A leadership challenge paper in support of UNESCO Futures of Education 2050

Choose Your Own Library

Ali Herbert

Faculty of Education, University of Alberta

aherbert@ualberta.ca

Choose-Your-Own-Library

Go to https://forms.gle/pmoLKyC4k282iVt97 to participate in an interactive journey.

Introduction

UNESCO's Futures of Education: Learning to Become is an attempt to use our global collective intelligence to positively shape the futures for all people and the planet (UNESCO Education Sector, n.d.). UNESCO sees knowledge and learning as our best hope and asks all stakeholders to share their visions for the futures. Public libraries are, above all, institutions of knowledge and learning. Education and lifelong learning are a core value of public libraries, as are the public good and social responsibility (American Library Association, 2004). As such, they are key stakeholders themselves, as well as a crucial, and often singular, gateway through which ordinary citizens access information and learning.

Libraries are constantly adapting in order to keep up with changes in society. These transformations are manifested in the types of resources and services offered, but they ultimately represent even more significant shifts: the evolution of the purpose of libraries. The genesis of public libraries itself demonstrates a major schism in which the purpose of some libraries ceased to be exclusively helping scholars (Lerner, 2009). Public libraries were created to help lower class individuals better themselves. Over time they expanded their mission to include provision of resources for entertainment as well as learning. The advent of the Internet required another evolution: their role became access to information rather than ownership of it (Lerner, 2009). Public Internet access became ubiquitous in public libraries and even today they remain the sole source for many on the wrong side of the digital divide (Fleischmann, 2011).

Despite these massive changes, public libraries continue to strive for more. According to Lankes (2012), bad libraries provide collections (i.e., resources), good libraries offer services

(i.e., programs, help, and access to technology), and great libraries build communities. Similarly, Mars (2019) asserts that public libraries are the most effective social infrastructure, a phrase Klinenberg (2018) uses to denote spaces and organizations that connect people to their communities, providing them with opportunities for interaction and affecting these interactions. Klinenberg discovered the importance of social infrastructure when researching a particularly fatal heat wave and noticed a major factor in neighbourhood fatality rates was social infrastructure (Mars, 2019).

Public libraries have been first responders to many recent local, national, and international crises, leaving aside the innumerable personal crises presented to library staff everyday (TEDx Talks, 2013). The director of the public library in Ferguson opened a free school in the library when the riots following Michael Brown's death shut down the schools (Zalusky, 2015). After Hurricane Sandy, libraries opened without power to distribute supplies (TEDx Talks, 2013). Indeed, public libraries are so well-suited to crisis response that they were unknowingly reinvented as resilience centres by expert designers (Mars, 2019). They are also tackling homelessness and the opioid epidemic (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, 2020; Mars, 2013; Ford, 2017; Simon, 2017).

Despite many powerful forces asserting that public libraries are obsolete, they are actually overwhelmed with use (Klinenberg, 2018). Public libraries are attempting to do more with less as they try to be all things for all people. Now they must tackle a truly global crisis: the COVID-19 pandemic. The nature of this crisis is in many ways incompatible with the traditional methods employed to ameliorate the personal and societal effects of crises. Social infrastructure encouraging individuals to physically connect with their communities has changed from protective to openly dangerous. Even resource sharing, the more traditional purpose of the

library, is risky. With limited resources and so many unknowns, what is the future of public libraries?

Scenario Planning and Exploration

The foresight tool known as scenario planning and exploration was used to explore four possible futures of public libraries. The critical uncertainties selected were COVID status (i.e., whether COVID continues to be an active threat or is either eradicated or effectively handled such that libraries return to near normal) and purpose (i.e., whether libraries revert back to focusing on provision of access to resources or whether they attempt to build community). Any current exploration of possible futures that did not consider COVID would be fundamentally incomplete and purpose was identified as a critical factor for several reasons. First, as demonstrated above, the purpose of public libraries is constantly evolving. Second, although most libraries would agree that community building is an essential objective, when COVID hit, it was often overlooked (potentially because it is far more difficult, time-consuming, expensive, and/or less compatible with current COVID restrictions). Finally, many non-library users and essential decision-makers have failed to acknowledge this extended purpose and use their out-dated view of libraries to justify their underfunding, suggesting that this purpose may not be sustainable, especially in a time of economic downturn. Moreover, even many familiar with the current goals of public libraries question whether libraries can or even should fulfil so many roles (Lankes, 2014; Mattern, 2014).

Choose-Your-Own-Adventure

Ogilvy (2015) recommends telling the story of each scenario, which will be done in a choose-your-own-adventure format. It is important to note that these stories all represent successful versions of the chosen scenarios, which is not guaranteed. In an effort to create an exercise in empathy, please consider the needs and desires of at least one of the following typical library patrons, in addition to your own. These patrons are not based on specific people, but are representative of patrons who can be found in any public library.

Alma is in her 70s and has lived alone since the death of her husband of 49 years. She is not comfortable with technology and she comes to the library primarily for social interaction. Joe is a middle-aged professional who makes good money. He uses the library for entertainment access. Parker just started school and they are struggling a lot. They are high energy and a bit

awkward, but excellent with technology. Hanadi recently immigrated with her husband and new baby and she is lonely here. In her home country she was a dentist, but she needs to perfect her English and get re-certified before she can practice dentistry here. Mac is street-involved and struggles with addiction. The library gives him somewhere safe to be after the shelter closes at 7:00 a.m., plus he loves the science fiction collection.

No COVID / Community

You enter a large, open space that is bustling with people of all kinds. A friendly librarian promptly makes eye contact, welcomes you inside, and tells you to stop by the desk if you need anything. You nod and she whirls back to the busy rows of public computers, weaving between them to help a handful of patrons at the same time.

Your attention is grabbed by a group of rowdy teens in the back corner, cheering on two video game players who appear to be locked in competition. There is a half-filled bowl of fresh fruit and cheese sticks on the counter near them. A P.A. system announces that story time is about to begin and a flood of toddlers and their caregivers vacate the children's section in favour of the auditorium. Despite their departure, their impact on the area can be seen in the toys and board books that cover the floor. A few school-aged kids start playing house and a group of mothers sip coffee and chat while cradling their infants.

In the adult section, there are small desks among the bookshelves, providing semi-private spaces for studying patrons. Those who want more quiet are free to book the soundproofed study rooms since sound does travel, especially from the raucous group knitting at a large table. 'Study' rooms may be a misnomer, since just now one is filled to bursting with six young adults who appear to be roleplaying and in another one patron stands and presents a slideshow to two seated people in suits. Many patrons browse the stacks, some helped by staff, others alone. Most

eventually select a pile of materials and check them out before leaving, but others take their find over to one of the many comfy chairs and couches and settle in to read. At least one skipped the comfy chair in favour of plopping down right next to the shelf.

Posters promote upcoming programs and services, which include film screenings, homework help, cooking classes, drop-ins, one-on-one technology help, online GED prep classes, teen nights, English language tutoring, conversation groups, a blood clinic, speed dating, and a preschool dance party. As you consider these, you overhear an old man tell a staff member a dirty joke; she responds by rolling her eyes and assuring him that she missed this last week. Another staff member chats on the phone, evidently scheduling an appointment with a social worker for whoever is on the other end. Immediately upon hanging up he switches to recommending "his all-time favourite series" to an enthusiastic child, then heads off to find it. Somehow none of this commotion wakes the man snoozing in a heavy overcoat.

Can you find what you need here?

No COVID / Resources

The moment you enter the library you are struck by the discrepancy between the bustling street outside and the silence inside. Perhaps not quite silence: as your ears adjust you can pick up whispered conversations. A friendly librarian promptly makes eye contact, welcomes you inside, and tells you to stop by the desk if you need anything. At least, you think that is what she meant, she was mostly mouthing.

There are rows of computers for public use and they are quite busy. A staff member looks busy as well, weaving between the computers to help various patrons with whispered instructions. The patrons look focused with the exception of a couple of kids who are trying to hold back giggles as they watch a video, sharing a pair of headphones. They soon slink away

after receiving a pointed stare from the librarian. She is quite effective at this: you watch her shoot the same look at a mother holding a baby who is starting to whimper and the mother quickly checks out her materials at the self-check and leaves.

The children's area is slightly louder as parents read to their kids or help them pick out materials to take home. A staff member busily replaces any books, magazines, and DVDs that are left out, while answering questions and making recommendations. Another staff member doing the same work in the adult section has an easier time keeping up since the patrons there are less likely to make a mess and less likely to sneak in food (fortunately all of the furniture is wooden or plastic, making it easy to wipe down). Plus very few of the adult patrons stick around for longer than it takes to pick out their materials, although there are a couple studying, working, or reading at the semi-private desks.

Posters promote upcoming programs and services, which include homework help, one-on-one technology help, online GED prep classes, English language tutoring and a weekly story time for pre-schoolers. You look over the various resources and collections, which appear to be well-stocked and maintained. As you consider these, you overhear a staff member attempting to convince an old man how much easier it is to use the self-check rather than coming to the desk. Can you find what you need here?

COVID / Resources

There is no physical library for you to enter, but you can access the library's expanded virtual resources and services from its webpage. Thanks to libraries across the nation, universal broadband is a reality regardless of where you live. Network neutrality is guaranteed and data capping is illegal. The library is an Internet Service Provider and offers free home access to low-

income families and individuals, as well as to shelters. As soon as you open the webpage, a pop-up offers to connect you with a librarian via chat, audio, or video.

You can borrow mobile technology for home use and library staff are happy to provide training on technology use through recorded videos, virtual synchronous classes, or virtual one-on-one help. Homework help, English language tutoring, GED prep courses, and even employment skill training is available through the same methods. There are also a few online children's programs, such as virtual story time. The library provides verified current information on the crisis and staff encourage patrons to submit their questions or ask for certain information sources to be evaluated. All the typical materials can be browsed and borrowed virtually and, if preferred, contactless curbside pick-up is available for physical materials.
Can you find what you need here?

COVID / Community

You wait until your day of the week to visit the library: in an effort to limit community spread while maintaining some level of community connection the library has divided its catchment area into five mini neighbourhoods that function as cohorts. You share your day with your neighbours, which has encouraged you to meet them. If you need to visit on a different day, the weekends are open to everyone but with much stricter conditions and no in-person programs. Plus the outdoor space, which includes a multipurpose court, some playground equipment, picnic tables, and lots of outdoor seating, is always open to everyone and anyone can use the Wi-Fi and public washrooms anytime. Plus the virtual resources are always available and you can access curbside pick-up any day.

Regardless, today is your day. Your cohort's friendly librarian buzzes you inside once she sees that you are wearing your mask. She welcomes you and tells you to stop by the desk if

you need anything. Her desk is behind a transparent barrier, but you know she will provide closer help if necessary.

The library is busy, but patrons are making an effort to distance when not interacting with one another. Every second public computer has been removed and transparent barriers separate them. Signs warn that public computers can only be used for an hour a day (half as long as pre-COVID), but encourage patrons to ask for more time if needed and accommodations will be attempted. They also tell patrons that it is their responsibility to wipe down the technology before and after they use it. You spot a rack of netbooks, laptops, and tablets that can be borrowed for use within the library (including its outdoor space) or taken home. You watch as another cohort-specific staff member uses a tablet to mirror the screen of any patron needing help: he approaches the patron from the front and speaks normally to them through the barrier, then is clearly able to see their screen on his tablet and seemingly even control their mouse through it.

Your attention is grabbed by a group of rowdy teens in the back corner, cheering on two video game players who appear to be locked in competition. The spectators are spread out, but can easily see the game projected on the wall on a massive scale. A counter nearby holds a spaced out line of brown bags and the sign above reads "Free Snacks; you touch it, you take it!"

A large monitor near the main desk promotes a combination of in-person and virtual programs and services. Many offer three methods of access: attend in-person if they fall on your day, virtually attend synchronously via live streaming on Zoom, or watch the recorded video at any time. These programs and services include film screenings, homework help, cooking classes (no hands-on participation in-person), drop-ins, one-on-one technology help, online GED prep classes, teen nights, English language tutoring, conversation groups, a blood clinic, speed dating, employment skill training, and a preschool dance party. You are intrigued by the variety of

virtual clubs focused on shared interests that are advertised. An addendum recommends alternatives for those less tech-savvy: you can be matched with a pen pal or phone buddy. Plus, it continues, library staff are always happy to chat about any topic in-person, via phone, chat, or video. Apparently they know jokes.

A P.A. system announces that story time is about to begin and a trickle of toddlers and their caregivers vacate the children's section in favour of the auditorium. Needing to pack up their toys hampers their progress, but leaves the floor in the children's section mostly clean. There are signs up asking parents to monitor and clean anything their children use, especially that which ends up in their mouths. A few school-aged kids start playing house, beginning with the ubiquitous ritual of sanitizing their hands and the toys each brought from home. A small group of mothers form a large circle, sipping coffee and chatting while cradling their infants.

In the adult section, there are small desks with transparent barriers among the bookshelves, providing semi-private spaces for studying patrons. Those who want more quiet are free to book the soundproofed study rooms since sound does travel, although they are too small for group work. Several knitters sit at a large table and a few laptops are opened at empty spaces, it sounds like other knitters are joining in virtually. Many patrons browse the stacks, some helped by staff, others alone, but all following the request to wear gloves. Most eventually select a pile of materials and check them out before leaving, but others take their find over to one of the comfy chairs and settle in to read. Signage surrounding the chairs reminds patrons to wipe them down before and after usage.

Can you find what you need here?

Implications

Even in a perfect world where all of the strategies undertaken by public libraries are successful, none of these scenarios is ideal for everyone. Although the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions' (2016) code of ethics requires libraries to provide equitable services to everyone, this is not actually possible. Given that everyone's needs and desires cannot be met, libraries must prioritize. If a clear rationale for prioritization is not selected, libraries are likely to fall into focusing on those needs that are easier and cheaper to meet. The 'decision' to revert back to public libraries as providers of resources once COVID-19 struck is a perfect example of this. However, this is not a valid method of decision-making. Instead, consider Pateman and Williment's (2013) model: needs-based library service, which focuses first on those with the greatest needs. The COVID / Resources scenario is great for Joe, our patron who least needs the library, but it fails Alma, Parker, Hanadi, and Mac. Is this really the best way forward?

Unfortunately, public libraries have no say in what happens with COVID-19, but we do have a say in how we respond. Our response is consequential, both in the day-to-day lives of our patrons and to humanity as a whole. UNESCO Futures of Education makes clear that humanity's best hope is our collective intelligence, which public libraries must encourage. While one might argue that any of the scenarios described would promote knowledge and learning, they would not all promote it equally for everyone. Moreover, two of the conditions credited with bringing societies to a crisis point are persistent inequalities and social fragmentation (UNESCO Education Sector, n.d.). Public libraries must play their essential role in remedying inequality and building community, even if COVID-19 makes that harder than ever.

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