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The Public Library as a Gateway to Society – Lifelong Learning in Small Communities

Ruth Ørnholst

Hordaland County Library
Bergen, Norway

Email: ruth.ornholt@hordaland-f.kommune.no
<http://www.hordaland-f.kommune.no/fylkesbibl/>

1. Introduction

I am the chief county librarian in a county made up of 33 municipalities. Each municipality is responsible for its own public library with the county library acting as a service and competence centre for public and school libraries throughout the county.

The responsibilities of the county library include finding solutions to overall problems and improving the use of resources. We organise the lending co-operation between libraries and are active in regional development on the same level as other county authorities. Our activities are governed by the Library Act and by a regional library plan that has been formulated in co-operation with many other organisations in the county. The library plan is a strategic tool aimed at achieving a co-ordinated development of the county's library system.

The County Council finances the County Library. We do not give library services directly to the public, with the exception of a mobile library and a few other services.

In co-operation with two other counties the Hordaland county library operates a floating library along the western coast. We also provide eight offshore drilling rigs with books for leisure reading.

The county capital is Bergen, which is Norway's second-largest city. The municipality of Bergen has a population of about 230,000. It has one main, central library, 7 branch libraries and a mobile library. The rest of Hordaland county consists of 32 municipalities with populations varying from 380 to 21,000. It is these municipalities which provide my frame of reference and which I call "Small Communities".

The municipalities in the inland parts of the county have a depopulation problem and are often those with the largest area but with the fewest inhabitants. Young people move to Bergen as a result of the decline in employment opportunities in industry, agriculture and fishing, and now tourism is important in many parts of the county.

2. Public libraries in small communities

In Norway the law decrees that all municipalities must have a public library with a professionally qualified chief librarian. However, the law does not require the post to be filled on a full-time basis and sets no standards for the services provided. The quality of municipal library services therefore varies greatly throughout the county.

Libraries are often regarded as a low priority institution required by law, and are often the first to suffer from cuts in public spending. Branch libraries are closed, staff reductions are imposed, opening hours are shortened, services become poorer and only the most basic activities are maintained. Many public libraries are operating at a very low level.

3. The Competence Reform

The Norwegian national programme to promote lifelong learning is entitled “The Competence Reform”

The Competence Reform programme in Norway was launched to give adults greater opportunity to acquire education and training and to improve their qualifications.

The main objective of the reform is to help meet the needs of society and the workplace for skills and knowledge. It is both an educational reform and a workplace reform. The Competence Reform programme is targeted at all adults, whether they be employed or unemployed. The Norwegian Government is working hand-in-hand with the social partners, educational institutions and organisations involved.

Three elements in the Reform programme are of significance for the public library system.

3.1. Adults have the right to a basic education and upper secondary education

Adults who need primary and lower secondary and upper secondary education have a statutory right to such education. This education must be adapted to the individual's needs and life situation as regards both when and where the education is to be provided and the rate of progress. The municipal and county authorities are responsible for providing this education. They can co-operate with other bodies, such as adult education associations or institutions which provide distance learning.

3.2. Non-formal learning must be documented and assessed

Non-formal learning may be acquired through training, through paid and voluntary work and through active participation in organisations and community life. Documented prior qualifications of this nature give the right to a course of upper secondary education shorter than would otherwise be the case.

The Norwegian Act relating to Universities and University Colleges has been amended to allow adults over 25 years of age and without formal entrance qualifications to be admitted on the basis of non-formal learning. In the autumn of 2001 approximately 2,700 adults were offered study places on this basis.

3.3. The Competence Building Programme

To carry out The Competence reform, the Ministry of Education has established a national program for lifelong learning – called The Competence Building Programme. Under this programme, enterprises, trade organisations, parties to wage agreements and others may apply for project funds to develop the market for continuing education and training for adults. In 2002 the Government granted NOK 100 million to this programme.

Public libraries are partners in several large projects in The Competence Building Programme. These projects have usually been based on co-operation between libraries and the educational authorities at a municipal or regional level. Public libraries have become partners in these projects because they have been a part of the Competence Reform from the start.

4. The Competence Building Programme and public libraries

During the preparation of the programme the Ministry of Education initiated a project aimed at establishing models for regional co-ordination and the adaptation of adult learning to meet the needs of users. A further aim was to ensure that adults would be able to receive education at different levels and in different subjects and as near as possible to their place of residence.

In Hordaland we obtained funding for a project entitled “Network for Lifelong Learning”, NELL for short. NELL involved altogether 11 municipalities with a population of about 40,000 and was carried out over a period of two years from January 1997 to December 1998. The NELL-project is in many ways the mother of many projects involving public libraries in lifelong learning in Norway.

Because of the results from the NELL-project - and others – the libraries have been able to point out the role they can play in carrying out the program for lifelong learning, and public libraries have become one of the means used to reach the goals of this national programme.

Public libraries can give educational services adapted to users' needs; they can form or join local networks and partnerships. Public libraries can develop as learning resource centres; they can be used in the assessment of non-formally acquired competence and in training of data skills.

In the following I will take a closer look at these fields based on the experience from the NELL-project and other projects in Norway.

4.1. Educational services adapted to users' needs

In order to ensure that users can follow a course of further education as near as possible to their place of residence, the local programme must be planned to suit the real interests and needs of users. The courses on offer must not be determined by what the planners may feel most appropriate. It must be made possible for companies and individuals to contact the public libraries when they feel the need for learning. The libraries must maintain a list of available course programmes and suppliers. Interested persons can be put in direct touch with the relevant course organiser or the library itself can initiate the required type of course activity. In the NELL-project, these measures led to an increase in the number of courses organised and users were often themselves able to help decide the timing of the course.

An important factor in achieving success was formal agreements between libraries and course providers with regard to the exchange of information and services.

The public library must also aim at helping people to find their way among the courses and training on offer from many different organisations, since the time this requires can in itself discourage people from taking advantage of the possibilities available. In this respect a databases providing both local and national course information on the Internet is a vital aid both for the libraries and for the individual user. The public library or the county library can be responsible for the coordination or input of the information in the database providing local course information.

The library can develop and maintain a web-site specially aimed at adult learners. It can contain the local database with course information, information about library services for learners, and links to local information.

4.2. Forming local partnerships

To establish good user orientated possibilities for lifelong learning, it is very important in small communities in rural areas, perhaps more so than in bigger, to establish partnerships or networks. One

partnership must consist of regional participants in adult education, the public library and both private and public companies. In order to be seen as attractive and useful places for lifelong learning, the libraries in the area must also establish inter-municipal co-operation with each other in another partnership.

The first partnership provides a joint forum for adult education. The aim of both partnerships must be to improve both the quality and the quantity of the adult education programme available to inhabitants, and also to provide motivation for learning. In the NELL-project the participants in the local partnership, - the municipal forum for lifelong learning, had previously had no fixed form of co-operation.

4.3. Public libraries as learning resource centres

In addition to its new role in adaptation of the educational services to user needs and being a participant in a partnership for adult education, the public library must also further develop its traditional and familiar functions as provider of material and information, a place for study and as a meeting place.

Libraries must also play a more direct part in adult education by improving the nature of the support offered to adult students and by actively adapting smaller libraries to meet their wishes and requirements.

4.4. Assessment of non-formal acquired competence

In connection with the national Competence Reform programme, centres for the assessment of acquired competence have been established in every county throughout the country. Nevertheless, although we have several such centres in my own county, distances in many areas are so great that assessment can take several days. A suggestion that videoconference equipment could be installed in the libraries for this purpose has been welcomed by users but so far has not been put into successful practice.

We have previous good experience of using videoconference equipment in connection with oral examinations for distance learning students. Videoconference saves time and travel expenses and is very useful in many ways in rural regions. In my county, some of the small municipalities have public computer centres, established on initiative from the people in the municipality. The "data sitting room", as it is called is in some places in connection with the library, which again can be a combination of school and public library.

In my county we are using videoconference in inter-municipal co-operation between libraries. It is felt as a much nicer way to meet than e.g. telephone conferences.

4.5. Data training

Public libraries should offer their local inhabitants instruction in basic computer skills, but it is often beyond the capacity of small and medium-sized Norwegian libraries. Because we are involved in the Competence Building Programme, the authorities have chosen to use the libraries to distribute a free CD giving those with no experience a simple introduction to the use of a computer. Of the 150,000 copies of the CD produced 100,000 have been distributed to libraries and schools. Libraries I have spoken to have been well satisfied with the scheme and have reported good public response.

5. Training of library personnel

Training of library staff is a central factor if public libraries want to play a role in lifelong learning. Library workers must be made aware of the requirements of those seeking further education and they must be given the motivation to assist this user group.

The NELL-project offered participants practical training in information search and meetings were arranged with others working in the field of adult guidance. We were unable to start systematic training in the guidance role but we came nearer to defining what this role should be, i.e. insight in

how to act as an intermediary between the person seeking learning and the course provider, how best to keep the course provider informed and how to evaluate the profile of the various courses available.

At Bergen University College we have developed a training programme especially for librarians in offering guidance to adult seekers of education. The training college course is combining education with municipal planning and development, and we have tested it with library workers from all parts of Norway.

At the same time as the participants have a theoretical education; they also have to develop their own libraries as arenas of learning, as workshops for adult students. The compulsory task, which counts for 50% of the marks available, is to draw up library development relevant to the theme of “the library as an arena of adult education” or alternatively some other field of learning. Tasks are linked to the course participant’s own library or type of work, thereby municipal planning and development can be an internal part of librarian training.

In the first class of students we experienced that the participants’ home municipalities assisted in different ways. Half of them granted extra funding to the library concerned, this money being used to cover the purchase of equipment, adapting library premises, longer opening hours and carrying out initiatives in the development plan.

A significant factor in the success of the first class was that the training was based on documented needs and that the development plan was an integral part of the course programme. The course is classified as higher or further education but can also form part of basic training for librarians.

6. The Inner Hordaland Knowledge Network

The work carried out in the public library sector in connection with the national programme for lifelong learning; the Competence Reform and the consequent growth of local and regional networking and partnership building has promoted the position of libraries as partners in regional development. Countless examples exist throughout the country of projects and development initiatives in this field, many of which have obtained funding from the central government’s Competence Building Programme mentioned earlier.

I should like to present one such project from my own county, the heartland of Norwegian tourism with its fjords, glaciers and spring blossom. This example concerns “Inner Hordaland” which is the district most affected by depopulation. Many of the elements I have mentioned earlier are being tried out in practice in this region just now.

The great distances and wide population spread in Norway mean that many people have a long way to their nearest centre of learning. It is common for young Norwegians to leave home at the age of 16 and move into a bed-sitter in a town where they can complete their upper secondary education. Even though we have 4 universities and 55 colleges of education, many Norwegians face this problem at some time or other.

Making it possible for adults to study in their own local district is a good investment for municipalities. This has become even more important now that the programme of competence reform has given adults the legal right to education according to their needs.

This project is aimed at improving the basis for growth and development in the region by concentrating on the provision of better facilities for adult education. Carrying out the project requires co-operation between different administrative levels and sectors within the 10 municipalities taking part.

The basic idea is that a collective and co-ordinated inter-departmental initiative in a region has a greater effect than independent efforts. The aim is to ensure that adults are offered quality-controlled and co-ordinated information and guidance for all types of training. This is to be achieved by close

co-operation and partnership creation between the various institutions with some sort of advisory function in respect of adults. Libraries are central participants in four out of six part-projects.

Project participants consist of libraries, centres for the assessment of non-formal competence, social security departments, unemployment offices, municipal adult education services, course providers, vocational training centres and course advisers in the upper secondary schools. In order to ensure that all participants have a common base of knowledge and understanding of the problems involved, the project includes a tailor-made course in relevant guidance skills. This is an important part of the project, since completion of the course represents one of the qualifications required to permit the use of the project-logo.

We had originally planned to create a special logo for the project but ended up using the logo from the Competence Reform, only adding the name of our own project. The logo is a standard symbol to be hanged on the door to indicate that this is the place for adults seeking information and advice on further education and training.

Criteria have been established with regard to use of the logo. At least one person in the organisation concerned must have completed this course or another course of equal value dealing with education for adults, such as the pedagogic guidance course previously mentioned.

At the moment there are 28 different institutions in the region with this symbol on the door, - including the 10 public libraries.

The libraries play a central role in The Inner Hordaland Knowledge Network, both in assisting those attempting to find their way in the jungle of courses on offer and also in providing guidance to those who have already commenced some form of further education.

7. Public libraries as resources in small communities

In the course of the 1990s Norwegian public libraries met with a growing demand on their services from adult students. Many of the smaller and medium-sized libraries experienced this as a strain on their resources, because of the large amount of distance lending involved. During the last 7 or 8 years, however, a change of attitude has taken place as a result of the groundwork carried out in advance of the Competence Reform campaign and an increased focus on lifelong learning.

As time passes many public libraries feel the need to play a more active role in relation to adult students who look to their local library as a service provider and a centre of learning. Adult students have become a challenging and interesting target group to be taken seriously. It is not only university and training college students who use public libraries but also adults whose acquired competence has been assessed as adequate for the further education necessary to gain university entrance or trade qualifications

Public libraries need more strings to their bow and lifelong learning gives libraries a more active role in relation to adult students and the local community. If they are to play a role in modern society and justify their case when municipal budgets are decided upon, they must become visible, active partners in many areas of public life and in the lives of each individual.

Lifelong learning can provide a new impetus, creates partnerships and co-operation with different bodies in the local community, with neighbouring municipalities and with the county.

A focus on lifelong learning can serve to vitalise public libraries in small and medium-sized communities, making them active partners and fellow participants at municipal level in carrying out a national programme to promote lifelong learning. It is not enough "to make books and other material available" as the Norwegian Library Act decrees.

Public libraries must take initiatives, participate in partnerships and be actively involved when municipal authorities develop plans to offer their inhabitants the benefits of lifelong learning. Libraries

represent an invaluable resource for local authorities faced with the task of carrying out the Competence Reform and fulfilling the rights of adults to higher education.

Finally I should like to remind you of the nature of the small communities I have been talking about and to emphasise that it is precisely in such places that public libraries can be a significant factor and add value to the daily life of inhabitants and their access to lifelong learning.