

The Library in the Boot

Eleven books, one car boot, and a problem nobody had thought to measure.

4 min read

Before you read

- **circulate** — to pass from person to person and keep moving
- **sceptical** — doubtful that something will work
- **logistics** — the practical organising of how things get moved and managed
- **sustain** — to keep something going over time
- **donate** — to give something away for a cause
- **overdue** — not returned or paid by the agreed time



An open car boot in a Lagos street, shelved with books, children choosing titles

¹ Chidinma Okafor was thirteen when she noticed that the problem was not that children in her part of Lagos disliked reading. It was that between her school gate and the main road there was nowhere to get a book.

² The school library existed. It opened for forty minutes on Wednesdays, and the books could not leave the room. Her own shelf at home held eleven books, most of which she had read more than twice.

³ The idea was not complicated, and she has always been firm about that when people describe it as clever. She asked her uncle, who drove a taxi, whether she could keep books in the boot of his car. He was sceptical, chiefly about the books coming back, and said yes anyway.

⁴ She started with her eleven. Within a month there were sixty, because she had done the one thing that turned out to matter: she asked. She asked at church, at the market, at two schools and at her mother's workplace, and people who had books they were never going to read again donated them.

⁵ The register was an exercise book ruled into columns by hand. Name, book, date out, date back. Her uncle's fear proved well founded — in the first three months, nine books went missing. Chidinma's response was not a rule but a number: she worked out that nine lost books out of two hundred and forty loans was a rate she could live with, and kept going.

⁶ The difficulty was never enthusiasm. It was logistics. The car was a working taxi, which meant the library existed only where the car happened to be, which was not always where the readers were. For two months the collection circulated almost entirely among children who lived on her uncle's usual route.

⁷ Her solution was unglamorous. She fixed the library to a place and a time — Saturday mornings, outside the chemist's at the junction, eight until eleven — and told everyone the same two facts until they remembered them. Making something predictable, she later said, did more for it than making it bigger.

⁸ Three years on, the collection is somewhere above four hundred books and no longer lives in a boot. Two other junctions run their own Saturday sessions, each with a register ruled by hand, because Chidinma insists the system has to be simple enough that anyone can take it over.

⁹ She is asked, often, what advice she has for young people who want to start something. She finds the question slightly irritating, and answers it anyway. Count something first, she says. She did not know how bad the problem was until she counted the books on her own shelf and then counted the days the library was open.

¹⁰ The ambition now is not a bigger library. It is a boring one — something ordinary enough to sustain itself without her, which she will need, because she would like to study engineering and the junction will have to manage.



A hand-ruled exercise book used as a borrowing register, names and dates in columns

Part A Choose the best answer

Circle the letter next to the right answer.

1. What did Chidinma identify as the real problem?

- ☐ (A) Children in her area disliked reading
- ☐ (B) There was nowhere nearby to borrow a book
- ☐ (C) Books were too expensive to print
- ☐ (D) The school had no library at all

2. Why was her uncle sceptical?

- ☐ (A) He did not have space in the car
- ☐ (B) He thought the books would not be returned
- ☐ (C) He did not think children would read
- ☐ (D) He wanted to be paid for the space

3. How did the collection grow from eleven books to sixty?

- ☐ (A) She bought them with saved money
- ☐ (B) The school donated its library
- ☐ (C) She asked people in several places for donations
- ☐ (D) A charity delivered them

4. What was the main difficulty once the library was running?

- ☐ (A) A lack of interest from readers
- ☐ (B) The library moved wherever the taxi went
- ☐ (C) Too many books were donated
- ☐ (D) The register was too complicated

5. In paragraph 10, calling the ambition 'a boring one' means she wants the library to be:

- ☐ (A) less popular than it is now
- ☐ (B) ordinary and steady enough to run without her
- ☐ (C) open fewer hours each week
- ☐ (D) stocked with less interesting books

Part B Write your answer

Answer in two or three sentences.

6. Chidinma's response to nine missing books was 'not a rule but a number'. Explain what she did and why it was a reasonable decision.

7. Explain how fixing a place and a time solved a problem that adding more books would not have solved.

8. Why does she insist that the system stays simple enough for anyone to take over?

9. The writer says she finds the question about advice 'slightly irritating, and answers it anyway'. What does this detail add to our picture of her?

Part C**Think deeper**

There is no single right answer here. Say what you think, and say why.

10. Chidinma's advice is to count something before trying to fix it. Choose a problem you have noticed and say what you would count first, and why that measurement would help.

11. Is a project that can run without its founder more successful than one that depends on them? Argue your view and give one reason someone might disagree.

12. The passage says the idea 'was not complicated'. Why might people prefer to believe good ideas are complicated? What is lost when they do?

Answer key

For parents and teachers

Part A

1. B — There was nowhere nearby to borrow a book | 2. B — He thought the books would not be returned | 3. C — She asked people in several places for donations | 4. B — The library moved wherever the taxi went | 5. B — ordinary and steady enough to run without her

Part B

6. She calculated the loss rate — nine books against two hundred and forty loans — and judged it acceptable rather than tightening the rules. It was reasonable because stricter rules would have reduced borrowing, which was the whole purpose. Accept answers weighing the cost of losses against the cost of restricting use.

7. The obstacle was that readers could not find the library, not that the library was too small. Predictability let people plan to come; more books in an unpredictable place would still have been unreachable.

8. So it can be copied at other junctions and continue when she leaves. A system that needs her personally would end with her. Accept answers about copying, handover, or lasting.

9. It shows she is practical rather than performing, slightly impatient with being treated as an inspiration, and still willing to be useful. Accept any answer that reads honesty or modesty into the detail.

Part C

These answers vary. Mark the reasoning, not the answer.

10. A strong answer names a specific, countable thing (how many minutes, how many people, how often) and explains what the number would reveal. A weaker answer names a problem without a measurement. Prompt with: how would you know whether it was getting better?

11. Either position is acceptable. Look for an honest concession — founders can provide drive and judgement that a simple system cannot replace; or, independence is the only real test of whether something works.

12. Strong answers suggest complicated ideas feel more impressive, excuse inaction, or protect the people who hold them; what is lost is that simple solutions get overlooked and fewer people try. Mark the reasoning, not the position.

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