepts.

Debate Conference:

One week after the collective reading, we organised a panel discussion with two experts. The question was : “What kind of environmental discourse does the far right promote?” It was a bold topic, but the discussion was respectful and rich.

4. What we learned

After these various examples, it's time to consider the benefits and added value of these activities in our libraries.

First of all, these activities are not very expensive. They don't require a big team. But they make a big difference.

They create a sense of community, curiosity, and care. Students feel welcome. They discover books, ideas, and each other. The library becomes more than a place to study — it becomes a place to live.

However, at the beginning of our activities, we received very mixed reviews.

It's true that we work in a university library.

This library is not a playroom.

Students need breaks, but always with an educational objective. We need to encourage them to use the library, borrow books, participate in the exchange of ideas, and build their reasoning on serious reading. We need to help them manage their work time. We need to offer them spaces conducive to work and study. We need to recognise and develop this vision of a library as a living space. Breaks are also part of life. Not all students need us. And we don't need all students. However, we must do everything possible for those who seek and need our presence and support.

5. Open discussion

Now that we've seen the impact of these activities, let's open the floor to your ideas.

I would like you to share your activity ideas.

Which ones work best in your library? Which ones should be implemented in our library?

No QR codes or online surveys.

Let's just share verbally. Who wants to start?

Thank you for your contributions!

It's inspiring to see how creative and diverse your ideas are. Thank you!