

Welcoming migrants in a local library in Paris

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Abstract:

Located in a deprived area in Paris, France, The Vaclav Havel public library has been more and more visited by migrants for the last 3 years. Most of them are young men from Afghanistan and Sudan or Eritrea, on their way to England or asking for asylum in France. Their presence has led librarians to provide specific services to them such as workshops, French lessons, administrative information and individual support. Besides, we strive to facilitate our rules and think about making the library easier for non-French speakers. On the other hand, we try to enable a better coexistence of our users and promote the library as a peaceful and welcoming place for everyone.

Keywords: migrants, social mission, public libraries, services

Background:

Designed to be wide open to everyone in a deprived district of Paris, the Vaclav Havel library is a new local amenity, part of the Parisian network of 58 libraries. At its very beginning, it had been implemented as a venue mainly oriented towards teens and young adults (videogames, homework help and a great range of activities). However, we have assumed social missions, with free services such as public writer and reading or digital workshops to foster local livinghood. Since it is located near asylum offices in a district that hosts many migrants, we expected this library to be attractive to migrants and therefore planned to organize French conversation workshop for them.

Nowadays, France does not provide enough facilities to welcome migrants properly and little is done to take them on. For this reason libraries can appear to them as places to get away from coldness and boredom, and to get access to power supply and sanitary facilities.

Besides, the international migration crisis has effects on our library, and we have welcomed more and more young and lonely migrants coming from Afghanistan, Eritrea or Sudan. This background challenges the role of our small public library: which services are we able to provide and how far can we go? A quick example may illustrate the difficulties we have to cope with. In order to register in Parisian libraries, you need to give ID document with a photo. Migrants usually wait months and months to obtain such a paper. So, we decided to override this regulation and to accept any kind of document, in order not to pull them away from libraries.

A progressive policy

Before the opening of our library in 2013, following the inspiration of other experiences, we wanted to set up French conversation workshops. At that time, we were mainly targeting, among other audiences, migrants setting up in Paris. Actually, if we did meet this public, who came (alone or through associations), we also welcomed more and more asylum seekers on their way to the UK. Though they came in for internet access and power supply, they gradually started to join our workshop, encouraged by librarians. At first, that workshop took place every two weeks, except during school holidays. We realized afterwards how confusing such a schedule was for foreigners, and decided to turn it into a weekly activity, including during the holidays.

Moreover, one of our patrons, a French teacher of Iranian origin, offered to provide French courses for Farsi-speakers 2 hours a week, free of charge. She is now volunteering for 2 years.

I might highlight another improvement, which was implemented based on experience and observation of the behavior of this public in the library: the need to facilitate our rules and adapt our space to non-French Speakers. In this view, we have undertaken a long-term work on communication, in order to make spaces identifiable and easy to understand without verbal explanation. Furthermore, the systematic translation in Farsi, Pashto and Arabic has been set up with the active participation of migrants themselves: today several people among our audience assure a volunteer translation in these 3 languages of our posters and messages. Under the influence of several libraries facing the same issue, the City of Paris has implemented registration documents and a presentation of the Parisian network in 12 different languages.



In addition, we have chosen to provide information about the asylum procedure, both via institutional and associative booklets, but also by offering monthly meetings with the NGO *France Terre d'Asile*. More and more, the library has become an information center towards a category of people who have difficulties to access this crucial information. To go further, we additionally propose in April and May 2016 workshops about tax return. Legal asylum seekers receive social benefits they have to mention in tax return, and are often confused by the administrative written language.

All these actions allow a better mutual understanding, and intend to tackle mental barriers between librarians and migrants. De facto, the later have more and more invested all areas of the library, e.g. attending movie screenings or playing video games. On the other hand, librarians have learnt about these patrons' lives, and their complicated administrative situations. Within the team, we often talk about this subject and exchange information to be updated about refugee laws, about the Parisian situation, etc. One of our colleagues has now a precise job description directly oriented towards migrants. Friendly relationships have taken place, as often between users and librarians in the libraries of the entire world!

A library for everyone

On one hand, we provide a differentiated reception, paying attention to people's needs. On the other hand, we try to enable a better coexistence of our users and promote the library as a peaceful and welcoming place. As a matter of fact, during the winter 2014-2015, while the number of migrants who visited the library was growing, we had to deal with openly xenophobic comments towards them. Though it was obvious for the whole team that a library has to welcome everyone, we had to make it relevant for everyone. To that purpose, we collaborated with a NGO *La Cimade* and participated in *Migrant'scène*, a national festival promoting awareness of migrations, every November.



During summer 2015, while we were working on this festival, the plaza in front of the library was occupied by a migrant camp. It had been evacuated several times and almost immediately set up again. Hundreds of men, women and children were living there in very hard sanitary conditions. This camp has generated different reactions from local residents, from hostile rejection to deep solidarity. The management of everyday life was complex for librarians. As everyone can imagine, it is not so easy to cross a camp on your way to work. Moreover, the rotation of summer leaves is not the best moment to have optimal communication between colleagues. Our hierarchy was overtaken by events, as we were, and it was not possible to anticipate anything.



We decided to offer what a public facility can offer: not deny them access to our toilets as any patron who enters the library, but not becoming the camp's restrooms. In addition, we facilitate them room bookings for French class and psychological assistance. But, even if it was a very hot period, we didn't allow them to plug fridges outside, for security reasons... During those 2 months, the library team has remained committed in its wish to host everyone the best way.

After this summer crisis, the importance of the Migrant' Scène festival grew bigger and bigger for us... We wanted it to foster meeting and communication in the neighborhood as an opportunity to heal the wounds of this episode. In order to offer attractive events, we contacted partners involved in human rights and who accepted to work for free or a very small remuneration:

- Alineaire, artistic game designers
- Underconstruction : designers of board games about migrations
- Local musicians, for 2 world music performances
- Comics writers Magid Ba and Pierre Fouillet ("Magic Majid")

Movie screenings, translated debates, concerts, exhibitions, board games and video games: they were lot of occasions to think, play and dance together as well! To be honest, the success of these events owe a lot to the commitment of everyone involved.

During the month of the festival, we did not want to reach only those who are interested in that topic, but to speak up on this theme of migrations in every activity we offer, in order to reach every component of our public. Therefore, we spread out this theme in our regular activities, such as reading clubs or children times.

Conclusion

From our first difficulties in 2014 to the serene climate we now enjoy, we have faced changing issues and challenges. This led us to develop a range of services in order to help migrants being part of the community and accessing information. The various difficulties we had to cope with have been actively constitutive of our evolving response to this situation: a better inclusion for all patrons and a peaceful cohabitation between them.

We deal with two main goals. First, to provide specific services for specific needs. At the same time, to give migrants the opportunity to be a public among others, and whose access to the whole library is enhanced.