

Library for All – also for the print disabled

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Abstract:

A print disabled person is a person who cannot effectively read print because of a visual, physical, perceptual, developmental, cognitive or learning disability. In Finland, the project Library for All was developed to reach out to users who cannot read standard printed texts. The project began in October 2013 and will end in December 2015. Library for All is a joint project between state-owned Celia Library for the print disabled and public libraries in Finland. The aim is to make available talking books produced by Celia in the services and collections of public libraries. This project is designed to provide equal access to literature and information for persons with print disabilities. This paper provides an overview of the project and the working methods used, while including information about how this service could be implemented in other libraries.

Keywords: Finland, vision impaired, disabled, literacy, equal access.

Introduction

Library for All is a joint project between the state-owned Celia Library for the print disabled and public libraries in Finland. The aim is to include talking books produced by Celia in the services and collections of public libraries. This project is designed to provide equal access to literature and information for persons with print disabilities. A print disabled person is someone who cannot effectively read print due to a visual, physical, perceptual, developmental, cognitive or learning disability. In Finland, the *Library for All* project was initially set up to reach out to users who cannot read standard printed texts.

Background

The number of people with print disabilities is growing. According to the IFLA Manifesto for libraries (2012), there are over 161 million blind and partially sighted people in the world. There are even more people with other print disabilities such as physical, perceptual,

developmental, cognitive and learning disabilities. Altogether, this makes up a very large number of people who cannot read a conventional book, magazine or website. Thus, the main target groups of the project *Library for All* are elderly people, children with learning and reading difficulties, and the visually impaired. Target groups also include other print disabled users such as people with intellectual disabilities and people with mental disorders.

In Finland particularly, there is a large and rapidly increasing number of seniors citizens who are visual impaired or who have other disabilities. Dyslexia is also more commonly recognized, so there is a growing need for talking books among young people. Although the mean literacy rate of Finnish adults is excellent by international standards, according to the 2012 Program for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) study, eleven percent of the adult population in Finland aged between sixteen and sixty-five are poor readers(approx 370,000 people). This group of poor readers could possibly include persons with reading and learning disabilities such as dyslexia.

Motivation of the project

The project began in October 2013 and since then staff at Celia Library have worked closely with pilot libraries around Finland. Key motivators behind the project included needs from both Celia Library and the public libraries. It was noted that the Celia Library is able to reach only a small percentage of potential users. When the project began Celia had about twenty-five thousand patrons. In the Nordic countries it is estimated that at least 5 % of the population could benefit from accessible literature such as talking books, which translates as at least 250,000 potential patrons in Finland.

Finland has a widely spread network of public libraries which could serve as local service points for users who need talking books. A similar service model has been used in Sweden where accessible materials such as talking books which are produced by the Swedish Agency for Accessible Media (MTM, Myndigheten för tillgängliga medier), are available in public libraries.

A joint project was also in the interests of public libraries. Librarians around Finland are aware that there are users who need materials other than print. Hence, a joint program was recognized as a natural step to serve those target populations who are not able to read standard printed books due to illness or disability. For local library users, talking books from Celia represents a remarkable improvement for print disabled users. The commercial production of audio books in Finland is very low, with approximately one hundred titles published per year, whereas the Celia Library produces approximately one thousand talking book titles annually.

Celia Library's book production is based on Section 17 of the Finnish Copyright Act which gives the library the right to produce accessible literature. The collection includes talking books, Braille books and tactile books. Talking books account for nearly 99 per cent of the library's loans. Talking books are digital audio books which comply with the DAISY standard (Digital Accessible Information System). Based on MP3 and XML, the standard has advanced features in addition to those of a traditional audio book, so users can search, place bookmarks, precisely navigate line-by-line, and regulate the speaking speed.

A new talking book service

The project *Library for All* is based on cooperation and open dialogue between Celia Library and the local public libraries. Representatives from disability groups have also been included

in the project, for example the Finnish Federation of the Visually Impaired and the Finnish Diverse Learners' Association. Cooperation with pilot libraries began in March 2014 when the first round of thirty-four libraries participated in seminars and workshops produced by Celia Library. The participants were able to plan the model for the talking book service together. They also had the time to practice using talking books via a web service.

Workshops also delivered a bunch of ideas about the materials needed in the local libraries. An important result of this first collaboration was the production by Celia Library of a handbook for librarians and advertising materials for public library patrons.

The talking book service was introduced to clients in the pilot libraries in September, 2014. The main focus was on online services. Libraries offer guidance and access to the Celia online service where there are forty thousand talking book titles available to download or to listen to online. Some libraries also offer a collection of DAISY talking books on CD. During this pilot of the project a lot of useful information was gathered about how the service could be implemented in local public libraries. As part of the pilot, surveys for end users and librarians were completed to obtain as much feedback as possible. As a result some improvements were made and the project was further expanded to new public libraries in Finland in the spring of 2015. By May 2015 there were 140 libraries across Finland delivering the new talking book service to print disabled users. The project will end in December 2015, but the service itself is established permanently and the cooperation between Celia Library and the public library sector is an ongoing process.

New target groups and enthusiastic users

Many of the librarians working with the project at the local level have none or very little previous knowledge about accessible literature such as talking books, easy-to-read literature and tactile books. This may be a consequence of the divergent library field. Services for people with print disabilities have been centered in Celia Library and although some cooperation with public libraries has existed in the past, it has been minimal and disorganized. However, much work has been done at Celia Library to make services more usable for public libraries and patrons. Consequently, the first goal of the project was to raise the awareness of the library staff.

It has been exhilarating to notice that, despite a lack of knowledge about accessibility, librarians working in public libraries do recognize many patron groups that could benefit from talking books, and they are enthusiastic about serving these patrons better. These groups include the elderly, children who have difficulties in learning to read, the visually impaired, people with intellectual disabilities and people with mental disorders. The most familiar target group for librarians was seniors who cannot read standard printed books and instead listen to audio books or read large print texts.

In the local libraries there has been a lot of enthusiasm about talking books and there are many excellent examples of active libraries and librarians. One good example is Turku City Library from the southwest coast of Finland where the librarians have been particularly active in developing the talking book service. They have included talking books in the public library network in the Turku area and developed original ways of using talking books with different target groups. For example, they have organized talking book reading clubs for people with intellectual disabilities. There is also an ongoing cooperation between the library and local prisons where prison inmates use talking books. All the public libraries working in the project have been active in creating partnerships with local disability groups like dyslexia

associations or associations for the visually impaired. They have engaged the print disabled users and have been active in asking and implementing feedback from the users.

Reception of the service by patrons has been very positive. Many patrons knew very little about talking books. The variety of users is as wide as it should be in the public library, ranging from young children with dyslexia to ninety year olds with visual impairments. For many of these users reading has a special importance. For a child with dyslexia talking books can play a major role in opening the world of reading, and for the elderly at home talking books can be a priceless pastime.

The end goal for the library is provide an entry point to reading and literature for all users. Talking books in the library create equal opportunities and advance literacy in the print disabled target groups. It is part of the public library's role to cater for all users and offer a wide variety of formats including print, audio and talking books, video, tactile books, and easy-to-read literature etc.

Towards a more inclusive library

During the project, there has been much discussion concerning the diverse ways of approaching reading and literacy. According to some professionals in the library field, printed text is represented as the right way to read, while talking books or audio books are sometimes seen as a temporary phase, for example in the life of a dyslectic person. However, staff at Celia Library aim to encourage the view that there are many ways of reading and talking books and other accessible book formats should be given equal importance when reading and learning.

It is essential to include accessibility issues in the education of future librarians. Therefore Celia Library collaborated with Turku University of Applied Sciences to develop a customized course about accessible library services and literature for the students in library and information studies. This course included a lecture by an accessibility expert, workshops about talking books and a teamwork assignment for the students. In teams of four to five people the students organized events or presentations about talking books for target audiences in schools, assisted living buildings, libraries and homes for the elderly homes.

As a spin-off from the *Library for All* project, a work group developed an accessibility checklist for use in public libraries. The work group consists of a number of professionals working with accessibility issues in different organizations. Work is steered by the *Culture for All Service* which promotes cultural services which are inclusive and include diverse audiences. The first version of the checklist will be introduced to public libraries in Finland in June 2015. It will include practical tips and information about accessibility in collections, services and communications for the library. Attention will also focus on developing digital library services that are accessible and usable to all users.

Conclusion

Since Celia Library began the *Library for All* project in October 2013, awareness of talking books has spread rapidly in Finland. The use of talking books has increased and in 2014 Celia Library received a record number of new patrons. In 2014 loans of talking books by Finnish public libraries also increased by fifty percent. In the future it is hoped that current law concerning public libraries in Finland will include mention of accessibility and accessible literature. At the moment, the Library Act states that public libraries should promote the equal opportunities of citizens to access education, literature and the arts. For public libraries,

this is a chance to improve library accessibility and literacy skills in the print disabled user groups. For the patron local service is a remarkable improvement. The role of the public library should be inclusive and the library should cater for all clientele in society including people with disabilities.

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