​**Introduction**

There is a general acceptance that public libraries contribute to ‘community’, and at least have the *potential* to have a very positive impact on civil society. (Varheim, 2007). This ‘impact’ is longitudinal, or 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). However, whilst libraries perform this multi-functional role, reaching out to citizens and spanning across different types of community provision, the value of libraries, in times of austerity, appears to be under increased scrutiny by the local authorities running them

**Purpose**

The purpose of this paper is to report back on a PhD research project currently being carried out, which seeks to investigate and demonstrate 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 used in order to ‘measure’ this impact and value.

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 & Altman, 2010, p.10). Similarly, social impact is frequently associated with public library services and the impact that they have on their communities and constituents (Kerslake & Kinnel, 1997, p.12).

With this discussion in mind, two main research questions have emerged which form the basis of enquiry for the project:

•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?

**Methodology/approach**

One way to address these questions is to talk to library users and ask them about how their library usage benefits them and has an impact on their development as active citizens.

Library users at eight different public library locations across the UK took part and initial focus groups, with up to ten participants in each, were convened and carried out at each location during 2015-16 as the first phase of the empirical study. The sample included a mix of rural county councils, city councils and metropolitan borough councils. Participants discussed and shared their experiences of using public libraries and reflected upon how their library usage had affected them (understanding, knowledge, participation, lifestyle, citizenship, etc.)  Having access to multiple participants (57 across the eight focus groups) has allowed for the research questions to be addressed, within an accessible and understandable conversation, allowing participants to freely discuss their experience of library usage.

Studies suggest that longitudinal studies are effective ways of observing and evidencing social development (Lewis & McNaughton Nicholls, 2013, 61-62) and a fundamental part of this methodology is its longitudinal approach. Because of the nature of the themes being discussed, it is desirable to reconvene each focus group, with the same participants at set intervals during the period of empirical research. 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.

Therefore, a second round of focus groups (phase two) was completed during 2016 in which participants were asked to discuss and reflect specifically on their personal development and involvement in their communities during the previous eight months (the period of time in between focus groups), and whether any of this had been facilitated through their library use.

A third and final round of focus groups, at the same locations, and with the same participants, is scheduled for Summer 2017.

**Findings**

Whilst the paper will focus largely on the methodology, there will also be an opportunity to discuss the findings of the first two rounds of focus groups. The main trends and themes identified so far include:

* A focus on the epistemic function of libraries
* 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

**Limitations**

There are limits in that the empirical study has only accessed eight public library authorities, which in effect is simply a sample with regard to UK active public library use.

**Conclusion**

This paper will discuss the advantages and limitations of a longitudinal focus group methodology in public library performance measurement research. The paper will also bring together the findings and analysis of the longitudinal focus groups and will discuss some of the ways in which public libraries demonstrate value and impact on the development of individual and community citizenship.

**Originality and value**

The methodology used in this piece of research is not widely used and the empirical study is now far enough on that the validity of the method and of the initial findings can be discussed. The paper and discussion therefore will be of value to anyone with an interest in the use of longitudinal focus groups, as a qualitative method for measuring and demonstrating library performance.

**References**

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