



Libraries Promoting Multimodal Literacy in an Intercultural Society

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Abstract:

IFLA's Literacy and Reading Section and Library Services to Multicultural Populations Section have decided to organize a common session in IFLA Congress in Gothenburg with the theme "Libraries Promoting Reading in a Multicultural, Multilingual Society".

The work of these sections is connected to The Glasgow Declaration on Libraries, Information Services and Intellectual Freedom, which is the framework when we are talking about the human rights, but also to Unesco's declarations like Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity and The Plurality of Literacy and its Implications for Policies and Programmes. This way of acting connects the work of the libraries in a remarkable way with the great global goals.

It is important to have great goals but we have always to connect them with the grassroots level, too. My example comes from my own library Helsinki City Library and its role as Multilingual Library since 1995. In a country like Finland with two official languages we see the strength in bilingualism. In this connection it means: preserving of one's mother tongue also helps one to learn the language of the new home country.

At the same time we can check to which direction we should develop our work. In this case my proposal is that we should not only talk about multiculturalism but also about the concept "intercultural" which highlights interaction and exchange and which is a process, not a goal. I also think that multimodal literacy, which includes text, image, music, sound and movement should be defined as the new concept of literacy in the digital era in which we live now.

IFLA's Literacy and Reading Section and Library Services to Multicultural Populations Section have decided to organize a common session in IFLA Congress in Gothenburg with the theme "Libraries Promoting Reading in a Multicultural, Multilingual Society". This is great because from the point of view of a librarian representing public libraries, like myself, these sections are dealing with the deep content of our work. They get direct to the core so to say.

Actually their work is connected to The Glasgow Declaration on Libraries, Information Services and Intellectual Freedom (1), which is the framework when we are talking about the human rights. The declaration stresses the rights on information and free access without any discrimination for any reason including race, national or ethnic origin, gender or sexual preference, age, disability, religion, or political beliefs.

As an outsider observer who has no role in any of these sections I can tell that they both are well-established in IFLA's organization. I also want to praise their impressive work. The best way to be convinced of that is to see the websites of these two sections. It is also interesting to see how both sections follow and implement some of Unesco's concrete goals. This connects the work of the libraries in a remarkable way with the great global goals.

The Multicultural Section has IFLA/Unesco Multicultural Library Manifesto with the subtitle:

The Multicultural Library – a gateway to a cultural diverse society in dialogue. (2) The manifesto has been published already in 15 languages and it defines very well that "Cultural Diversity" or "Multiculturalism" refers to the harmonious co-existence and interaction of different cultures. The closer definition of the purpose is a direct quotation from UNESCO's Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, 2001. (3)

It is also interesting to find out how The Literacy and Reading Section in 2007 started the process to change the name of the section from Reading Section to Literacy and Reading Section. This because the new name "much better reflects the interests of the section" as it was stated in the minutes of the section (9.8.2008) after IFLA administration had approved the change. (4)

This brings me again to Unesco and to the definition of literacy. According to Unesco literacy is "the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute and use printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society." (The Plurality of Literacy and its Implications for Policies and Programmes, published in 2004 by Unesco) (5)

I think we all agree that literacy is more than only the mechanical skill to create words out of letters. But not even Unesco's broad definition of literacy is enough today. The Literacy and Reading Section is well aware of that. Last year one of the presentations in IFLA in Milan was Sean Cordes' paper "Broad Horizons: The Role of the Multimodal Literacy in 21st Century Library". (6)

My quotation is from Cordes' paper: "Multimodal literacy, called a variety of terms such as visual literacy, digital literacy, media literacy, and multiliteracies, is a literacy of the screen. Modes on the computer screen include image, text movement, music, sound effects and voice quality, all of which create meaning to the student. This multimodal literacy raises the issue of what literacy is or could be, and what it means to be literate in the digital era."

The material of these two sections is really worth reading and I have learned a lot. Inspired by reading there are two aspects, however which I would like to touch in this paper.

For the first: do we really live up at the grassroots level to the great goals presented above? Do we really work according to the principles our colleagues have stated in different documents? How good we are to make the goals real?.

For the second I raise the question to which direction and why we should work when we are talking about literacy and multiculturalism. The title of my paper reveals something of my ideas.

Helsinki City Library's Multilingual Library – trust in bilingual work

We need declarations, goals and guidelines for our work but it is always interesting to see how we use them in our daily work and what kind of influence they have on our services. During this session we will hear many interesting examples of different projects. I am also happy to tell my own experiences, in other words something about the multicultural work in Helsinki City Library. (7)

That you can understand the way how we work I give you first some background information about Helsinki and Finland.

Helsinki is the capital of Finland, one of the Nordic countries in the Northern Europe. Around 5,3 million people reside in Finland and around 580 000 in Helsinki. Helsinki Region has about 1,3 million inhabitants.

Finland has two official languages, Finnish and Swedish. During the period 1809-1917 when Finland was an autonomous Grand Duchy within the Russian Empire even Russian was used in Finland. From that point of view Finland has a long tradition being multilingual.

Today the number of immigrants or people with foreign background is growing. The total number is still small, at least compared with many other countries. There are still under 200 000 people who have other languages than Finnish or Swedish as their mother tongue.

In Helsinki the situation is different. Out of the population 84 percent are Finnish-speaking, 6 percent Swedish-speaking and 10 percent have other languages as mother tongue. The biggest groups come from our neighboring countries Russia, Estonia and Sweden and the bigger other groups from Somalia, China, Thailand, Iraq, Turkey, Germany and United Kingdom.

In 1995 the Ministry of Education gave the Helsinki City Library the mandate to function as a central for multilingual library services. The library receives a special government grant for this purpose, amounting 130 000 € in 2010. The whole budget of Helsinki City Library is 35,4 million €.

The function of multilingual library is to support library services for the foreign language population in Finland, to develop co-operation with domestic and foreign partners, to develop information and advisory services, and to acquire materials for nationwide use in languages that are rare in Finland and have correspondingly small numbers of users. The main responsibility for general library services catering to the foreign population continues to rest with the municipalities.

At the moment about 9 percent of the book collection and about the same percent of the book loans are in other languages than Finnish or Swedish in Helsinki City Library. On the other hand only the most exotic languages are a part of the Multilingual Library. European languages like English, German, French, Italian, Spanish, Russian and Estonian are now, as it has been always, included into the normal acquisition program. In Multilingual Library we have collections in about 60 other languages.

In Finland where the literary culture in Finnish is young – our first novel in Finnish was published in 1870 – we understand the importance of own language. The fight for the Finnish language and for the education was also a part of our independence struggle which ended in 1917 when Finland became independent. This combined with the fact that Finnish is spoken only by under 6 million people make the question of the mother tongue very important.

With the tradition of two official languages we also see the strength and possibilities in the bilingualism or as my colleague in the Multilingual library says: “The preserving of one’s mother tongue also helps one to learn the language of the new home country. The libraries have lots of different kind of material for studying Finnish or Swedish languages. Parents can support the skills in the language spoken at home by reading aloud to their children.- Libraries provide information on the Finnish society and opportunities but as well on one’s home country and its events. “

Helsinki City Library is also one of the libraries which run a language café. There foreign people with different backgrounds and languages can meet Finnish people and discuss about topical issues or literature together. We have also tested this service online. Elderly people can attend the café from their home and be part of the discussion group in that way. In this activity the goal is not to separate the different multicultural groups but to integrate them.

The Multilingual Library in Helsinki follows the IFLA goals and standards. My example with all the other during this session will show – and I am sure about that – that the historical, cultural, social and even political differences in our societies can be seen in the ways we implement the same goals and guidelines.

The figures are for everyone the same, however. I am sorry to say but in our Multilingual Library we do not reach the acquisition standard to provide 0.25 books per capita per annum in different languages. So even in a wealthy library with high stan-

dards we lie under the goals which have been set by the international collective of librarians.

From multicultural to intercultural libraries

The work of libraries should always reflect the situation and the conditions of the society. Lib

raries should demonstrate their usefulness. The benefits should be assessed from the viewpoint of both individuals and the wider society.

Human beings functioning in society can be examined on at least three levels. They are individuals with their own story of development and their own lifespan, with accompanying personal needs. When functioning in society, the same individuals are citizens and have both rights and duties. They also need certain skills and an understanding of their environment. Each of us, in some phase of our life, also plays a role in the production chain of the economy when working in different milieus.

The tasks of the public libraries can be grouped in the following way, for instance: The public library is using its activities to support culture, democracy, development and integration.

Culture here does not mean just written culture, but also other cultural forms. Important considerations include the versatility the materials offered by the library and their temporal depth or continuity, so that older materials are available alongside the new. The library supports regional, and national culture as well as the entire worldwide variety of cultures.

The realisation of democracy requires the presentation of differing viewpoints and ensuring that all kinds of information are available in the first place. Where democracy begins to crumble, the censorship measures are often directed against libraries.

The public library will support development by serving the personal needs of individuals for information, whether connected with private life or functioning in society and working life. The library also plays a part in the teaching and maintenance of many socially indispensable skills. Of these, literacy is one of the most central, but in the current hectic pace of change, the library also has its place in supporting many other kinds of skills. It is not always enough to support the use of the Internet and of e-mail and e-commerce, when it is necessary to learn new media and new things.

Concerning integration there are very few, if any, other institutions which like libraries invite together people in all ages, in different cultural and social groups and both genders. Trends to separate are in societies more common than trends to integrate.

If we think all the changes in publishing media and the forms the content is presented I believethat I do not have to persuade you very much before we agree that to be able to function an active citizen in a democratic society the traditional literacy is not enough. We as librarians might be word oriented but not necessarily those people who we serve.

This is also a question how we as librarians are able to meet the challenges of the future. Thus I return to the beginning of this paper and to the multimodal literacy. We have to evaluate the relations between the written word and other forms of media and our relation to them. Especially in the multicultural world where the words not always are enough the images on the screen might help.

My other aspect “from the multicultural to intercultural” is not new for the members of the multicultural section. They have had a whole conference around this theme in Vancouver in 2008.

For many of us the terms “multicultural” and “intercultural” may seem to be almost similar but they are not synonyms.

“Multicultural” can mean different cultures, national, ethnic, religious groups all living within the same area but not necessarily coming into contact with each other. Different groups may be tolerated but not accepted or valued.

“Intercultural” can also mean different cultures and national, ethnic, religious groups living together but maintaining open relations of interaction, exchange and mutual recognition of their own and respect values and ways of life. Intercultural is a process, not a goal.

In the world in which the ethnic purges seem to be everyday life libraries should realise this and start in their own way a counterblow. Do not think that I believe that libraries could prevent those purges but if we as librarians were aware of that even we have a role to play in these kinds of important matters.

We need guidelines and standards for our work but we also need understanding among the librarianship that we actually are dealing with big global questions and we should act according to that. The relevant question then is how we combine the local and global level. For example multiculturalism is a global issue but applied on the local level. There, on the local level, interculturalism is a way to keep developing dialogue and democracy in a multicultural environment. On the other hand without reading and literary competences which are basic in any society, intercultural dialogue is not possible.

Libraries are a key strength in any country to enable local people to participate in the local society and become citizens of global information and multicultural society.

- (1) <http://archive.ifla.org/faife/policy/iflastat/gldeclar-e.html>
- (2) <http://www.ifla.org/en/publications/iflaunesco-multicultural-library-manifesto>
- (3) <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001271/127160m.pdf>
- (4) <http://archive.ifla.org/VII/s33/annual/s33-minutes2008.pdf>

- (5) <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001362/136246e.pdf>
- (6) <http://www.ifla.org/files/hq/papers/ifla75/94-cordes-en.pdf>
- (7) <http://www.lib.hel.fi/en-GB/monikielinenkirjasto/>