

Literacy and Reading - Best Practices in Malmö, Sweden

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Abstract:

Malmö is the third largest city in Sweden with a population of 300,000. It is a multicultural city with more than 30% of its population being born abroad and it is also a young city with an average age of 38.6 years per citizen. Malmö public library has worked with a range of activities promoting literacy and reading among the target groups. Such activities are Tea-parties on fantasy sub-genres, putting bookshelves in a police station and lending an empty business premises in a shopping mall to create a place for literature and creativity in a different place. Success factors include defining the target groups, having a good budget for the project(s), setting goals as well as work methods on how to obtain those goals, and being persistent in finding ways on how to reach people still not coming to the library. Last but not least, it is when we collaborate with others that we get the best results.

Keywords: Literacy Matters, reading, Sweden.

Introduction

Malmö is the third largest city in Sweden with a population of 300,000. It is a multicultural city with more than 30% of its population being born abroad; and with half of its pre-school children speaking a language other than Swedish with their parents. The city is represented by 178 countries from all over the world. Malmö is also a young city, with an average age of 38.6 years per citizen with 22% younger than 20 years old, and 62% of the population between the ages 20-64. The city has twelve public libraries, including the main city library. And, like many larger cities, Malmö has a variety of socio-economic resident areas suffering from challenges of integration, and in these areas we have target libraries aiming to reach the goal of an equal and accessible library service. To promote literacy and to establish a low threshold for encountering the services of the libraries, there is crucial work to be made with activities promoting reading and literacy in different ways. This paper presents some examples of literacy initiatives from Malmö.

Literature for readers from Somalia and Somali literature for readers

The public library received funding in joint co-operation with a Somali association with the aim to promote the public library as a meeting place and as a place for inspiration. The

Somalis in Malmö are an active group, but unemployment and integration present some real challenges. The purpose of this project was to promote Somali writers and Somali culture to the public and the users of the library, by showcasing Somali writers in the library, and also by having one of the evenings at the International Authors' stage visited by the Somali writer Nuruddin Farah.

Another objective of the project was to cooperate with the Somali association on a Somali cultural festival. The Somali book collection, within the project, will also be looked examined to see how, and if, it meets client demands. The library has also set up book circles – one in Somali and one in Swedish – with both circles focusing on books written by Somali writers. With this project the library hopes that the Somali population will visit the public library more frequently and look upon it as a natural meeting place. The project is also designed to raise awareness with the general public about good Somali writers.

Tea parties using fantasy genres

The Malmö Public library has a well-established cooperative relationship with the local Sci-Fi bookstore, and this collaboration has resulted in a tea party. This event is a combination of a classic tea party with a lecture on fantasy sub-genres such as Steampunk and Fractured Fairytales. The staff from the book store deliver the lecture, and the library hosts the event and arranges all practical aspects of the event.

All visitors are encouraged to dress up in costumes representing their chosen genre, which gives an extra twist to the party. The result is the fusion of a formal lecture that deepens the knowledge of or introduces this specific literary genre to participants who either know nothing about fantasy genres, or who want to know more; with an easy-going, informal, social event. The tea party proves that people from different generations, knowledge bases and gender can be brought together because they are curious, want more knowledge or just want to have fun. This autumn, a second Sci-Fi tea party has been scheduled and will focus on new sub-genres such as Dystopian literature.

Widening the international authors' stage to include writers for young adults and cross over sections

In 2010 Malmö public library started the *International Authors' Stage* which is an ongoing event where many authors have made guest appearances. Paul Auster, Margaret Atwood, Nawal El Sadaawi and Silvia Avallone are some of the noted writers who have visited our library. The concept is more or less a live talk show with an international author and a well-matched host, having an interesting talk on stage the library.

The majority of audience members initially were women who were already familiar with the library. These are loyal clients or regulars who re-visit the library for borrowing books and visiting book circles, but also for participate in other programs. However, the number of men in the audience has increased over the years, although their presence is highly dependent on the visiting author, eg. the males were in high numbers when Conn Iggulden and Paul Auster were guests on the stage.

After some years of running these talk shows, the library decided to broaden the range of authorship being offered to the audience. We wanted to give something to young adults as well, as they are a target group for our library. The *International Authors' Stage* is also a costly event and as such, it is nothing but fair to widen the demographics to also include the

next generation of readers. We stipulated that at least two programs per year should be directed at young book lovers by presenting young adult writers, as well as *crossover* authors. As a result, we now see mixed audiences involving both the regulars and young people, discovering a new range of authors and genres. The library staff consider such investments and the target marketing we are doing in social media, will make young people more likely to come to the library, recognize its versatility and explore all of its treasures.

Sci-Fi book circle for young adults

A main target group for our library is the young adult age group. This group are also a prioritized in all Library policy documents. While staff meet a lot of students in the library using the space as a place for studying; they rarely participate in Library programs or using the library for other things. Young people in this age group who are not students seldom visit us.

As a way of meeting the goals for this target group, the library arranged a book circle in English using only Sci-Fi and Fantasy literature. The participants in the book circle read one book from each Fantasy sub-genre such as Space Opera, Urban Fantasy and Steam Punk. Staff wanted to showcase the variety of sub-genres and also motivate young people to visit the library by demonstrating a selection from our wide-ranging collection that is interesting, captivating, up-to-date collection and free to the public for borrowing. A core group of attendees returned throughout the circle, but each time there was someone new that we had not seen before. One man with reading disabilities struggled, but managed to read an entire book just because he was so interested in the genre. While this was a success in itself, he also helped library staff to realize that there were very few audio books available within the Fantasy genre. Since then, we have made a lot of suggestions to publishers on the provision of audiobooks in this category.

Literature in the gaps

The library created a project called *Literature in the Gaps* which aims to reach young adults in the 15-25 year age range. The idea was to utilize the gaps or free spaces - both the physical and mental ones in our society - to make room for literature and to provide a shortcut to the library. This project also included a book circle, as well as a movie based on a graphic novel. Furthermore, we reached out to the public by placing bookshelves in places such as the passport office at the police station and other places where people sit and wait, often for a long time. We also obtained access to empty business premises inside a shopping mall and created a temporary room/scene for activities all focusing on literature, poetry and music. The goal was to introduce people to our world by making literature visible in nontraditional and new places. The book shelf at the police station was a resounding success and people read by themselves, to their children and even used the opportunity to take the books home. It was also interesting to be at a shopping mall, catching peoples' interest using books, poetry and puzzles and to offer a place to hang out surrounded by books and words.

HBTQ certified – now an even better library!

Malmö Public Library is one of the first libraries to get a HBTQ certification (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender/Transsexual and Queer). That means that all staff have participated in a six month educational program consisting of lectures and workshops. What the different terms can mean to people identifying as something else than heterosexual and male/female both in the present and in history were discussed. We also talked about books and films that can represent love and life of different kinds or of more than two genders. A major topic of discussion was how the Library can be improve the promotion literature that is relevant to all

of our patrons. This course has widened the librarians' knowledge in books and films and has also made us aware on how we meet, talk and display things in the library.

Conclusions

The library has a lot to gain in the work of improving literacy, and promoting literature when we collaborate with others. In this process it is important to:

- define the target groups;
- make a budget for the project(s);
- set goals as well as work methods on how to obtain those goals; and
- be persistent in finding ways on how to reach people who are still not coming to the library.

When we interact in new, nontraditional locations or with a range of people, Library staff have learnt that we are able to reach new audiences by working collaboratively with each other to meet the needs of the target group. By appearing in new, nontraditional places and including activities such as pop-up-activities and other art forms as well as literature such as music and film, the Library increases and adds value to what it can offer to the general public. It is also rewarding for the librarians to realize how much the library do and how many more people it can reach when engaging in unexpected partnerships such as the police or a shopping mall. Trying new methods of presenting the Library is also rewarding and satisfying, and justifies the investments made time, personnel and money to reach our target groups.