Using a longitudinal focus group methodology to measure the value and impact of public libraries

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to report back on a PhD research project currently being undertaken at Edinburgh Napier University, which is currently investigating the impact and value of the public library service on citizenship development in the UK. The paper will focus particularly on the specific longitudinal qualitative methods being applied in order to 'measure' this impact and value. A brief background to the project, along with a review of the literature around the theoretical frameworks informing the research are also provided I order to contextualize the research questions being addressed.

Background

There is a general acceptance that public libraries contribute to 'community', and have the potential to have a very positive impact on civil society. (Varheim, 2007). This 'impact' is ongoing, in that library users can realise the impact and value of libraries throughout their lives. 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). Similarly, Totterdell (2005) very positively discusses the contemporary role of the library in society and suggests that the traditional public library in the UK is based on four keystones: culture, education, leisure and recreation, and information. However, even though libraries perform this multi-functional role, reaching out to citizens and spanning across different types of community provision, the value and impact of public libraries, in times of austerity, appears to be under increased scrutiny by the local authorities running them

Traditionally the value of public libraries in the UK has been measured through quantitative methods in order to demonstrate return on investment or value for money to the authorities financing them. For example, Mcmeney (2009) discusses how measuring outputs alongside the measurement of economic impacts should provide evidence of the library's value for money, and how contingent valuation can be used to assess a library's economic value. An example of where this has been applied is one which demonstrates the return on investment in the British Library, when findings suggested that for every £1.00 spent on the service, a return of £4.00 was generated in terms of public good, knowledge transfer, intellectual capital, etc. (Pung, Clarke and Patten, 2004). Similarly there are examples of many academic libraries use metrics and learner analytics to demonstrate impact on outcomes such as retention and achievement by students in their respective institutions. The JISC Library Impact Data Project is an example of this (Stone, Patten and Ramsden, 2012) and so too is the *LIRG/SCONUL Impact Initiative*, which looked to assess the impact of higher education libraries on specific outcomes around learning, teaching and research in UK universities (Markless and Streatfield, 2006)

However, dealing with public libraries and the public that uses them, does not really allow for impact to be measured in this way as the associated outcomes of using public libraries are not necessarily defined by local authorities, not measured with regard to performance against these outcomes. There are some examples of value and impact studies in public libraries which use more qualitative methods, such as interviews and case studies (Linley and Usherwood, 1998), but they have relied on assuming that the respective libraries were operating with intended outcomes in mind and make reference to these as outcomes of education and social inclusion.

Literature review

The measurement of library performance to demonstrate value and impact, has become a significant sub-discipline of library services management. Understanding library users, their demands and expectations is essential for identifying success criteria and impact indicators (Hernon and Altman, 2010). Similarly, social impact is frequently associated with public

library services and the impact that they have on their communities and constituents (Kerslake and Kinnel, 1997). Whilst the research is grounded in the broad theme of public library performance measurement, it is also underpinned by some theoretical frameworks. A brief overview of these frameworks is provided below by way of a brief literature review:

Exchange theory

Information science has traditionally 'borrowed' theories originally developed in other areas to inform information science research (Hall, 2003). Exchange theory can be regarded as an appropriate theory on which to discuss the creation and exchange of knowledge and information. Exchange theory argues that commodities are bought and sold in transactions which are subject to contracts, conditions and obligations and that currency is exchanged during these transactions. Any human creation can be a 'commodity' and commodities have 'value'. Value can be regarded as 'use value', which is the personal value that someone gains from consuming the commodity and 'exchange value', the value in monetary terms which might be given in order to obtain the commodity. (Best, 2003).

The production and exchange of information and knowledge and social capital as useful commodities has become established as one of the major functions of the public library. The benefit to individuals and communities through having access to these tangible outputs of public library use are the outcomes by which the impact and the value of the public library might be measured. Therefore it is important at this stage of the study to appreciate the possible theories which contribute to the concept of the public library service.

Exchange theory, even when applied to knowledge and social capital, is largely associated with commercial gain or competitive advantage and ultimately the transaction or exchange is financially (economically) driven. It is perhaps difficult to see the role of the library within these purely capitalist and macroeconomic models but 'social exchange theory' offers something potentially more appropriate and comprehensible with regard to the role of libraries in the creation and exchange of knowledge, information and social capital.

Hall (2003) also introduces the concept of 'gift giving' in non-capitalist societies. She explains that economic anthropologists have discussed systems of social exchange of physical artefacts as gift economies and that the rituals of gift giving provide insight into group values and behaviours such as the mutual regard and respect of parties involved in the exchange. Through this 'borrowing' of exchange theory it is possible to view the transactions which take place in the public library through an economic or socio-economic lens. This is important in respect of establishing what the intended outcome of public library use is and indeed the mechanisms (i.e. exchanges) through which the outcomes might be achieved. A basic understanding of this is required in order to consider how the impact and value of such outcomes might be measured.

The role of the public library in the Information Society

The Information Society is a concept which can be used to frame the idea that vast amounts of information are constantly generated and used and that in order to benefit from this, individuals and organisations need to maintain access and proactively engage with information. In this respect, libraries are used purposefully by people every day on several different levels as a means to access space, support, advice, technology and information: "supporting the self-education of the citizenry in order that they may become fully participating members in a democratic society." (Alsted and Curry, 2003, p. 2).

One of the fundamental issues at the heart of information society or knowledge society studies is the sheer speed with which new knowledge and information is produced and the impact that this has on its dissemination, let alone critical consumption and ultimate impact and value of the knowledge and information. Bell (1973) and Duff (2000) talk about information flows and in doing so acknowledge the problem of information overload.

Information Society studies seeks to address the issues around information generation and dissemination through a number of theses, but at its centre is the impact of information. Feather's work on the Information Society explains the use of information within a variety of economic and cultural environments and also discusses in detail how the commercial value of information becomes increasingly important in a world in which data can be transmitted across the globe in a matter of seconds (Feather, 2013). This in itself suggests a certain pressure on individuals, communities and organisations to be able to adequately seek, absorb, critique, discern, process and effectively use information and knowledge. The narrative about the

Information Society also suggests that information production certainly is not shrinking and differences between types of information is becoming less and less clear. This all leads to the potential for individuals to be overwhelmed by information which can result in potentially disengaging from making use of knowledge and information.

Synthesis and research questions

The Information Society literature points to the fact that information production, information flows, information overload all as a result of the modern information society. When this is considered alongside exchange theory one starts to see the role that the public library might play in such an environment. A lot of the literature reviewed also discusses the roles and responsibilities of the public library system particular with regard to citizenship and democracy.

Webster regards information as having a very powerful role within a democracy and talks about the concept of the 'public sphere', that is publicly available, reliable and adequate information which will facilitate sound discussion inform opinion and debate (Webster, 2006), and suggests that the public library network is the nearest thing that the UK has to a public sphere. It is this role of the public library, as the public sphere which makes sense of and makes accessible the information flows of the Information Society. This is not necessarily referenced or acknowledged on the literature which looks at the role and the outcomes measurement of public libraries. The value of the public library service and the impact that it has on the citizenry could be demonstrated through identifying social wellbeing and citizenship development outcomes and determining whether active usage of the public library services has afforded these. In considering this it is also possible to see how individuals and communities exchange knowledge, intellectual, transactional, human and social capital in their habitual use of the library service.

Therefore, there are two broad research questions which the project is seeking to address:

•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?

Methodological considerations

Having established the focus for the research and the research questions the next stage was to consider a research strategy, which included potential methods for conducting the research. On a very basic level there are three simple options for empirical data gathering available in the social sciences: watching people; asking people; looking for evidence. In other words, 'watching' becomes 'observation', 'asking' becomes 'interviewing', 'using questionnaires', or 'administering tasks', whilst 'looking for evidence' includes 'desk-based research' or 'document analysis' (Robson and McCarten, 2016, p. 241)

The first decision taken was whether a quantitative or qualitative (or indeed mixed) approach should be taken. Usage figures for public libraries are available via CIPFA (Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy, 2017) and as such demonstrate how much is spent of individual public libraries and whole library authorities, how well they are used, and ultimately the value for money in costs per transaction, or spend per citizen. The CIPFA statistics are not a measure against library outcomes, therefore making use of these would not satisfy the research questions which effectively need to be answered in a more qualitative manner.

Qualitative methods

The nature of this study lends itself to a qualitative research method through which the impact and value of public library use could be measured within the theoretical frameworks underpinning the research. The method would need to be able to produce anecdotal and reflective data regarding how public libraries have an impact on the citizenry. Several methods were duly considered including interviewing public library users and a case study approach.

Interviews with library users would have been a suitable method, but within the scope and time limits of the research there was no guarantee that sufficient library users (i.e. those who could focus on citizenship development within the Information Society) could be guaranteed. There was also the issue of having access to different public library authorities and the logistics of arranging a critical mass of interviews across representative areas of the UK. This method was therefore discarded from a logistical point of view.

A case study approach was also considered, but it was felt that it might prove too difficult to find suitable case studies in which the research questions would be addressed. Whilst using case studies would have gone some way to enabling discussion around citizenship development it was felt that the aspect of talking to a critical mass of library users and discussing with them about how their library usage benefits them and has an impact on their development as active citizens would be the best way to generate the data required for this study.

Focus group method

A focus group method was chosen and agreed upon as the method with the most potential. In the first instance, one of the key elements of the methodology which need to be tested was the focus group interview itself. The key features of a focus group, as identified below, appear to be appropriate channels through which to elicit the data required for this research:

"Focus group interviews typically have five characteristics or features. These characteristics relate to the ingredients of a focus group: (1) people, who (2) possess certain characteristics, (3) provide qualitative data (4) in a focused discussion (5) to help understand the topic of interest." (Krueger and Casey, 2009, p. 6).

Taking these characteristics into consideration, the research requires a method in which subjects (library users) are invited to discuss and share their experience of using public library services and to reflect upon how their library usage has affected them (understanding, knowledge, participation, lifestyle, citizenship, etc.) Having access to multiple participants and provoking discussion allows for the research questions to be addressed, but within an accessible and understandable conversation, allowing participants to talk freely and discuss their experience of library usage.

Pilot focus group

A pilot focus group was convened in September 2014 in order to test out the focus group method and to assess its appropriateness as a method for investigating the specific research questions. The Principle Investigator (PI) had access to Liverpool City Libraries, which was used in order to pilot the method.

The focus group was advertised using posters in and around the Liverpool City Library Services libraries, and was also included on the council Webpages and it was hoped that it would attract between 6 and 10 participants. Eight people eventually signed up for the focus group, which was an appropriate and workable number. They represented different users and demographics of the user population of Liverpool Central Library, including a gender balance and representation of different age groups, ethnicity and nationality.

The participants were asked to provide some personal details in advance of the discussion in order that demographics, representation and protected characteristics might be considered during the data evaluation stage.

	Age	Gender	Occupation	Nationality	Libraries used	Reasons
Participant 1	**45 - 54**	**F**	**Lecturer**	**Indian / British**	**Central**	**Books, Computers, Events**
Participant 2	**75 - 84**	**M**	**Retired professor**	**Indian**	**Central**	**Interest / Knowledge**
Participant 3	**65 - 74**	**F**	**Retired mental health worker**	**British**	**Breck Rd.**	**Borrowing, Reference, Computers**
Participant 4	**16 - 24**	**M**	**College student**	**British**	**Central**	**Reading, Computers**

Participant 5	55 - 64	M	Retired	German	Central	Computers, Internet
Participant 6	35 - 44	M	Photographer	Venezuelan	Central	Books, Borrowing, Internet
Participant 7	55 - 64	F	Retired	British	Central, Allerton, Childwall	Books, Studying
Participant 8	55 - 64	F	Social worker	British	Central, Allerton, Childwall	Books, Borrowing, Studying

Figure 1: Details and demographics of pilot focus group participants

Focus group theory suggests that a set of four therapeutic factors ordered within a focus group discussion represent stages of a discussion (Foulkes, 1964), and that time and consideration for each stage can optimise the usefulness and data outputs from said discussion. The first factor, *social integration* is the opportunity for equal participation by the participants within the discussion. The second factor, *mirror reaction* allows for participants to realise the shared values, anxieties and experiences that they have around the subject being discussed. The third factor, *condenser phenomenon*, is the collective conscious and unconscious of the group which enables participants to talk about the issues raised within the group discussion session, and the fourth factor, *exchange*, is the process of sharing information which forms the main part of a focus group discussion (Fern, 2001). This approach was applied during the pilot focus group, in order to test out methods of facilitating discussion within the broader methodology**.**

Ethics

Ethics is concerned with the attempt to formulate codes and principles of moral behaviour within the research process. Ethical enquiry needs to inform the reasons for action in the conduct of social research and should protect participants and the integrity of the inquiry (May, 2011). Taking this into consideration, the process of the focus group was explained to the participants, including the requirement for obtaining personal details which would be for analysis only and which would remain anonymous. An 'informed consent form' was distributed to the group, and this was explained and also read aloud to the participants. An anticipated longitudinal nature of the study was also explained in the hope that the focus group could be reconvened at a later stage of the research.

Focus group questions

The initial literature review findings were used to develop the questions which were then used in the pilot focus group. They were designed to provoke discussion which might inform the research. The questions were split into three general thematic areas, each of which was given an equal amount of time, with a fourth question intended as a 'wrap up' included briefly at the end of the interview:

1. Feelings and Attitudes

What are your feelings towards the public library (i.e. how do you feel when you are making use of the library?)

- What would you say your attitude was towards the public library?

2. Who are libraries for?

- Who do you think libraries are for and why?

- What do you think libraries contribute to society?

- What would happen if there were no libraries?

- What do you think about the future of information?

3. Citizenship

- What do you think is meant by the term citizenship?

- How do you think your citizenship is affected by using the library?

- Have you been able to do anything different as a result of using the library?

4. What do you like about the library?

The discussions from the pilot focus group were very rich and provided much useful qualitative data, which in turn informed a values framework which could be used in subsequent focus group discussions required for the empirical element of the study.

The values framework consists of three main themes:

- Values around the epistemic function of libraries

- Values around access to libraries, information and support

- Values around integration and inclusion

Analysis of pilot focus group data

When analysing the transcript of the pilot focus group and individual comments and observations made therein it became clear that whilst the participants themselves presented a diverse mix of public library users. They were in agreement that their library service was indeed very valuable and there was a sense of pride in having access to their local and central libraries. The participants had a lot of praise for the physical space, the resources and the staff support in general as well as the concept of 'library' and the services and resources that they had access to. The discussions and observations from the focus group were very enlightening and in themselves allowed for a deeper understanding of potentially why people choose to use public library services, how they do so and how they benefit as individuals and community

It is this benefit/advantage perspective which the research project aims to explore as it seeks to understand how libraries play a role and have an impact on the citizenry in the United Kingdom. Therefore, the data generated from the initial pilot group discussions validated the questions used and the values framework was agreed upon as a tool for subsequent focus group discussions.

Analysis of the focus group method

Strengths of the focus group method include: enabling proactive discussion in a safe environment; targeting questions so that the themes which emerged from the literature review can be addressed; capturing anecdotal evidence; validating anecdotal evidence through asking participants to reflect on the other participants' observations. The pilot focus group did indeed provide a safe platform through which the participants could engage with the research and the questions posed and allowed all the participants to usefully contribute to the discussion.

Potential weaknesses of the focus group method identified included: Risk of the discussion being dominated by one or two individuals; the discussion becoming a platform for feeding back on specific library services; discussions taking different directions leading to insufficient time to cover all the questions.

All of these potential weaknesses could be mitigated though effective and measured facilitation of the focus group and an appropriate facilitation method was developed. It is important to ensure that all participants have an opportunity to contribute and that the discussion is not dominated by individuals. Similarly the facilitator needs to be aware of keeping the discussion focused, needing to steer the discussion back if it begins to take a different direction. It is also important that the facilitator

uses accessible language, meaningful to the participants. For example most library users are unaware that they are participating in the exchange of social and transactional capital. Similarly, participants are not familiar with making conscious 'citizenship' decisions and the focus group questions and discussions need to be developed accordingly, taking this into account, but also ensuring that the research questions are addressed.

The pilot focus group had been well planned and executed and it was recommended that the same approach was taken for the future focus groups required for the research, making full use of the values framework that had now been developed. Some of the questions were amended to ensure clarity and understanding, which subsequently helped in keeping the discussion focused on the research questions.

Empirical study – Phase one (2015)

Approximately 30 public library authorities were then approached in order to obtain a representative selection of UK public library users, whilst at the same time trying to account for different types of library administration (i.e. county councils, city councils, urban and rural areas). From the responses received and the requirement to have a representative mix of library authorities, the following library services were then selected and used for the necessary sample:

- Liverpool (City council authority)

- Newcastle (City council authority)

- Edinburgh (City council authority)

- Lincolnshire (County council authority)

- Essex (County council authority)

- Devon (County council authority)

- Redbridge (Metropolitan borough council authority)

- Sutton (Metropolitan borough council authority)

During the Autumn and Winter of 2015, focus groups, with up to ten participants in each, were convened and carried out in each of the chosen localities 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 total of 53 participants were involved in the phase one focus group, which allowed for a critical mass of reflective and anecdotal data to be gathered in order to inform the research project.

Phase two - Longitudinal method (2016)

Focus groups can produce a number of different types of information and depending upon the research a large quantity of information might be desirable, for others, quantity might not be as important as the quality of the information (Fern, 2001). In the case of this research project both quantity and quality was required. The quantity had been addressed through the multiple focus groups approach, but it was felt another dimension was required in order to get the quality of information in order to fully inform the research question

Interval contingent design is acknowledged as an intensive method in social science research methodology. Interval contingent recording involves participants recording experience at regular and pre-determined intervals of time (Bolger and Laurenceau, 2013). Studies also suggest that longitudinal studies are effective ways in observing and evidencing social development (Lewis and McNaughton Nicholls, 2013) therefore a longitudinal approach was an integral part of the research method which meant that each of the focus groups needed to be convened on multiple occasions. A longitudinal approach means that each group of participants would therefore be re-convened on multiple occasions at pre-determined periodic intervals. 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.

A second round of focus groups (phase two) was completed during 2016 in each of the original locations, with as many of the original participants as possible. During the second round of focus groups, participants were asked to discuss and reflect specifically on their personal development and involvement in their communities during the previous 8-12 months (the period of time in between focus groups), and whether any of this had been facilitated through their library use. These themes were intended to generate more reflection and to focus in on both individual and community learning and development afforded through public library use. This has been the case and a mid-way analysis of the data suggests that a further round of focus groups are required in order to explore further some of the concepts which have come out of the first and second round focus groups.

Therefore, in order to further contribute to both the quantity and quality of information and data required for the research project a third and final round of focus groups is planned for Winter 2017, in which participants will be asked to focus on the generation and exchange of social and transactional capital and the role of the public library within the Information Society.

Analysis and findings of longitudinal data

The focus has been on the methodology applied to the project, and how this has been informed. Coding and analysis of the first two rounds of focus group is currently underway, but a full presentation of the findings will not be possible until the third and final round of focus groups has been completed. However, at this stage it is possible to report the main trends and themes identified through the research so far, and these include:

- A focus on the epistemic function of libraries as being primary to libraries achieving their social missions

- Print monographs being perceived of the main vehicle for the dissemination of knowledge and information

- Community ownership of public libraries

- Embedded digital citizenship within public library provision

- Inclusive and accessible libraries allowing for capital to be generated and exchanged

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the advantages of a longitudinal focus group methodology in public library performance measurement research. The methodology which has been applied is not widely used in Library and Information Science research but the empirical study is now far enough developed that the validity of the method can be discussed. The paper and discussion are therefore of value to anyone with an interest in the use of longitudinal focus groups, as a qualitative method for measuring and demonstrating library performance.

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