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The role of public libraries in Lifelong Learning in a multicultural and digital context

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Abstract

The traditional roles of public libraries are approached from four directions: the library as a(n) 1. information provider, 2. mediator of cultural assets, 3. source and services for lifelong learning, 4. a place for recreation and entertainment. Recent changes in the society suggest that two main trends – both derived from globalisation – influence the content of these traditional roles: multiculturalism and digitisation with the growth of knowledge society. According to these trends public libraries are functioning as low-intensive meeting places where people with different ethnical, cultural, religious background can be exposed to other values. Based on the digitisation of content and services public libraries have reinterpreted their roles in an online environment too, that made the reflection to actual tendencies of lifelong learning possible. The blurring border-lines of curricula, the exchangeable roles of educator and learner, the relativity of values all suggested the necessity of elaboration of a continuously changing lifelong learning infrastructure. Public libraries are tending to create spaces in online environment make possible the confrontation of different values and ideas, acquisition of new knowledge and stimulating creativity. The border-lines and the scope of public library services are also blurred as archives, museums and also companies – also from outside the GLAM sector – are facing the same challenges and reflecting the same user needs. The paper presents some European examples in which the public libraries based on providing digitised content are creating stimulating online environments for the needs of lifelong learning.

Keywords: *public library, lifelong learning, digitisation*

Introduction

The role of public libraries have been continuously reinterpreted since technology and changing approaches to information became present in all fields of life. It is obvious that public libraries as public good of our societies can be relevant for the citizens as information providers, as mediators of assets of cultural heritage, as a source for lifelong learning and place for recreation and entertainment. These approaches – reflecting to the general requirements toward libraries – are still relevant though the possible roles can be grouped but not limited to the above mentioned ones.

A survey on the perceived outcomes of library services was recently conducted in Norway, Finland and the Netherlands. (Vakkari et al, 2014) On the one hand it compares systematically the benefits users derive in the major areas of life from the public library in various countries on the other it presents that the aims of library use are not limited to such areas like information, education, culture and recreation. On various levels citizens can benefit from library services during their vacation, in childcare, creative activities, societal discussion, housing, consuming issues etc. Though all of these elements can somehow be connected to the traditionally perceived roles of public libraries the approach that the real outcome is examined showed us that our institutions and their services are considered relevant in almost all fields of life. It is necessary to reflect these needs, because the financial support of public libraries as public goods is not as obvious today as it used to be a few years ago. We have to show up our values and systematically search the fields in which public libraries can be relevant in the society. One such role is the support of lifelong learning which is quite obvious in the knowledge society but the way how to realise and the motivation why to do it has changed.

The aim of this paper is to present the role of public libraries in lifelong learning in the light of two major challenges defined by multiculturalism and digitisation. It also presents some cutting edge services that represent the main approaches.

Challenges

Digitalisation of the society means that most of the public services are becoming available online. It affects the users generating higher demands toward public services. As almost everything is available via the internet, citizens expect remotely available services, and huge amount of content related to different issues.

Due to the digitalisation of the society the users' expectations are also growing toward digitised cultural heritage content made available online via well designed, searchable interfaces and services. The need for huge amount of digitised material generates new challenges for the cultural heritage sector. The continuously growing number of digitally available documents are followed by the even faster growth of demands and expectations.

Digitising cultural heritage content results in a huge single text on the internet with multiple access points and high quality services provided by memory institutions (museums, libraries, archives, galleries, audio-visual institutions etc.). As the borders between the scopes of these types of institutions are blurring public – and also academic, national and school – libraries are facing new competitors. The most obvious result of digitisation for memory institutions that they are serving the same audience with the same types of services using the same knowledge base. One of the biggest challenges in digitisation is that due to copyright reasons huge amount of content (and practically the most interesting documents) are protected and not open for reuse.

The huge single text including textual, visual materials consists of documents representing various values that may differ from the users' expectations. We are exposed to different values and approaches which on the one hand can be quite inconvenient, on the other

holding great possibilities for developing a greater understanding of each other. These conflicts and possibilities are first and foremost discussed under the terms multiculturalism and diversity.

The term multiculturalism traditionally refers to the phenomenon emerged as a result of influx of immigrants with a non-Western background from third countries to North America and Europe. The interaction and harmonious co-existence of different cultures are the most important issues cultural diversity or multiculturalism refer to. In this context ‘culture should be regarded as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature; lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs’. (UNESCO, 2001)

It means a big challenge to public libraries. According to Audunson (2005) ‘the challenge referred to above takes on basically two forms. The first is related to how one integrate newcomers into the political and social culture of the receiving country simultaneously as one gives them possibilities to cultivate their own culture. (...) The second form that this challenge takes is related to creating arenas where people belonging to different cultural groups can meet and communicate.’

The Multicultural library manifesto (2009) describes the role and the key mission of public libraries in the following way.

- In a culturally diverse society focus should be on the following key missions, which relate to information, literacy, education and culture:
- promoting awareness of the positive value of cultural diversity and fostering cultural dialogue;
- encouraging linguistic diversity and respect for the mother tongue;
- facilitating the harmonious coexistence of several languages, including learning of several languages from an early age;
- safeguarding linguistic and cultural heritage and giving support to expression, creation and dissemination in all relevant languages;
- supporting the preservation of oral tradition and intangible cultural heritage;
- supporting inclusion and participation of persons and groups from all diverse cultural backgrounds;
- encouraging information literacy in the digital age, and the mastering of information and communication technologies;
- promoting linguistic diversity in cyberspace;
- encouraging universal access to cyberspace; supporting the exchange of knowledge and best practices with regard to cultural pluralism. (IFLA, 2009)

All of these points refer to the enhancement of understanding between people. In a wider context we can describe the role of public libraries as a place where people with different background (cultural, ethnic, religious), and demography (age, gender, education, etc.) are exposed to other values than they traditionally hold. From a practical point of view the libraries’ reaction to multiculturalism and the growing trend of digitisation lead to the same direction: it promotes the reflection to content, to people, to services and enhance the understanding of each other. The libraries possible role can be described as a physical or online space where we can stimulate the greater understanding of each other via intensive communication.

Public libraries facing the challenges of digitisation and the challenge of growing amount of cultural content available on the internet, elaborated new evidences of their existence. New information providers are catering the needs of users that suggests simply making content available is not quite strong argument for financially supporting this huge network of service points. The idea of breaking down the walls between members of the society could serve as a new argument for maintaining libraries or cultural heritage sector in general and public libraries in particular. The public libraries can create value and remain relevant via

supporting user-generated content, capturing community knowledge, aggregating locally interesting documents, and stimulating the use and reuse of digital material. In the next section we are overviewing some relevant theories around the idea of library as a place.

Theoretical background

First and foremost we should refer to Ray Oldenburg (1989) who elaborated the concept of third places. He suggests that after home (first), workplace or school (second) – where people spend most of their time –, third places are also necessary in the society. These are neutral spaces where people regardless to social status can randomly meet. The main characteristics of the third places are the following:

- Free or inexpensive;
- Food and drink, while not essential, are important;
- Highly accessible: proximate for many (walking distance);
- Involve regulars – those who habitually congregate there;
- Welcoming and comfortable;
- Both new friends and old should be found there. (Oldenburg 1989)

On some extent these characteristics can be valid in an online environment too, though the effects of virtual meetings can't be compared to the physical ones.

The main objective for maintaining third places within the community is to increase the quality of life and strengthen the cohesion within the society. Although according to Jeffres et al. (2009) shopping centres, coffee shops, malls, markets, recreation centers, clubs, church and schools can also function as third places, among the above listed ones several places are not neutral enough to be attractive to people with different background. To understand the problem we should take a look at another concept: 'low vs. high intensive meetings and meeting places' which considers neutrality as a key factor to strengthen cohesion within the society.

„This dichotomy catches the difference between arenas where we can live out our major interests and engagements together with people who share them (high-intensive), as opposed to arenas where we meet and are exposed to people with a quite different interests and values (low-intensive).” (Audunson 2005) An ideal low-intensive meeting place is neutral and has a low threshold. It should be welcoming and open to make it easy to enter. Facing different people can be inconvenient because we have to step out from our comfort zone, but on the other hand it is quite necessary to understand them via their reflections. Participating in high-intensive meeting and meeting places is essential in today's society because these are holding the strong ties with friends, family members and those people who are sharing the same values, but on the other hand it leads to fragmentation and isolation.

Public libraries are ideal low intensive meeting places because these institutions are immensely holding the ambition to show up the diversity represented by the published knowledge worldwide. Public libraries declare to be open to anybody regardless to gender, age, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origins, financial situation, birth or other grounds. (Library Act, 1997) Public libraries' engagement toward equal access to information and ensuring equal opportunities in the fields of culture and education is also unquestionable. IFLA in its Statement on Libraries and Intellectual Freedom declares that:

- “Libraries provide access to information, ideas and works of imagination. They serve as gateways to knowledge, thought and culture.
- Libraries provide essential support for lifelong learning, independent decision-making and cultural development for both individuals and groups.
- Libraries contribute to the development and maintenance of intellectual freedom and help to safeguard basic democratic values and universal civil rights.

- Libraries have a responsibility both to guarantee and to facilitate access to expressions of knowledge and intellectual activity. To this end, libraries shall acquire, preserve and make available the widest variety of materials, reflecting the plurality and diversity of society.” (IFLA 1999)

Today libraries act the part of the above statement by ensuring the possibility for people to meet and understand each other, published knowledge and generate community information.

The changing nature of learning in a multicultural and digital context

As growing amount of content is made available online in a digitised format and as we are increasingly facing the challenges of cultural diversity, the importance of non-formal education is strengthened. Cultural heritage institutions provide learners with a great infrastructure and huge amount of content that makes learning possible in various contexts, on different domains. Digitised content ensures the possibility of encountering different values, remote people and various expressions of culture.

Europeana published policy recommendations on education and learning in which the changing nature of learning was summarized from the viewpoint of the digital cultural heritage institutions. The policy document well summarized the most important factors that should be taken into account by public libraries and other memory institutions.

“The nature of learning is changing. Increasingly, learning takes place outside of the classroom or formal institutions. Digital learning is becoming more important, and as the number of visual learners rises, the demand for visuals and moving images grows. More attention is given to the development of transversal competencies such as cultural awareness and digital, social and civic competences. As a result, educators need innovative educational resources that are engaging, reliable and of high quality, that help students to acquire competences, and are easy to use, adapt and develop. Moreover, educational systems are traditionally focused on the history and culture of the individual nations, rather than on the links between them. A transnational approach would be better suited to the current reality and diverse background of students.” (Europeana Foundation, 2015)

Regardless of learning alone or in a group the learner encounters a stimulating, continuously changing material that explicitly incorporates the knowledge, visions and ideas of others which if often referred to as ‘wisdom of crowds’. The space and time constraints of learning are also extended as mobile devices gave the opportunity to learners to exploit the advantages of electronic sources in a much wider period than before. Practically learners are having a continuous access to cultural heritage sources in general and to learning material in particular.

Reinterpreting the roles of public libraries and memory institutions

The supply and demand for cultural assets is continuously growing in which the digitally available content is more heavily present than in the last few decades. The easy access to digital cultural heritage content makes consuming culture trendy. Culture becomes instrumental in our daily lives as well, because people do not need to take further efforts to access these goods. When cultural heritage institutions are digitising their analogue content they are contributing to one single text which consist of different types of material like images, videos and texts. This is one common cultural heritage content with multiple access point.

From the users' viewpoint it doesn't matter what type of material it is, which institution made it available and where the borders of the single document are (if so). This single text is searchable from multiple sides. The borders between the different types of memory institutions (galleries, museums, libraries, archives, audio-visual institutions) are blurring. The borders between texts, documents and document types may also disappear.

As cultural heritage institutions are giving access to the same freely available content and knowledge base, greater emphasis is given to the services, and the presentation of cultural assets. Museums, archives and libraries become each other's competitors as almost every institutions are trying to manage the same information space and targeting the same audience. The reuse of documents becomes more important than simply the use. Users are expecting stimulating experiences from their local libraries, museums, and archives. This stimulating experience can be grasped via the reflection to content (reuse), to each other (different values), to the community (identity) and to each other's reflections, opinions. Though an online environment holds great possibilities to foster reflections, the library as a physical space can also be the centre of meetings, and the strengthening of local communities.

New services have emerged in public and university libraries. The so called 'labs' are aiming on the one hand to ensure access to infrastructure that supports learning and on the other to engage students both with the learners community and the institution. Several examples could be mentioned from Scandinavian public libraries in which users should convince the library management that their projects have an impact on the served community and therefore be worth to support. In these cases users become eligible to use certain technical devices, spaces, knowledge base of the library that are not always available for an ordinary user. These 'open' projects have the potential to extend the focus of research with new visions, skills and competencies.

In the next section I present some examples which I consider relevant in this context and which represent the new possible roles of public libraries in particular and memory institutions in general.

Services

Europeana serves as the top level of digitisation efforts, where the European digitised cultural heritage content is aggregated and presented on one single website. It gives great possibilities to comparative methods, to transnational approaches and to develop understanding between nations. Europeana is in the forefront in defining new trendy services on a European level, therefore their new strategy and how it defines the target audience are worth to look at. (Europeana Foundation 2014)

Europeana basically aims to serve three communities: users, re-users and professionals. The latter is the least important in our context. Professionals play a crucial role in digitisation of the content and therefore require professional support, and in some fields harmonisation of efforts, or campaigns on different domains. Users are those, who are directly consuming the content for their thesis, for entertainment or simply because of being interested to a certain topic. A huge part of the use of digital cultural heritage is for educational purposes, therefore the needs of learners should be taken into account when designing online services. The most interesting community from our viewpoint is of the re-users'. A basically new sector called creative industry has a continuously growing importance within the economy. The re-users can turn digital cultural heritage to economic growth, by creating value added services using digitised, freely available, reusable (free of legal restrictions) material.

The major directions of re-user services are research, education and tourism. As cultural tourism is one of the most important sector in European economy creative industries can generate the most direct income via services in this field. Research and education are more obvious as traditional use of cultural heritage content, less evident regarding economic

benefit. The re-user services can serve as a telling argument for spending huge amounts for digitisation and for maintaining expensive memory institutions from the tax-payers' money.

Around Europeana several re-user services can be found that aims to make cultural heritage more interesting and easier to take in. Some of them was designed by libraries, others by other heritage institutions, while there are examples from the private sector as well.

Rethinking history

There are a number of great projects targeting a common understanding of the past. One of the most popular of them is the ***Europeana 1914-1918*** which is coordinated by the Europeana Foundation and made the common European digital collection well known for a very wide audience all over the World. The collection compiled by this project consists of three main elements, which represents three different relevant approaches to history.

Firstly individuals have the possibility to upload their personal documents, untold stories, digitised items. Collection days were organised in different European cities where locals could bring their own memories, photographs, analogue materials, which were digitised or scanned. Huge amounts of new original documents were collected this way.

Secondly Europeana launched Europeana Collections 1914-1918. Eight countries' ten leading libraries formed a consortium to digitise and make available 425.000 items from their own collection related to the 'Great War' and considered relevant. From books, newspapers, pamphlets and other textual documents to pictures, medals and coins significant amount of content was made available from these institutions contributing to the greater common understanding of this dark period of Europe's history. (<http://www.europeana-collections-1914-1918.eu/>)

Thirdly under the framework of European Film Gateway 1914 701 hours of audio-visual material (newsreels, documentaries, propaganda and anti-war films) and 6100 film-related documents (also from or about the Great War was digitised. Within this part of the project all together 740 hours of films were published through the European Film Gateway. A virtual Exhibition was also created from the selected digitised items. <http://project.efg1914.eu/>

According to Europeana website "the material highlights the importance of WWI for a common European identity and is reflective of the different experiences of individuals and groups on all sides of the conflict including different ethnic, linguistic, political, social and religious communities and those opposed to the war." (<http://pro.europeana.eu/web/europeana-collections-1914-1918>)

Historiana Your Portal to the Past (<http://historiana.eu>) tool offers a possibility for learners to explore some moments of European history of crucial importance based on original historical sources. It doesn't provide learner with a comprehensive story of Europe, but aims to function as a supplementary portal to the national history textbooks. The portal's goal is to present the multiple approaches of the historical facts provided by the different nations of Europe. It is a way to develop cross-border understanding between nations and a common European identity.

The contributors are educators and historians more than 30 countries from Europe, but professionals from other parts of the World (Asia, Middle East, Africa, North America) are also actively involved as our continent has many historic ties to the neighbouring territories. The different countries' national teacher's associations are contributing with the development of educational material which are assessed by research institutes. Memory institutions are providing the cultural heritage content and ensure their accessibility to various user groups and communities. The most important contributors are the users who can use, evaluate and comment all the content and represent all the different approaches to history that are present all over Europe by expressing various values, emotions, and beliefs.

According to the portal “Historiana promotes the acquisition of cross-border historical knowledge and the development of critical thinking, digital and other transversal competences important for preparing a young generation for active participation as citizens of the 21st Century.” (<http://historiana.eu/about/about-home>) The reflections to others’ opinion is the real added value in this project.

Certamen Europeana was an ideal example of the idea of learning by doing in a funny way. Secondary school students had to create texts on the history of Spain using Europeana content, and a committee evaluated the projects. Several application arrived of which two examples: a flight over Madrid in the 17th century and a report on the murder that started the First World War. The projects required detailed search on the Europeana website whilst students could gain experience on how interesting and exciting was digging into the past and using original sources.

The website of Certamen Europeana is not available any more, but the project showed up how to involve secondary school students, how to entertain and engage them with digitised cultural heritage content.

Building identity

Râpeanu (2009) reported about a Romanian initiative that represents a great approach to forming communities, stimulating meetings and reflections between different people and values based on the libraries’ knowledge base. Under the framework of Community Participation Contest several projects were launched in the Romanian library sector with the general aim of identifying and addressing community specific needs with innovative and creative approaches. The projects also aimed to provide other institutions with new inspiration that could be resulted in new services in the local communities.

The CLIO Project (Center for Promoting Local Culture and Traditions of Jurilovca) was one of these initiatives that targeted the preservation and revival of the Lipovan traditions in the village of Jurilovca. The settlement located in the Danube Delta is mainly inhabited by Russian speaking Lipovan minority, the descendents of the founders fleeing persecution for opposing Russian Church Reforms in the 18th century. The community being very proud of their traditions, preserved their roots, maintained their religious, linguistic and cultural identity.

The CLIO project was initiated by the local public library as a response to the Community Participation Contest call. The two main coordinators of the project, the librarian and a history professor, invited the formal and informal leaders of the local community, teachers and students from the local school to take steps toward the revitalization and preservation of Lipovan traditions by creating cultural bridges between residents and to the outside world.

The older inhabitants retold oral tradition, folklore to the young students who digitally recorded them and made available on a newly established website dedicated to the Jurilovca traditions (www.bibliotecajurilovca.ro). On the website one can find old books, published and handwritten historical sources (articles, studies, papers, notes, travel photographs, hand-document, edgenotes); manifestations of the community; documents about trades (fishing, needlecraft), religious traditions and art (icons), family events (wedding traditions); audio recordings of folklore (tales) and some photos on the community and the project.

The project supported the interaction between the older and the younger generation, between Lipovans and newcomers in the community, and what was even a greater achievement, boosted the local identity in a global context. (Râpeanu 2009) The project team planned to continue the upload of content to the website later on, though no major changes, significant additions have occurred since it was first made publicly available.

Anyway there are some unquestionable results. Jurilovca stepped out to a global stage that strengthened the local identity and made people proud of their traditions. Residents became aware of their local values. The project brought new friends and followers of the library. The

leaders of the community acknowledged the achievements of the institution and strengthened its position on a local level. The older people got to know the younger generation, and vice versa, reducing prejudice against each other. The whole project is a learning process in which the knowledge base of the community is growing, social competencies are developed and the communities' identity is built.

Learning by doing in the field of art

The Van Go Yourself project (<http://vangoyourself.com/>) is a great representation of the changing way of consuming art. It engages users by allowing them to recreate a painting with friends, colleagues, family members, which is then twinned with digital copy of the original and shared on the vangoyourself site and social media. The user first picks one item published on the website. These are preselected by the managers' of the service, but certainly users may also suggest masterpieces to be 'vangoed'. The next step is to recreate the masterpiece. The service gives support to select an item that fits to the purpose from 'Easy to recreate' to a 'Challenge to a master' regarding the different levels, but it is also important how many people want to take part in this game, so one can also select paintings using criteria such as '1 person', '2 people', '3 people'. Other tags can also be used. The last step is to exhibit and share your rethought masterpiece with the world.

The recreated artworks – especially those which are not only recreate but reinterpret items – galvanize life into the old masterpieces. New interpretations are stimulating new thoughts, interact with and enrich the original. The learner has to study the details of the selected artwork, grasp the most important features, and create a new message based on the original to be able to reproduce something similar.

The service represents how the distant learner can actively be engaged in consuming art in a different, funny and trendy way. The learner (or user, consumer, player) should use both the online and the physical spaces to create his or her own masterpiece. The online game supports real life meetings, joint thinking around art and culture, while a global audience benefits from the ideas generated on a local level. Recreating the classic scenes is fun on the one hand, on the other user can become a co-creator who actively participates in generating value. Meetings occur on different levels: between different users, between user and pieces of art, between the original and the reproduction, and between values represented by the ones mentioned above.

Discussion and conclusion

All of the above mentioned examples have some common features that define the main requirements toward the roles of public libraries in the near future in the field of lifelong learning.

The services should actively engage the users and get them to participate, open his or her mind and add value to the existing content. This added value can originate from the users' personal memories, documents or other material (Europeana 1914-1918, Bibliotheca Jurilovca), from their opinion (Historiana) or imagination (Certamen Europeana). The user can add value by creating a new, rethought masterpiece (Van Go Yourself) or by any other way of reflection.

The services are originally providing the users with an exciting way of access the cultural heritage material or give an opportunity to extend the knowledge base lying in the background. This is a kind of self-representation, a great possibility to express your personal thoughts, values or beliefs and – on the other side – also a potential to be exposed to the different ideas expressed by others. The permanent reflection strengthens users' and communities' identity providing answers for the question who I am, who we are in the society in compare with others.

Public libraries' should function as a low intensive meeting place that stimulate encounters and meetings whilst users can be exposed to different ideas, values, and people who represent them. The cultural heritage sector in general and public libraries in particular gave access to cultural heritage content. Now it much more turned into functioning as a place for reflections in which the winner of the game can serve the users in the most impulsive way.

However this article deal with the role of public libraries some general comparisons can be drawn with academic, research and school libraries as well. On the one hand original sources of the digitised cultural heritage material are mainly stored in national, academic and research libraries on the other, the access point for the library system is usually the local public library. In a virtual environment users usually perceive one single interlinked digital text regardless of the original source of the pieces of information. Museums, archives, public and another types of libraries are contributing to this single digital text via different types of documents and also providing users with access points to it.

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