ReVisioning the Public Library as an Oasis of Learning

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ABSTRACT

Culturally diverse older adult learners are among the fastest growing age groups for which public libraries promote the needs of lifelong learning today. This article explores the past, present, and future of informal and non-formal public learning environments as safe and welcoming, with supportive educational programming provided by librarians and community volunteers. In light of an advancing 21st century learning framework, the aim of this article is to encourage adult learning practitioners to re-examine the public library to recognize a new world of potentiality in library learning for this population.

Keywords: Cultural Institutions, Learning Environments, Lifelong Learning, Older Adult Learner, Public Libraries

INTRODUCTION

“Our neighbor across the street brought me this book of all the stories written by Hans Christian Andersen. When I finished with that book I knew I needed more. So that’s when I really acquainted myself with the library and the librarian (whom I thought was the rudest woman in the world because she had something I wanted ... those books). I would go in there and get those books and she would tell me: “You just checked out one last week.” And I’m saying to myself, “but I read it already.” I really learned to escape the stresses of the world as a child through fiction.” Mogul, African/American (Bamdas, 2009)

Public or community libraries of the past were places for family adventures in books that could be found with a card catalog and the Dewey Decimal System. When ready to check out books, the librarian marked the due date using a date stamper and a red ink pad. The library was a quiet, safe, and supportive place for all family members to search for facts and the knowledge of others, and where their imagination could roam beyond the community’s main street. For many decades the library was a storehouse for published books and magazines.

These libraries were used from cradle to grave, with literature available for the child before school, during the school years, and beyond. The public library of the community then developed as a resource in schools becoming known as media centers. The library was a friend for life and a staple for every family member.
Beyond Black and White educative cultural institutions little was known fifty years ago or even more recently about the existence of public libraries for Indigenous populations, Asian Americans, or other cultural groups. The stereotypical White privileged view of libraries in history particularly for the “Baby Boomer” generation (Vincent & Velkoff, 2010) was a time of simplicity, an idyllic time.

Oldenburg (1999) argues that library institutions are reinventing themselves, expanding and evolving into “great, good places” (p. xiii) to connect and collaborate. Today public libraries are embedded institutions that are contextual mirrors of the communities served, providing informal and nonformal learning environments for a more ethnically and age-diverse population. The library primarily offers support for informal learning projects by lending materials and access to the Internet. The library augments these materials by offering nonformal learning opportunities facilitated by library personnel. These are community-based classes such as computer literacy, adult literacy, and e-help clinics with no grading or attendance requirements.

The changes of the late 20th and early 21st centuries have introduced interactive and collaborative changes driven by a digitally connected, global world (Dede, 2010; Ludwig & Starr, 2005).

However, the socioeconomic challenges by libraries of the first decade of the 21st century have been accompanied by the need to “defend its existence” (Clark, 2010, n.p.) or question “if libraries are essential and whether they should command priority in the competition for public dollars” (Wooden, 2006, p. 4). In fact public libraries around the world are economically challenged. For example, 423 libraries (almost 10%) in Britain “have either been closed down or targeted for closure” while in Brent, England, plans to open a “Virtual Library or ‘super library’ at the cost of $4.6 million” (Shamsie, 2012, n.p.) are underway. This is also happening in New York Public libraries as these institutions are also experiencing an almost 30% reduction in both their staff and materials budgets. The story is the same with the Seattle system, Los Angeles public libraries, and Volusia County Library in Florida as well as others. The New York Public Library is selling off two of its most prominent libraries to build their own high-tech super library (Sherman, 2011). The library system has been forced to change and evolve to better serve its diverse public needs.

The aim of this article is to encourage librarian and adult community practitioners to look at the potential of the library as a diverse learning environment for a host of ethnic, educational, cultural, and economic populations. The current users of the library come from a variety of ages, have varied interests and abilities, and want to experience an environment fostering open and collaborative learning in a time where there are fewer public gathering places.

Although libraries and librarians provided support for learning in the past, in recent years the library, its staff, volunteers, and resources “stand in” and serve as a kind of “third place” environment within American communities (Oldenburg, 2002). As a result of the Information Age, the welcoming, safe and informal community setting with a focus on conversation is missing. In fact, there are far fewer informal gathering places. States Oldenburg (1999),

“In their kind and number, there has been a marked decline in gathering places near enough to people’s homes to afford the easy access and familiar faces necessary to a vital and informed public life…Both the joys of relaxing with people and the social solidarity that results from it are disappearing for want of settings that make them possible.” (p. 15)

Oldenburg (1999) believes we need to defend these “great, good places” against unbelieving and antagonistic voices.

For the purposes of this article, which concentrates on the older adult population who has limited access to more formal learning avenues, the major findings of support for the library as an educative cultural institution came from Cassell’s (2011) study of the Hispanic and Haitian older learner. The analysis for this paper will also include Bamdas’s (2009) study
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