

Summary

Workshop on fragmentation of society

A solid library for a fluid society

The moderator presented the idea of the workshop: To discuss the development towards fragmentation in society and examining whether the participants could agree on an EBLIDA/NAPLE agenda coping with new types of user needs in consequence of this development. How do libraries respond to problems in society and can they offer service models and be part of a solution?

Fragmentation was presented as a term picked up from sociologists like Anthony Giddens and Zygmunt Baumann, describing a growing diversity and individualisation in society and a trend of citizens living under extremely different and often fast changing ('liquid') conditions leading to less cohesion of society. Particularly the digital and social divide reveals need for identity and competence building, related to increasingly knowledge based work and new jobs.

The question raised was: can libraries develop services to more directly support cohesion of society - and can the library more actively support learning and identity building among citizens - than by just giving access to library collections? If the answer is yes, should the library build a platform for services that are proactively directed at including all citizens in society? Can libraries bring solidity in a fluid society?

The participants broadly underlined the analysis of fragmentation of society and supported the idea of policy and service development to cope with a new societal context. Several participants stated, there was no choice, at least public libraries must be active in this field to fulfil their roles as public enlightenment institutions. Other types of libraries may also understand their responsibility towards society, communities and a sustainable environment.

The public library was seen as an institution taking over tasks that earlier were fulfilled by the church, the family and even schools. The library must be more aware of giving space to different cultures, be active in promoting media literacy, develop special services to minorities, be more active in learning activities and offer more community centre services. At the same time we must face the fact, that library staff also need to develop new competencies to deal with this challenge, so the library work organisation will include a larger variety of professions.

In the discussion participants pointed to many new already existing (best) practices and services, such as Book start programmes, find a mentor in the library, support for job-search, various health-care information services, socialisation programmes, informal literacy courses, neighbourhood cooperation, information markets on social services, and low literate courses. Recent research demonstrates the value of the library as a meeting place, which acknowledges the values of different cultures and where concrete new social contacts are being made. The library as a living lab of civil society. The need for building a sustainable concept for and systematic development of lifelong learning in a library context was also stressed.

Concluding: the workshop very much supported the idea that a European library policy position paper should deal with the new societal agenda and find ways to develop learning programmes and activities to further inclusion of citizens.

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