

Abstract Submission Form

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Submission Details

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| Title of Abstract | Demonstrating the impact of the public library on citizenship development in the UK: focus group findings |
| Type of Submission (please select ONE): | Full Paper | \* |
| Short Paper |  |
| Round Table Discussion |  |
| Themes (please select all that apply): | Information Literacies |  |
| Information Behaviour  | \* |
| Impact | \* |
| Information as agent of change |  |
| Methodological Paper  | \* |
| Abstract (Please check Call for Papers for requirements): | **Introduction**This paper presents the findings of a research project that seeks to understand how public libraries operate and demonstrate value and social impact. The research considers how the multi-functionality and social impact of public libraries can be measured within a values framework, focusing on citizenship development. The focus of the paper is the findings from sixteen focus groups conducted with UK public library users during 2015 and 2016.**Literature review**Many public library commentators write about public libraries as being at the centre of their society. Brophy suggests that “libraries are at the heart of social systems; they exist to serve the needs of people, to help them live, learn and develop and to act as part of the social glue which holds communities together” (Brophy, 2006, p. 3). In an earlier study Brophy (2001) examines what constitutes a contemporary library service and argues that ‘libraries provide a very wide variety of activities and services for people in all walks of life’ and that the key concepts of this activity are “education, information storage and retrieval, and the transmission of knowledge.” (Brophy, 2001, p. 14). Similarly, Totterdell (2005) discusses the contemporary role of the library in society and suggests that the traditional public library in the UK has been based on four keystones: culture, education, leisure and recreation, and information. This suggests a multi-functional role for the public library spanning across different types of community provision. The idea of public libraries having this variety of societal roles means that they have different types of impact and value depending upon who is using them and for what purpose. In effect, it gives public libraries a greater outreach than would be possible if they fulfilled only one of the functions identified. These commentaries discuss the contemporary public library as a social entity with values around knowledge provision and discovery, support and assistance and accessibility. This particular theme suggests that in their multi-functional and societal roles, public libraries can benefit and advantage their users.The measurement of library performance to demonstrate value and impact, has become a significant sub-discipline of library and information services management. Understanding the library user, their demands and expectations is essential for identifying success criteria and impact indicators (Hernon & Altman, 2010, p. 10). Markless and Streatfield (2006) illustrate how meaningful success criteria need to be set around outcomes of library usage and that libraries need to demonstrate beneficial ‘outcomes’ to their users. Examples of such outcomes could be around: knowledge gained by users; higher information literacy competencies; higher academic or professional success; social inclusion; or, an increase in individual wellbeing (Poll & Payne, 2006, p. 550). Similarly, social impact is frequently associated with public library services and the impact that they have on their communities and constituents (Kerslake & Kinnel, 1997, p.12).Being able to demonstrate the impact and value of public libraries is fundamental to public libraries achieving their mission. For example, the Scottish Libraries and Information Council (SLIC) has developed a framework called *How Good is Our Public Library Service* which is intended to help demonstrate the impact libraries have on communities (SLIC, 2015). Such activity is now regarded essential at national levels and there is an increasing body of research and literature, which discusses how important it is to be able to analyse public library outcomes and the larger social role that they play on a national level. For example, Vakkari et al (2015) compare the perceived benefits of public library usage across five culturally different countries (Finland, Norway, the Netherlands, South Korea and the USA), and in doing so discuss the differences in societal outcomes for the public library services in each of these countries, as being determined by the individual nations’ social requirements from their library services. Another particular case study that stands out is that of Denmark, where a national initiative to introduce a portfolio of ‘citizen service’ was rolled out across the entire Danish public library system as part of its national library strategy (Pors, 2010).The value of the public library service and the impact that it has on the citizenry that uses it can usefully be measured and demonstrated through identifying such social wellbeing and citizenship development outcomes and determining whether active usage of the public library services has afforded these. Therefore, there are two broad research questions to come from the literature:•To what extent is an individual’s position advantaged or disadvantaged as a result of using public libraries?•What is the impact of using a public library service on individual and community citizenship?**Methods**A longitudinal focus group approach has been adopted in this study in order to obtain relevant data for analysis. Eight UK local authorities were approached to take part in the study in order for the research to carried out within a sample of representative UK public libraries. Focus groups, with up to ten participants in each, were convened and carried out during 2015-16 as the first phase of the empirical study. Participants discussed and shared their experiences of using public library services and reflected upon how their library usage had affected them.A fundamental part of the methodology is its longitudinal approach. Because of the nature of the themes being discussed, it is desirable to reconvene each focus group, with the same participants at set intervals during the period of empirical research. This enables participants to reflect back on their most recent library usage and to discuss its impact and value in a current and personal context. Reconvening focus groups in which the participants are familiar with each other, also allows for a deeper and more open discussion, which in turn enables deeper and richer data to be obtained. The themes discussed during the first round of focus groups were around general library usage including:* Attitudes and feelings towards public libraries
* The demand for and use of knowledge and information
* Who are libraries for and what is their role in society
* What is meant by the term citizenship and how does the library contribute to this

The questions posed during the first round of focus groups were designed to capture the immediate thoughts of library users and their historic experience of using libraries. A second round of focus groups (phase two) was completed during 2016 in which participants were asked to discuss and reflect specifically on their personal development and involvement in their communities during the previous eight months (the period of time in between focus groups), and whether any of this had been facilitated through their library use. These themes and the questions used were largely informed by the themes identified during the first round of focus group and were intended to generate more reflection and to focus in on both individual and community learning and development afforded through public library use. **Findings**The paper will report on and discuss the findings of the first two rounds of focus groups bringing together the themes and trends identified. One of the main themes identified is a focus on the epistemic function of libraries. The focus groups suggested that having access to knowledge and information through the library allows for individual development to take place. Libraries facilitate learning and the support given through libraries and library staff in making learning and development accessible is widely acknowledged.Another emerging theme is that print monographs are still perceived as being the main vehicle for the dissemination of knowledge and information. The participants are all library users and habitually make use of computers and digital information but discussions often turned to the importance of print and its credibility and authority when compared to electronic information. The other key theme to come from the focus group findings is how inclusive and accessible libraries allow for capital (social, human, transactional, knowledge) to be generated and exchanged in a number of ways and how through bringing people together in libraries communities are formed and subsequently take a sense of ownership of their local public libraries**Conclusion**This paper will bring together the findings and analysis of the longitudinal focus groups and will discuss some of the ways in which public libraries demonstrate value and impact on the development of individual and community citizenship.**References**Brophy, P. (2001). *The library in the twenty-first century: new services for the information age*. London: Library Association Publishing.Brophy, P. (2006). *Measuring library performance: principles and techniques*. London: Facet Publishing.Hernon, P. & Altman, E. (2010). *Assessing service quality: satisfying the expectations of library customers*. Chicago: American Library Association.Kerslake, E. & Kinnel, M. (1997). *The social impact of public libraries: a literature review*. London: British Library.Markless, S. & Streatfield, D. (2006). *Evaluating the impact of your library*. London: Facet.Poll, R. & Payne. P. (2006). “Impact measures for library and information services.” *Library Hi Tech*, 24(4), 547 – 557.Pors, N. O. (2010) Citizen services and public libraries: an analysis of a new service in Danish public libraries. *New Library World*, 111(7/8) 263-272Scottish Library and information Council (2015) *How Good Is Our Public Library Service? (HGIOPLS)* Accessed: 29th March 2017: <http://scottishlibraries.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/HGIOPLS-Landscape-WEB-2017-.pdf>Totterdell, A. (2005). *An introduction to library and information work*. Facet: London.Vakkari, P., Aabo, S., Audunson, R., Huysmans, F., Kwon, N., Oomes, M. and Sin, S-C, J. (2016) Patterns of perceived public library outcomes in five countries. *Journal of Documentation*, 72(2), 342-61 |
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