



## Public Libraries as Catalysts for Lifelong Learning and Social Engagement

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### Abstract:

This paper reports on the results of an empirical study of public librarians' conception of how public libraries support lifelong learning, as well as the role of information literacy in relation to lifelong learning.

Lifelong learning has become essential to all people in today's information society as a result of easy and free access to information. A basic understanding of the concept is "learning throughout life, either continuously or periodically". This implies that learning is not restricted to educational institutions, but can also take place in for example the public library. Public libraries thus may play an important role in supporting the learning process not the least because lifelong learning is characterised by the inclusion of informal elements of learning, flexible learning opportunities, and a shift towards self-directed learning. This self-directed learning promotes active citizenship and employability, thereby enabling people to participate in all spheres of social, political and economic life.

Therefore, how do the public librarians conceive the learning responsibility and their own role in supporting lifelong learning? Furthermore, how do public librarians become better at teaching? The study reports on data from 12 interviews of purposely selected public librarians and a large-scale e-mail survey (questionnaire). The e-mail survey contained 28 questions and was sent to all staff members in public libraries in Denmark, and resulted in 986 responses.

The results show that the public librarians consider the public library to be an important place for learning. The results also show how the public librarians find that they could become better at teaching and facilitating learning. This could in turn affect the sharing of knowledge and collaboration.



## Introduction

This paper reports on a study of public librarians' perception of the public library's role in lifelong learning. In this study, we identify how they perceive learning and user education in the public library, and which competencies the public librarians should have to support learning. The study is motivated by a need for a deeper understanding of librarians' perception of the role of the public library and information literacy education in relation to learning. This knowledge is essential for public librarians, because establishing a common understanding of the importance of public libraries in lifelong learning is the foundation to improve and adapt information literacy education to users' needs. Consequently, information literacy education courses should be based on a theoretical and empirical basis, which enables public librarians (acting as mediators) "to base practice on general principles rather than depending solely on hunches and intuition" (Kuhlthau, 2004; p.xv). Thus the aim of this paper is to present empirical results of users' perceptions of the public library as a place for learning, and on this basis to motivate a discussion of how users perceive public libraries role in learning, user education, information literacy, and librarians' information competencies.

This is done via the answering of the following two research questions:

1. How do public librarians experience the public library's role as a place for learning?
2. How do public librarians become better at teaching or facilitating learning?

## Literature review

The theoretical point of departure of the paper is based on a constructivist view of learning. As such the conceptual framework can be found in the works of, e.g., Belkin, Oddy and Brooks (1982), Bates (1986), Dervin and Nilan (1986) and Kuhlthau (2004). Especially Kuhlthau is an exponent of the constructivist process theory for library and information services that emphasizes the information search process as an essential component of learning. In this understanding of the learning process the user passes through a number of phases, in which the public librarian as adviser, tutor or counsellor in the information search process may be needed (Kuhlthau, 2004). Therefore, with a focus on information search processes the ability to locate, manage, and use information, also labelled "information literacy", has become important in relation to "...decision-making; problem-solving; independent learning; continuing professional development;



and research” as reported by Bruce (1998: 25). There has been conducted a substantial amount of research with a focus on information literacy since the mid-1970s (e.g., Zurkowski (1974); Horton (1983); Breivik and Gee (1989); Bruce (1997); Rader (2003); Hall (2010)). The earliest research concentrated on defining the concept and arguing for the importance of information literacy in the information society. Horton (1983) discusses the distinction between computer literacy and information literacy, which leads to the modern perceptions of information literacy. He finds that computer literacy has to do with increasing the understanding of what the technology can and cannot do (Horton, 1983: 14). In practice, there is a gradual increase in access to more and more information, because of the development in technology, IR-systems, and library networks. But, “[t-]here is a “literacy gap” between knowing and not knowing what is available and how to access it” (Horton, 1983: 16). Horton explains how “[i-]Information literacy, then, as opposed to computer literacy, means raising the level of awareness of individuals to the knowledge explosion, and how machine-aided handling systems can help identify, access, and obtain data, documents and literature needed for problem-solving and decision-making” (Horton, 1983:16). Computer literacy in Horton’s understanding is a prerequisite for information literacy, but it is not enough to know about and be able to use computers. It is the use of the information that can increase the individuals’ productivity. Breivik and Gee (1989) discusses the role of the (academic) librarian in teaching and learning processes. Their focus is on collaboration between faculty and librarians and the awareness of IL as tool for lifelong learning. The most widely accepted definition of the information literate person stems from the American Library Association (ALA) that states that: “To be information literate, a person must be able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information” (ALA, 1989). This definition further makes a connection between information literacy and learning. “Ultimately, information literate people are those who have learned how to learn. They know how to learn because they know how knowledge is organized, how to find information and how to use information in such a way that others can learn from them. They are people prepared for lifelong learning, because they can always find the information needed for any task or decision at hand” (ALA, 1989). The ALA definition has been further extended by a number of researchers (e.g., Doyle (1992); Johnston and Webber (2003)). Doyle (1993) specifically adds critical thinking to the definition. Johnston and Webber (2003) further add the element of ethical use of information to the definition. This is very important in a time where plagiarism is of concern as it has never been easier, and where the social responsibility in communicating information has never been more important. In this way Johnston and Webber (2003) has helped to expand the definition, and make the definition more clear at a general level within LIS.



Furthermore, using phenomenographic research methodology Bruce (1997) adds to prior research by raising the awareness about people having different conceptions and approaches to information literacy in different contexts. This line of thinking has been developed further and recent research has shown that information literacy is a fluid or fluctuant concept, which means that it is continually developing and is shaped by personal experience and changes in an information rich society. Martin (2013) analyses four selected standards for information literacy and shows that these standards model their approach to be a flexible, holistic, and integral part of the learning experience. However these standards are directed toward the academic and school library community, where information literacy is embedded into the learning process. Martin specifically finds that information literacy cannot be attained through brief, one-time experiences, but need lifelong and continuous refinement by becoming part of the learning experience (Martin, 2013: 6).

We have studied how learning is perceived and provided in the public library. This was done partly through interviews and partly through an e-mail survey. We describe the two data collection methods in further details in the following two sub-sections.

### *Interviews*

A semi-structured interview guide was designed for data collection. Interviewees were recruited purposively based on their involvement in information literacy instruction or because of their involvement in the development of the public library as learning places. The interviewees worked in different public libraries and had different functions. They were recruited to ensure that as many viewpoints as possible was adequately represented within this group. This is inspired by the phenomenographic approach. Phenomenography is a qualitative and empirically based research approach (e.g., Marton, 1986). Marton (1986, p.31) describes the phenomenographic research methodology as “...a research method adapted for mapping the qualitatively different ways in which people experience, conceptualise, perceive, and understand various aspects of, and phenomena in, the world around them”. As a result the participants were eight librarians and three library managers. Following the phenomenographic methodology in the data analysis process, the collected data forms the basis of the researcher’s constructs of a limited number of categories depicting the perceptions of the concepts in question. The categories of description are useful to us in that they help to understand the different ways public librarians and library managers understand phenomena and by gaining insight into the users’ perceptions be able to propose how public librarians can act accordingly in the actual situation. Furthermore it has helped in the design of our large scale survey described below.

### *Survey*



The second part of our study is based on an Internet survey. The survey was a self-administered, structured on-line questionnaire. According to Velhovar and Manfreda (2008) self-administration is beneficial for both researchers and respondents for a number of reasons. Most important is that respondents can complete a questionnaire at their own time, place, and pace. In addition, the absence of an interviewer reduces the cost of research. The use of computer technology also reduces time, cost, and errors arising from transcription from paper questionnaires.

Further, the data is readily available for analysis as soon as the questionnaire has been completed.

The questionnaire consisted of 28 questions and was a combination of both qualitative and quantitative questions. Some of these questions inquired into related aspects of learning and information literacy, which we will not report in this paper due to the limited space. The questionnaire was distributed to 96 public libraries

which basically constitutes the entire population of 98 public libraries in Denmark. E-mail addresses were not available for the remaining two. Nearly all public libraries responded often with replies from several employees. A total of 740 questionnaires have been answered. The answers are in the form of either single words or short sentences. We have read and analyzed the interview and questionnaire answers line by line and have made broad categories, which bring together answers that resemble each other. The categorization of answers represents the respondents' coherent understanding of information literacy and learning.

## Results

The objective of this section is to present, discuss, and put into perspective the results of our empirical study. In that way we aim to answer our two research questions.

First we present our results in relation to how the public librarians and library managers experience the public library's role as a place for learning. This is based solely on data from the interviews. Then we show how public librarians in their own opinion can become better at teaching or facilitating learning.

Throughout the sub-sections we have included excerpts from the transcribed interviews and the survey to exemplify the different aspects attributed to each category of description.

### *How do public librarians experience the public library's role as a place for learning?*

The objective of answering the first research question is to contribute to an understanding and awareness of the public library as a place for learning from the public librarians' and library managers' perspective.

In respect to this question we have identified three individual categories of



descriptions which are: an information resource center, a place for independent learning, and a place for support and guidance. These are described in detail below.

### ***An information resource center***

The “information resource center” conception of the public library as learning place emphasize the public library as a place for discovering of new sources, and seeking and locating information in various sources both print and electronic. The role of the public library is to provide access to information as a foundation for learning. This can be done either through seeking and selecting information for the users using the multitude of search tools available. In this conception knowledge of databases and Internet search tools are seen as important for the public librarians. As one interviewee says: “The greatest strength is that we have or can find the knowledge or information that can generate learning”. This point to an awareness that information is a core component in relation to learning, which corresponds well to e.g., Kuhlthaus (2004) Information Search Process Model.

### ***A place for independent learning***

The respondents also think of the public library as a place for learning with an understanding of “a place for independent learning”, which is different from learning in school or other educational settings. The public library in this conception is conceived as a place for learning and education, but less as for tuition and teaching, One interviewee explains: “...public library as providing lifelong learning no matter who you are and where you are in life”. Or as another expresses it: “We are a free, open, and accessible place where you come from inclination and not under

There is collaboration with some formal educational institutions, but the main focus is on the public library as a physical place which is open for all, provide for independent and informal learning, and support lifelong learning in a pleasant environment. None of the respondents mention efforts to offer learning through the digital library. It is assumed that learning takes place in interaction between physical place; the information; and during the interaction with information systems.

In this understanding we also find a strong focus on the public library’s role as guarantee for democracy and protector against the digital divide.

### ***A place for support and guidance***

The public librarians see themselves as mediators more than as teachers. They are the link between information resources and search tools and the users’ informal learning. Information technology plays an important role in support and guidance of the users, since there is an awareness of a digital divide in society and the public library has a responsibility to help those who have problems with technology. Guidance is also needed because of the vast number of different sources for information available. Accessibility to information is no longer the



primary function of the public library. But guiding the users to the right information is. As one interviewee states: "...we have been a place for learning in the traditional library, however there is no doubt that information technology changes this in many ways. It changes in the way that as a librarian you can no longer only make (information) accessible, but also has to mediate, guide and teach".

**TABLE 1. QUALIFIED IN FACILITATING LEARNING**

	Do you feel professionally qualified to teach and facilitate learning	Do you feel pedagogically qualified to teach and facilitate learning
<b>Yes</b>	462	<b>333</b>
<b>No</b>	286	<b>412</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>748</b>	<b>745</b>

*How do public librarians become better at teaching or facilitating learning*

From the online questionnaire survey we see how there is a great insecurity amongst the library staff respondents regarding teaching and facilitating learning as depicted in Table 1.

**TABLE 2. HOW TO BECOME A BETTER TEACHER OR FACILITATOR OF LEARNING**

	HOW TO BECOME BETTER AT TEACHING	
Supplementary pedagogical education / competencies	135	<b>40.0%</b>
More practice and routine in teaching	18	<b>5.0%</b>
Personal attitude toward teaching	12	<b>3.5%</b>
Do not teach	169	<b>50.5%</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>334</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

professionally, however a majority feel that they lack pedagogical competencies. This is also reflected in the answers to the question regarding which competencies they lack to be a good teacher as can be seen in Table 2.

As can be seen not all respondent of the survey have answered this question. In addition there are many who do not teach at all at least not in their own understanding and in the responses. There are three dominant answers to this question. The most recurring answer from the respondents is that they need more pedagogical competencies preferably through formal education. The second most



frequent answer is that they need more practice and routine in teaching and facilitating learning. Thirdly, they say that their own personal attitude towards teaching influences teaching and facilitating learning. This is an interesting category, and the answers point toward two distinct things. Either respondents answer that they do not want to teach or they answer that they cannot. Those who answer that they do not want to teach argue that they are librarians and not teachers. Those who answer that they cannot teach argue that they are either too impatient or too nervous to teach. A number of respondents state, that they do not want this kind of work as librarians.

**TABLE 3. SUPPLEMENTARY EDUCATION**

Supplementary education to become better at teaching and facilitating learning		
Yes	165	22.3%
No, but have considered	120	16.2%
No	456	61.5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>741</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Table 3 displays how many of the respondents who have taken, have considered taking, or have not taken any supplementary education to become better at teaching or facilitating learning. As can be seen, only a minority (22.3%) have taken supplementary education. However, numerous answers indicate that supplementary education actually is demanded. We can only guess why there is so few, who has taken supplementary education, but maybe the public libraries funding is too limited. Though a majority of respondents would like to have further education then only a minority actually have pursued and in fact have achieved supplementary education. This calls for more focus on supplementary education from the management in public libraries.

## Conclusion

This study provided an opportunity to learn about how learning is perceived in Danish public libraries, and how public librarians seek to develop their competencies in supporting learning. Our first research question aimed at finding out how the concept of learning in the public library is perceived. Our study identifies three categories of description: an information resource center, a place for independent learning, and a place for support and guidance. Together the three categories place the public library in an important spot in regard to lifelong learning. The first category identifies the public libraries' *information resources* as important for learning. The second category finds that the public library as a physical place supports all kind of *self-directed learning* both in relation to formal





and informal learning. The third and last category identifies the importance of *public librarians' ability to facilitate learning* through the use of the information systems that are available in the library. As such, learning in the public library revolves around the use of information resources and helping the users to be able to use the information in a critical way. Hence, everything speaks for a focus on supporting learning through information literacy. Our second research question aimed at identifying how public librarians could become better at teaching. Only a very slight minority find that teaching should not be part of their job. But their arguments should none the less be taken seriously.

However, all in all the responses to this question show that a majority of public librarians would like to improve their pedagogical competencies. This is clearly the best way to become better at teaching. As pedagogical competencies is not part of the librarians curriculum, some public librarians have already taken supplementary education and others consider it. Still many are hesitating due to lack of funding or lack of time. Hence, it is relevant to find further resources for supplementary education or focus more on pedagogy in the education of librarians if public librarians should become better teachers.

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