

RESPONSE

The role of public libraries in social justice

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John Vincent coordinates The Network, formed in May 1999 as a legacy of a project funded by the Library and Information Commission, Public Library Policy and Social Exclusion (see Muddiman, 2000). The Network's mission is 'to assist the cultural sector, including libraries, museums, archives and galleries, heritage and other organisations, to work towards social justice'.

Philip Pullman's terrific paper sets out really clearly what is at risk when public libraries are closed – or 'handed over' to the community – and outlines some of the background to this. In this response, I would like to focus on one of the hidden roles of the public library. As in many other current debates, the arguments about the role of the public library have been over-simplified, which has meant that the enormous range of different work libraries undertake has been obscured. The result is a simplistic and reductive emphasis on book-lending (which, at the very least, ignores the wide range of other formats that libraries carry) and on visits to the library. For example, a recent blog posting sums this up well (Good Library Blog, 2011):

The minister for libraries has said that the government won't set standards for the public library service, and despite years of being told that they should, councils haven't set standards either. So here are some that could and should be used

- (1) Every library should have more books available than it did this time last year
- (2) Every library should be open longer hours than it was last year
- (3) Every library should be clean, with its windows washed and its light fittings working
- (4) Every public computer in a library should work properly
- (5) Every library should provide some private space for quiet study

Performance against these should be measured and shown not only on the library notice board but on a national website.

If we adopted these standards and stuck to them, I guarantee the public library service would improve out of recognition; people would use it more, and no one would want to close a library without providing a better one nearby. In just 5 years we would have a library service that would be the envy of the world. I know that libraries do a lot more than what is highlighted in this list – and how important those other things are –

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but if we measure and improve the core and basic service, there is no limit to the value that libraries can bring.

Obviously, these “standards” could well be beneficial, but the overall impression is of static, buildings-based provision that completely omits any kind of community focus. What this particularly ignores is the huge role that public libraries play in contributing towards social justice – much of which is carried out in the community, not in library buildings. It is this role on which this brief response will focus (see Pateman and Vincent, 2010).

In broad terms, ‘Social Justice is about every one of us having the chances and opportunities to make the most of our lives and use our talents to the full’ (Curran, 2002). For libraries, it must involve embracing equality and diversity; focusing on a needs-based service and targeting resources towards those who need them most; knowing and understanding the components of the local community; having an active, collaborative role in empathising and working in partnership with the local community; and fully engaging the community, moving as far as possible towards co-production of service provision.

Work in at least the first three of these areas has gone on for as long as public libraries have existed, but is often either overlooked or downplayed in favour of “number-crunching” (the number of visits or issues, the number of people attending events, etc.). This is not to downplay the importance of value for money and cost effectiveness, but it is often – as Philip Pullman shows in his paper – the intangible, more complex benefits that people remember about a service. The real danger of the numbers approach is that provision with, and for, particularly needy and vulnerable people – which can often involve small numbers of individuals and relatively few loans of library material – is pushed to one side as library services try to attract more and more people through their doors. For example, one area of library work that is frequently very successful is the development of reading skills and literacy of children in local authority care, yet the numbers in any one local authority area may be tiny, and, because of the previous experiences of the young people, it may be a struggle at first to get them to read/borrow; however, we know that the eventual benefits may be life-changing and lifelong.

Libraries also offer support, information and a link to the wider community for other groups who are marginalised – refugees and asylum-seekers, for example. Libraries (and mobile libraries) are often situated at the heart of communities. As well as being a physical presence, they play an important role in developing a literate community, supporting reading, financial literacy, IT literacy – all of which are vital for the economic development of the UK. The role of libraries in providing information to allow citizens to make informed choices should not be underestimated. Nor should the role that reading and learning play in the wellbeing of the nation.

The more libraries are seen as self-service material-delivery points, the less opportunity there will be for this sort of work to continue and flourish. As contact between library staff and the community dwindles, so these opportunities fade too. As Philip Pullman so clearly says, the answer does not lie with community/volunteer-run libraries. Volunteers will have links with the community (or parts of it!), but they will not necessarily have the skills, knowledge or experience to forge and maintain the kinds of community links outlined above.

Because of the simplistic way in which public libraries are viewed at the moment, the outlook for many libraries, their communities and their staff is grim.

But it is worth remembering the outstanding work that libraries have undertaken over the last few years. Such work is, however, at great risk from the forces that Philip Pullman identifies. Public libraries and social justice go together; we must continue to fight for the community-based role and the powerful part that libraries can play in it.

References

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