

Learning from Each other: The Ulverscroft Experience

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Abstract:

The Ulverscroft Foundation supports projects which will have a positive effect on the quality of life of visually impaired people (blind and partially sighted) or people with a print disability. Aim of this paper is to show two examples of Ulverscroft/IFLA Best Practice Award and the influence they had on libraries involved, viewed from a few years distance.

In 2010, Yasmine Youssef from Bibliotheca Alexandrina had been given the opportunity to go on a one month study visit to DAISY South Africa. The purpose of visit was to work with the organization in assisting and training staff members in three organizations on the production of digital talking books as well as to learn and cooperate with professionals working in the production of accessible material for the print disabled. This study visit has helped develop Bibliotheca Alexandrina's production of accessible titles and services they offer to the print disabled. Through this experience, they were able to share and network with organizations whose vision and aim is to serve and improve services for the print disabled community.

In 2012, Jelena Lesaja from the Croatian Library for the Blind spent two weeks at NOTA, Danish National Library for Persons with Print Disabilities. The main purpose of study visit to Nota was to learn what services for the dyslectic users can a library for persons with print disabilities offer, to understand the basics of Danish approach to dyslexia and finally to see if and how can the Croatian Library for the Blind implement some of the ideas and solutions introduced. From a four year distance, Nota experience has introduced a whole new perspective of digital library and its services which inspired (and still inspires) innovative changes at the Croatian Library for the Blind.

Keywords: print disability, accessible publishing, digital talking books

1 INTRODUCTION

Uvlerscroft Foundation is a charity organization. The foundation was established in 1973 by Dr Frederick Thorpe, OBE, the founder of Ulverscroft Large Print Books Limited, which he formed in 1964, which is major commercial supplier of accessible format books in the UK and around the world.. The Ulverscroft Foundation funds projects that support and serve the needs of visually impaired people world-wide.

The Ulverscroft Foundation and the IFLA Libraries Serving Persons with Print Disabilities Section for many years now have offered to librarians working in the field of library services for the print disabled an awards programme (Ulverscroft/ IFLA Best Practice Award). The award is given annually to selected professionals from all over the world to assist the development of library services for the print disabled and to encourage the cooperation between library institutions serving these persons.

In this paper, two of the winners of the Best practice award will share their experience and the impact it had on the libraries involved.

2 STUDY VISIT TO DAISY SOUTH AFRICA:

Through the Ulverscroft/ IFLA LPD Best Practice award, I was able to go for a month in 2010 to work with DAISY South Africa. The organization was founded in 2009 by members of various regional organizations involved in the print disability field.

2.1 Purpose of the study Visit

The purpose of my visit was to share knowledge and experience with *DAISY South Africa*. The knowledge transfer envisioned did not only cope with the specifics of DAISY (Digital Accessible Information System) production when it comes to structural mark-up but also tackled the language specifics in double byte languages such as Arabic and Japanese. My main responsibilities were to give hands on advice and instruction on all aspects of DAISY production line design and implementation in three institutions serving the print disabled. As well as learning from South African professionals in the DAISY production the know-how and expertise needed to produce Digital Talking Books in foreign languages besides English.

2.2 The South African Experience

The Taha Hussein Library for the Blind and Visually Impaired (TH Library) is one of the many specialized libraries within the Bibliotheca Alexandrina. The TH Library started producing digital talking books in 2009. Staff members received extensive training on the production of DAISY titles from the DAISY Consortium, and also became an associate member of the consortium in the same year. And the study visit timing was opportune, to help me and my colleagues develop and improve the process of DAISY books production.

The Study visit organized by DAISY South Africa was conducted in three organizations: The South African National Council for the Blind (SANCB), Open Air School and Madrassa An-Noor for the Blind.

On the first week, I conducted a training to four visually impaired staff members of *SANCB* on the DAISY technology; how to playback DAISY titles and how to produce DAISY books using accessible production tools. The aim of this training was to enable blind professionals to produce fully accessible materials.

During my week stay in Pretoria, I visited the UNISA university library, and met with DAISY specialists there who kindly shared their experience with me and gave me a tour of the library and showcased their activities and efforts to make text books accessible for print disabled students. We had discussions on the challenges they faced in converting text books to accessible formats and their efforts to deliver university material to students with the available resources.

In my second week, I worked with Shakila Maharaj, director of DAISY South Africa. I gave her an overview of the DAISY production and how to use DAISY playback tools. We also worked on an Action plan for establishing a network for DAISY specialists and trainers in South Africa. We also held extensive discussions and exchanged ideas on how to promote the production and dissemination of accessible publishing in Africa. During this week, I joined her meetings and discussions with many stake holders in the field. This highlighted the challenges and issues regarding making touristic destinations accessible.

In my third week, I conducted training in the *Open Air School*, a school for students with special educational needs in Durban to teachers and therapists. This school is an inspiration to anyone working in the community serving persons with special needs. It was the first time for me to see a school that integrates different disabilities in one class room, while giving them the necessary tools needed for the learning experience to be as accessible as possible. In addition to the follow up they do outside the classrooms in terms of offering a variety of therapies (psychological, speech, physio and occupational therapies) to students depending on their needs, to help improve their performance in their educational experience.

The aim of this training was to enable the school staff to convert the school materials and especially exams into DAISY format depending on open source tools with low costs. By the end of the training, the teachers were able to produce exam papers and a Microsoft Office manual into DAISY.

During my one visit in the school, they provided me with an excellent and unique opportunity to observe occupational therapy sessions, as well as, observing the accommodative teaching methods adopted in their classes. These classes integrate children with varying abilities and needs in spite of that, teachers create and adapt their curriculum to meet each and every student learning needs.

In my fourth week, I had a workshop with the DAISY Specialist of *Madrassa An-Noor for the Blind*, an Islamic school for students with visual impairment. The school has an audio library that produces digital talking titles in Arabic, English and sometimes multiple languages such as Swahili, French and Urdu.

In this workshop I learnt how to use sound editing tools to enhance and edit audio material, and also to produce bilingual (English/Arabic) text in DAISY format. We also worked on some samples of an English translation of the Quran (Holy Muslim book). During this workshop, several common issues in producing a bilingual DAISY book were raised, which resulted in many solutions overcome many of these production challenges.

2.3 Lessons learnt:

The South African experience and working with DAISY South Africa had left me with so much knowledge, inspiration and ideas to improve the services the TH library offers. I gained more technical expertise in the field of talking books production, DAISY technology and on a wider perspective about the services offered to print disabled patrons of the library. The experience of producing multiple language materials enriched my experience in the production of DAISY titles. We have maintained our network and contact with the DAISY South Africa, and the *Madrassa An-Noor*, sharing experiences knowledge and also exchanging audio books.

Six years later, this experience has helped empower the development of the DAISY book production at Bibliotheca Alexandrina making it a leader in the Arab region for the DAISY technology. We have managed to produce digital talking books in Arabic, and through these years we have learnt to overcome issues faced when working with double byte and right-to-left scripts like Arabic. So far we have produced 170 titles in Arabic covering a wide range of subjects. We are currently in the process of launching an online library for digital talking books to the library patrons.

The open Air school experience whose motto is “we can and we will”, has reshaped our perspective of services we offer to the print disabled. And we have managed to offer new programs to the visually impaired community inspired by what I have seen in the school. We started to integrate young children with visual impairment with their sighted peers in numerous workshops and events to help improve their communication with their community and help both the visually impaired and the sighted learn more about each other. Another workshop inspired by Open Air School, is the pre-braille skills that helps pre-learners develop their tactile skills. The program teaches children with visual impairment to enhance their tactile perception, tactual discrimination and fine motor skills in order to prepare them to read and produce braille later.

On the South African Side, DAISY South Africa continues to disseminate accessible publishing through offering training and support to institutions offering inclusive services. This year, they conducted EPUB 3 training for a major NGO named SA Braille Services, who for the first time will now produce inclusive publications. This organization is the largest Braille producer in Africa. They also offered training to major banks and other industries in South Africa. Both training workshops were done in collaboration with the DAISY Consortium.

Madrassa An-Noor for the Blind, has gone so far during these six years, they have launched an online audio library that has subscribers from all over the world. They have produced 116 DAISY titles in DAISY 2.02 and DAISY 3 formats, they distribute these titles to their students and members of their resource centre. Books are in the medium of English and Arabic and sometimes multiple languages.

3 THE DANISH APPROACH: 2 WEEKS STUDY VISIT TO NOTA¹

In 2012, with a help of Ulverscroft/IFLA Best Practice Award, I spent two weeks at the Copenhagen’s NOTA Danish National Library for Persons with Print Disabilities. The main purpose of my visit was to learn what services for the dyslexic users can a library for persons with print disabilities offer, to understand the basics of Danish approach to dyslectic and

¹ Detailed report is available through the Ulverscroft foundation website
<http://www.foundation.ulverscroft.com/LesajaReport2012web.htm> (accessed August 1st 2016)

finally to see if and how can the Croatian Library for the Blind implement some of the ideas and solutions introduced. (I will use the acronym CLB instead of the Croatian Library for the Blind further on).

In a few years prior to my visit to Nota, small but persistent change in the population of CLB users occurred. Core of CLB users consists of blind and partially sighted people but small number of patrons, mostly children and youngsters, with dyslexia warned us that out there might be a growing population of potential users in need of our services. The questions that we asked ourselves were: 'what can CLB offer to the potential user?' and 'do we have the capacities for fulfilling their needs?' We've decided to improve our services in a way that our core population of users would also benefit from and the idea was to learn from the best. The word was spread that libraries in Scandinavia were the most experienced with services for people with dyslexia, and Nota library from Copenhagen, Denmark, caught our eye.

Colleagues at Nota made intense and truly beneficial schedule for my 2 weeks visit. At Nota, I was introduced with all the basic services and production steps which gave me a good basis to comprehend the special services and projects for the dyslectic users. This big Nota tour has showed me the whole new perspective of the world where a standard print is not a standard. It was my first encounter with the true digital library, a library that is at the same time closed for the public but open and very alive in a parallel universe of a virtual reality. During my visit to Copenhagen I also attended ORD 12 Conference on dyslexia with speeches and workshops held by various field experts. This has given me an overview of the basic problems and some of the most usual approaches to dyslexia.

Thanks to the already mentioned program made by my hosting library I was also able to visit public libraries which implemented service for the dyslectic users within the public area, the approach that was direct but discreet at the same time. I must mention that my impression was that even in the very well organized society like Denmark's, when it comes to putting ideas into practice at the end everything depends on the individual(s) in charge of it. One of many benefits from my visit to Denmark was meeting these inspiring individuals.

So, from a four years distance, what have changed? When I returned to CLB I was fighting this notion that Danish experience left me with: I wanted to implement everything I saw there. But, I had to come to my senses. I kept detailed diary of my Danish visit so I was able to present some ideas that could realistically be implemented in our library. Before we could open ourselves fully to the dyslectic users, it was clear to us that we had to create the download service. Our capacities, based on the lend-and-return approach, could not meet the needs of incoming population of users. Thanks to the Nota experience, vision of the digital library and its services became clearer and we have been able, and still are able to adjust it to our library's needs, economic capacities and social backgrounds. Download service, launched in the spring of 2015, brought satisfaction for many of our core users. Incoming patrons, especially children with dyslexia, are encouraged to use it as the basic lending option.

We've made appealing promo materials for our download service and advertise it in our community, demonstrating its benefits and simplicity. But we still have to build stronger approach towards the potential users, stronger cooperation with NGO's for dyslexia, professors and school librarians. The big Croatian initiative on dyslexia awareness is on the way and CLB will be joining it.

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Ulverscroft Foundation , Nota, DAISY South Africa.