

Identifying and Implementing Diversity

Collaborative Action-Based Research at Mariestad Public Library on LGBTQ Issues

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Abstract

In Sweden, a high degree of awareness of human rights and civil liberties is presumed to be well-founded in society. This awareness is expected to be common practice in public libraries which, in extension, means that library staff and operations have an open attitude towards diversity. Libraries are considered a significant public meeting place, open to everyone and found in every municipality by law.

Mariestad Public Library is dedicated to working with diversity in different areas. Democratic values are thought to permeate library operations in general, including interculturism and services to the physically and/or mentally challenged. This is an ongoing process of daily awareness that has been created and developed over time. Considering this dedication, it is interesting to focus on an area only recently appearing on the library's agenda, namely gender and LGBTQ-issues, through which a different challenge is discovered. In the drive to live up to library standards, the question of how to approach gender and LGBTQ on a local level is being explored.

So, how to identify the issues? What steps are best taken to develop a sound approach to this "newly found" diversity? Next, how to implement new understanding and knowledge throughout library operations? One seemingly successful approach is through coactions between the library and LGBTQ advocates such as RFSL - The Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Rights. This is a first step in the process of attaining a well-informed team of employees. Other measures that are in various stages of implementation are well-informed choices in media purchasing, marketing strategies and planning culture activities from a broad perspective.

Keywords: LGBTQ, inclusiveness, human rights, library operations, diversity

Introduction

Sweden has a strong library culture, but there are always areas in need of exploration, development and improvement. Issues of inclusiveness are areas that are not yet fully discovered or explored. This paper will expand on the process of awareness making on a local level through collaboration between the public library and LGBTQ (Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning) -advocates. It presents a project of local action-based research, and I have come to understand that it is in this type of small scale, in-house research that many questions can be both successfully raised and at least partially answered.

In Sweden, a high degree of awareness of human rights, civil liberties and gender equality is generally presumed to be well-founded in society. Furthermore, this awareness is expected to be common practice in public libraries which, in extension, means that library staff and operations have an open attitude towards diversity. Libraries are considered a significant public meeting place and are open to everyone. Legislation such as The Library Act (SFS 1996:1596) has ensured that a public library is to be found in every municipality throughout the country.

With this being said, it is interesting to note that although there is legislation that ensures public access to free library service, and legislation that protects against discrimination on the basis of sex, gender identification, ethnicity, sexual orientation or age, the Anti-Discrimination Act (Diskrimineringslagen 2008:567), there are still areas in society with discrimination, prejudice and acts of homophobic violence. There are also gaps in the knowledge about, and understanding of LGBTQ issues and normativity that on a sub-conscious level risk excluding individuals, their actions and their life styles, denying them otherwise prevailing rights and services in Swedish society.

RFSL is the Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Rights and is a non-profit organization with no affiliation with political or religious organizations. Being the country's strongest organization for LGBT rights, they do extensive work with information dissemination and have programs for education for organizations, institutions and state and private companies. There is an incipient interest in collaboration between libraries and RFSL.

The Swedish Library Association, a non-profit organization without political or religious affiliation, supports all types of libraries and library operations. One of several networks of the association is the LGBTQ Network, connecting library staff members at a number of libraries throughout the country. Mariestad Public Library is a member of the Swedish Library Association and myself, the youth librarian, a member of the LGBTQ Network.

The importance that education and learning play in the path towards understanding and acceptance *beyond* tolerance must not be understated. A proven method of furthering knowledge and understanding is through working collaboratively which is common practice in the sphere of public libraries in Sweden. Collaborations exist between libraries and any number of organizations, as well as with individuals and groups.

Background

Mariestad is a typical small city in central Sweden, with a public library as well as school libraries including a branch library to the University of Gothenburg. Mariestad Public Library is dedicated to continuously working with diversity in a number of different areas. Democratic values are thought to permeate the library's operations in general, including areas of diversity such as interculturism, language, and services to the physically and/or mentally challenged. This is an ongoing process, a process of daily awareness that has been created through education and numerous projects¹ as well as through interactivity with individuals, organizations and institutions. Strong lobbying groups at local, regional and national levels have strengthened the position of both individuals and groups, both inside and outside library walls. To a degree, an awareness of general norms and gender issues can be found in the selection of media and in recommending literature in different situations. It can also be seen in delivering library services and in dealings with the general public.

We have chosen to focus on an area that has only recently appeared on Mariestad Public Library's agenda, this area being gender and LGBTQ-issues, and social norms. When investigating how these issues are looked upon and dealt with on a strategic level, but perhaps even more importantly, on a daily basis, a different type of challenge is discovered. Through discussions and observations it has become evident that these are delicate issues and a rather unfamiliar sphere for library operations and personnel. In the drive to live up to library standards, the question of how to approach these matters on a local level is being explored.

Identifying the issues that need to be addressed is step one. In the case of Mariestad's library, this is something that has happened over time through observations of society as a whole as well as observations at the library. It could be a trickle of almost indiscernible derogatory comments and the lack of books and other media on the subject of LGBTQ, especially in the children and youth sections of the library. For years, there was only a handful of LGBTQ related books available for children and youth. (The lack of LGBTQ books is due to the lack of publishing and not unique for Mariestad.) In my daily work as head of the youth department I often think of how we express ourselves when speaking with children and youth, do we automatically say "your mother and father"? Or do we choose a more neutral language, for instance "one of your parents"?

So, how to identify the issues at hand? What steps are suitable in developing a sound approach to this "newly found" diversity? Next, how does one go about implementing new information and knowledge throughout library operations. Based on these questions, discussions, research and learning processes and LGBTQ issues in and outside of Sweden, the research questions posed are as follows:

How does one create a library organization's interest in, and knowledge about, seemingly invisible LGBTQ issues in library operations?

What steps are involved in strengthening skills and qualifications in the process of furthering development of a norm-critical approach?

As this research must be seen as a small scale undertaking, there is not adequate space to fully delve into all research that has been done on LGBTQ issues in reference to library policies or library services. However, keeping in mind that the focal point of this paper concerns how diversity can be identified, and once identified, how change can be initiated, there are a few examples I would like to mention. The first is the public library in Hallonbergen, Sweden. Through extensive collaboration with the RFSL organization, Hallonbergen Public Library was recently awarded the prestigious LGBT-certification which ensures a high quality of services and staff in LGBT issues and inclusiveness. The Rainbow Library in Umeå, also in Sweden, is another model library dealing with these issues.

Research outside Sweden

Studies in the United Kingdom and U.S.A. have shown that when it comes to questions of LGBT libraries, access to LGBT literature and other media play an important role for the LGBT community as a whole, and more specifically for youth struggling with identity issues. Elizabeth Chapman² at The University of Sheffield, England, has done extensive research on the availability and importance of lgbt-related fiction for young readers, as well as on the importance of a knowledgeable and open-minded staff. Her research sheds interesting light on the situation in a number of public libraries in the United Kingdom. In Ann Curry's³ article "If I ask, will they answer?" the focus lies on public library reference service. The results of these two studies have significant similarities and both point to the fact that the importance of a knowledgeable and open-minded staff should not be underestimated.

Learning processes

The importance of a learning environment must be considered and it is not surprising to find that a supportive work climate leads to the best results. This is true on an individual level as well as on an operational level.⁴

I would like to emphasize that I am not implying that the work environment at Mariestad Public Library is inhibiting or restricting in questions of intercultural, tolerance and inclusiveness. On the contrary, the work climate is open and permissive with a staff that takes on great responsibilities managing library operations and services on a daily as well as a long term basis. The absence of LGBTQ questions is not due to any reluctance on the part of the employer or employees, it simply points to an area that up until now has passed unseen. This means that once these questions are raised, there are greater possibilities for change.

With David A. Kolb's model of experience based learning, Cato R.P. Bjørndal⁵ illustrates the cycle of actions that a learning process can entail with four main steps which are: to experience, reflect, generalize and theorize, and to act. A collective learning experience means for instance that a group of employees act together, generating experience, integrating and interpreting these experiences, and finally acting anew. Per-Erik Ellström states "When we talk about developing organizations we often use the expression "a learning organization". Such an organization is characterized by individual and collective learning processes."⁶ Ellström also makes use of previous research when he offers examples of capacity building in the context of learning processes with three major strategies of learning:⁷

- Learning at work: competency is acquired and used in parallel – this is how Mariestad's library functions as well as the action-based research presented here.
- Self-learning: learning through studies of one's own, this is a good method for the individual but not automatically for the organization. In combination with one or both of the other strategies, it often proves effective by strengthening the individual's competency and personal interest.
- Learning from others: networking and work place study trips = imitation and reproduction, this is a combination of the first two strategies.

All of the above strategies are used in the project reported here: meetings, discussions and the planned day of training/seminar fall under the "Learning at work" category; my personal university gender studies fall under the "Self-learning" category; and last, discussions amongst the staff members become part of a natural learning process, "Learning from others".

The LGBT- certification of Hallonbergen Library

RFSL and Hallonbergen Library in Regional Stockholm have recently implemented a comprehensive training which resulted in the library receiving a LGBT-certification in December 2012. In Cecilia Bengtsson's report *The LGBT-Certification of Hallonbergen Library*, she accounts for the collaboration with RFSL. From a "from the floor" perspective, Bengtsson's report confirms the importance of the work climate in a learning process involving LGBT-issues. "In training examples and group discussion much has been based on personal values and one's own thoughts. It is both brave and important to share these values and thoughts. This requires an open and non-prestigious learning environment as well as trust."⁸

The training at Hallonbergen Library was comprised of a number of steps such as scouring policy documents, web pages and other materials, as well as a number of training sessions for the entire staff. Examples of what these sessions were made up of are lectures, film, discussion and workshops. Bengtsson goes on to describe how a combination of the above learning methods and experiences in the various areas and topics gradually increased their understanding and knowledge throughout the process.

Research Method

Despite the limited scope of this research, it was important to choose an appropriate method. Collaborative action-based research is a method that is well-tried and proven in library research as well as in various other fields. It is a method that is relatively easy to apply to the type of organization that a public library is. The method incorporates the aspects of both theory and known norms, together with in depth inquiry into the library's daily practice. The tools used in this particular case are observation recorded in a journal, interspersed with findings such as relevant articles and previous research on the subject, interviews, mentorship and the developing "action" itself. The mentors that supported this project are from Region West Sweden, Kultur i Väst, consultants Kerstin Wockatz and Eva Fred, as well as researcher Cecilia Gärdén from the University of Borås, Sweden.

Process

As mentioned earlier, observations over time led to intensified discussions, this being step one. The next step was identifying the issue as LGBTQ in the context of inclusiveness in and around library operations. After considerable thought, the library director and I reached the conclusion that all successful change begins with the attitude of the staff. We then explored what steps that preferably would be taken to develop a sound approach to this "newly found" diversity in the learning processes of the library staff.

With the research questions formulated, observations were focused on library operations during the process that led to the undertaking of the "action". Once we worked through the process, i.e. up to and including a day of training consisting of the planned RFSL seminar and workshop, there was renewed discussion and finally my attempt to analyze the gathered material. The collaboration with RFSL began when I contacted them for an exchange on how to approach the matter of evoking the library staff's interest in these questions. This resulted in the booking of a RFSL-instructor and the new collaboration was thereby under way.

The Action-Based Research

- Information about the action-based research was given at general staff meetings on two occasions well in advance of the planned seminar and workshop with RFSL.
- Information was also disseminated at a meeting between the department head and union representatives.
- The research, LGBTQ and gender issues were tentatively discussed in other contexts such as smaller meetings and informally at coffee breaks.
- Informal group interviews were conducted with the staff in small groups. The aim with these interviews was to offer a comfortable environment for questions about the upcoming seminar with RFSL. It was also an opportunity to inform everyone about a soon-to-be-opened LGBTQ-café for young adults in Mariestad, the first of its kind.
- Individual interviews were held with 6 staff members after the day of the seminar and workshop. These were optional, and had the character of in-depth interviews with a small number of questions and manually recorded answers.

Before the process of action-based research was initiated it was observed that:

- Finding relevant literature at the library was difficult.
- A trickle of derogatory remarks about individuals sexual or gender identity, amongst the staff and library users.
- Language – choice of words. The automatic use of for example "your mother and father".
- Exasperation when the use of a third choice of gender is suggested for the yearly library survey.
- Many people, young people as well, are not familiar with either of the terms LGBT or LGBTQ.
- Teachers and other educationalists frequent request for books specifically for boys or girls.

Between the initiation of the local action-based research and the “action”, i.e. the seminar and workshop it was observed that:

- In general, library employees had a sense of uncertainty about the subject.
- Discussions continuously “ended up” in the question of sexual orientation.
- The upcoming seminar and workshop, talks and marketing information has sparked slightly more conversation on the topic of LGBTQ.
- Slightly increased focus on media purchasing and use of relevant descriptors and subject headings.
- A small increase in demand for gender and LGBTQ related media for children and youth from students (in the teaching profession).
- Library staff questioned if the LGBTQ-community should be targeted, for instance by establishing special LGBTQ or a gender-based section at the library.

RFSL’s seminar and workshop

The library booked an educator from RFSL for a training session including lecture and interactive workshops. The group of 17 people included the library director, librarians, library assistants, photo archivists, building manager and trainees.

The seminar consisted of basic information about the concept and terminology of LGBTQ, which took some sorting out. Furthermore, the seminar and discussions evolved around social norms in general and prevailing heteronormativity in society in particular. This includes the consequences these issues can have in the context of library services and the idea of inclusiveness, as well as on the individual who is by choice or otherwise outside these social norms.

Discussion and interaction with practical examples high-lighted such things as how the library staff can:

- deal with meeting the general public
- carry out successful meetings with groups such as parents, class visits and others
- explore and maintain a safe and open work environment
- make well-informed choices in media purchasing
- change and expand marketing strategies to ensure inclusiveness
- plan culture activities from a broad perspective
- become aware of how we use neutral words and language as a means of expanding inclusiveness

Interviews

After the seminar six interviews were performed. In an effort to get a nuanced picture, the interviewees had among them different library functions. The interviews were kept relatively short and informal, a questionnaire was used to establish a consistency in questions posed:

1. What is your impression of the LGBTQ-seminar and workshop?
2. Will you apply any of the new information and knowledge in your daily work? If so, what or how?
3. Do you think a continuation of exploring these questions would be good, and if so, in what form could it take?
4. What do you think of having a designated area for a LGBTQ-based section in the library?

Results

One step in the sought-after increase of competency is to generate an interest in LGBTQ issues. The staffs' sense of uncertainty expressed partly by near-silence before the training (the RFSL seminar and workshop) is apparently not an unusual reaction. When a new field of work or study is introduced, there is often a certain level of apprehension. With this particular topic, a degree of uncertainty and hesitancy was expected. Despite great effort, I found that information at meetings, talks and group interviews given at different stages before the seminar were not sufficiently established. In the Hallonbergen report, Bengtsson⁹ tells of how each individual became involved on a personal level to a degree not often found when otherwise developing work-related skills. This can be an indication of how complex LGBTQ and social norm issues are, and for many individuals, a delicate area of new information and knowledge that takes time to absorb.

With this in mind it was not surprising to find that informing the staff about the training process was a long one. It was only after the subject had been brought up collectively a number of times in the work environment that talking about it started taking place, and this only somewhat tentatively and cautiously. I found there was much uncertainty about what the topic actually was, what do these words mean? What was expected of each individual staff member?

Once the day of training was completed, everyone seemed somewhat relieved. Perhaps this has to do with the fact that focus was not exclusively on LGBTQ issues, but on how society is focused on norms in general and heteronormativity in particular, spoken and unspoken, and it is only when an individual is placed or places oneself outside these social norms that restrictions and boundaries become evident. There seemed to be a new sense of general understanding that these were significant issues for everyone and for library operations in particular. Spontaneous responses to the interview questions were comments such as:

- It was very interesting... there is so much more to this than I thought.
- I have always considered myself rather open-minded and unbiased, I had no idea I had so many prejudices...
- I feel we already greet everyone in the same way and with the same respect.
- Now I feel more comfortable with the terminology.
- Now I better understand what you (Brandstedt) mean when you keep pointing things out about language and how we express ourselves.
- I would like a 3-day course, then maybe I will begin to understand – and it so important that we *do* understand!

All of the persons interviewed replied that RFSL's seminar was both educational and interesting. What it means to each individual partly depends on their field of work and responsibilities. A heightened awareness can affect areas such as marketing, meeting the public, how we verbally express ourselves and in future media purchasing. Through observations at different intervals, talks and meetings, the RFSL seminar, the subsequent interviews and continued discussion reflect the four steps of David A. Kolb's model to experience, reflect, generalize and theorize, and to act. This can be seen when looking at the learning process results as a whole. This careful and repetitive approach is verified in the Hallonbergen Library certification report: "The continuous and repetitive process has made possible in-depth study and mutual reflection on these areas."¹⁰

I can see an initial understanding that these questions are about how society is formed by social norms and standards for better and for worse. Furthermore, how these norms control and moderate society and individuals who challenge them. Since the library continuously works with inclusiveness, tolerance and interculturism, it becomes obvious that these issues and LGBTQ issues are closely connected and that this is merely a continuation of already ongoing diversity efforts.

Conclusion

This action-based research deals with inclusiveness and diversity in the context of an LGBTQ perspective and has revealed a mostly unexplored area. This is perceived as both interesting and somewhat discouraging. As stated earlier, Mariestad Public Library is dedicated to hard and continuous work with diversity in a number of different areas, and yet there is a gap. The results that I can discern point to the possibility that we have lived in the belief that we are familiar with and cover basically everything that a Swedish public library is expected to cover, within the realm of openness and inclusiveness. Not until now have we become aware of LGBTQ issues and the importance of a norm-sensitive approach that has been made visible in this study. Among items we discuss now are the tone of discussion at the work place, what type of collaborations that could be beneficial to further explore and develop LGBTQ issues and how to implement new knowledge about marketing and purchasing on a long term basis in an effort to secure quality service for all.

The learning process shows aspects of library services that the staff is interested in learning more about, and developing further. This implies that now that these questions are presented and a heightened awareness can be detected, there are good possibilities for change and improvement. I can also see the significance of keeping these issues on the table, so to speak, as Sweden's public libraries are an important democratic arena. There remains a great deal of work to be done, but we now have a platform from which to expand library diversity efforts to fully include the LGBTQ community.

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