How can public libraries support learning?

There is a limit to how far libraries are able to take their role as learning providers, but by working closely with other professionals and drawing on their skills and knowledge, they may discover ways to expand their role, writes Sarah McNicol.

Learning in libraries is currently high on the political agenda, with Framework for the Future, the recent strategy document produced by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), setting out a wide role for libraries in relation to learning. Resource (the Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries) has also actively sought to put libraries and learning on the agenda through the publication of Inspiring Learning for All, while Better Public Libraries, jointly published by Resource and the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE), highlights how innovation is key to bringing libraries into the 21st Century.

As libraries move outside their comfort zone and extend their services to learners, there are bound to be difficulties to overcome. Many staff lack the training, confidence and time to support learners fully. Extending the role of libraries is likely to require support from those with greater experience and expertise in supporting learners at all stages of the learning process. A research project recently carried out by the Centre for Information Research (CIRTR), at the University of Central England, demonstrates that there are a variety of ways in which this might be achieved, for example, co-locating libraries with other forms of learning provision; employing specialist staff; and providing staff training in these areas.

This research was prompted by the fact that most of the projects investigating learning and public libraries have focused on the outcomes and impacts of learning experiences. There has been less interest in examining in detail how libraries support learners specifically in relation to each stage of the learning process, from engagement, through resource provision to reflection and evaluation.

What happens in practice?

Staff with responsibility for learning in 10 English library authorities were interviewed and case study libraries in Sunderland and Birmingham were visited. From this, it was clear that, in addition to activities which were formally reported in Annual Library Plans and other documentation, much is done on an informal basis by individual library staff which often goes unrecognised and unreported.

One of the main advantages libraries have in comparison to other learning providers is their role in linking formal and informal learning and in helping to encourage people who might, initially, be reluctant to approach more formal educational institutions. However, there was little agreement about what the precise role of the library should be and librarians acknowledged that a learner's experience is likely to differ considerably depending on the area they live in, the library they use and the members of staff they encounter.

Resource provision was identified as the activity libraries currently perform most successfully. It is where they have the greatest expertise and experience and where staff at all levels have the greatest confidence and skills. However, the methods of providing learning resources in libraries are constantly changing. For example, the expanding role of ICT is seen as a way to offer access to a greater variety of resources and also as a way of engaging less motivated learners. In general, library staff felt that engaging learners, in particular those who are 'harder to reach', was extremely important and something which was likely to become even more crucial in the future.

Most staff believed that there was a limit to how far libraries were able to take their role as learning providers; at some point, learners have to be referred to other organisations, such as adult education services and colleges. Generally, libraries have least confidence in supporting the more internalised stages of learning: reflection, generalisation and evaluation. Reflection needs to be better understood and developed; it does occur informally in libraries, but much depends on the skills and confidence of individual members of staff. Generalising and implementing what has been learned is, perhaps, the most problematic stage of the learning process for libraries to support as it often takes place outside the library. Some staff did not even think this activity had any relevance for libraries. However, implementing learning can be the most important, yet also the most difficult stage of the learning process for many learners, especially those who are less experienced, and may be something with which they required extra support.

It was interesting to note that, when they were asked about evaluating learning, library staff tended to focus on formal evaluation designed to measure the library's impact. However, learners may also evaluate their own experience informally, reflecting on what they have learned to determine how they might progress. Again, this is an activity with which less experienced learners in particular may require additional support.

The way forward

Libraries need to do more to support learners by providing help and guidance as well as access to resources. However, they currently appear to be most comfortable with issues concerned with materials: environment, publicity, books, ICT and so forth, rather than people and skills. Processes such as reflection and learner evaluation are obviously more difficult to quantify and measure than the more evident activities of resource provision and engaging learners, the areas where libraries' efforts have traditionally been focused. There is undoubtedly a limit to how far libraries are able to take their role as learning providers, but by working closely with other professionals and drawing on their skills and knowledge, they may discover ways to expand their role.

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