

# Libraries inspire learning

COLIN BRAY sees a profession in crisis and a way of opening up the reading experience that could offer a solution.

**A**s a public librarian for 13 years I have seen a growing identity crisis in the sector which has seemed to accelerate in recent years. This article is a personal reflection on one of the reasons I believe this crisis exists and offers a very specific approach to measuring services that may serve to refocus our work and increase confidence in our profession.

### Measuring value

There has been a steady trend towards performance measurement of public libraries over the past 20 years which, although valuable in some ways, has forgotten two key points. First, that library performance measurement as applied so far has not been generally appropriate to the core work of public libraries; it has tended to engage with outputs, rather than outcomes. Secondly, and related to this, the nature of public libraries has always been elusive to define and crude attempts to measure them run the risk of missing that very essence.

The value of public libraries has always been largely metaphorical – “Medicine for the Soul” as said the inscription above the door of the library at Thebes. By transferring our sense of value entirely into the realm of bean-counting, we risk losing ourselves. As a service we must choose our battles carefully. Our vague and all-encompassing sense of purpose has previously protected us from political change because all ends of the political spectrum have seen us as a “good thing.” Since the 1980s, however, public libraries have been dragged into the need to constantly justify our existence via performance measurement. Whilst this has been a good thing, in that it has helped us tighten our managerial performance and develop a systematic approach to services, libraries are now at a dangerous time in their history. If we are not careful, we shall find that we will have lost both our essence and our practical sense of value to those we serve.

My contention is that public libraries need to find a path that isolates what makes us truly important as a social and community institution and do our best to measure this, all the while recognising that our true value goes beyond any crude attempt to nail ‘it’ down. This aspect of our identity and justification lies in the realm of metaphor. The real political value we possess is in public perception and this has many layers. We need to engage with all those layers to survive. I will attempt to demonstrate in this article a tool for service measurement that can be used as a demonstration of true outcomes of the work we do. It can potentially provide a wealth of data that shows just how libraries change lives.

### Learning outcomes

This tool came directly from the MLA’s Inspiring Learning for All programme. As Lending Librarian at Exeter Central Library I attended a course on ILFA during 2005 and was simultaneously intrigued by its potential but also frustrated by the lack

of work that had been done to apply its framework for measuring learning outcomes to borrowed library books. For some time previously, museums, galleries and libraries had been using the Generic Learning Outcomes (GLOs) as framed by the MLA for feedback on events, training and other group work within the sector.

However... what is still the major aspect of our work? It is lending books! Do we know how beneficial this can be to people? Well... yes... kind of. It’s obvious isn’t it? Books get borrowed, books get read, and books get returned. That’s a good thing, right? Well, I would rather know how useful the 17,000 books Exeter Central Library loans out per month are to the adults that borrow them than whether 10 people achieved their aims in an IT session, important though that is. It’s a matter of scale and ensuring that our core service is meeting the needs of those that use us. So with that in mind, I set out to create a basic survey that asked book borrowers which of the GLOs were met when they read a book, whether it be:

- Knowledge and understanding
- Activity behaviour and progression
- Enjoyment inspiration creativity
- Attitudes and values
- Skills

A small-scale project was trialled in Exeter Central Library during 2005 in which 181 (18% of the total) survey forms were handed back to staff upon return of the book. The survey forms were placed in books at issue and filled in at home. Further comments were requested about the book and also overall library services. This proved a very cost-effective method of gathering data. The results were so interesting that SWMLAC (South West Museums Libraries Archives Council) agreed to fund a larger project. Eventually, six authorities took part – Devon, Somerset, Wiltshire, South Gloucestershire, Plymouth and Bath & North East Somerset. The survey was expanded to gather various types of information, although the centrepiece was still the questions that referred to the GLOs.

### Results

In all, about 22,000 survey forms were given out in participating libraries in the six authorities and 5,379 completed forms were returned. The returns have given a mass of information that can be used to demonstrate value in a new way – and which can also be used to develop library services and stock. Through this survey we have obtained information that other methods of data gathering, such as the PLUS survey, do not have the facility to gather. There is not the space for this article to develop the detail of much of the data gathered, but one or two general points need to be considered before I go on:

- *Learning was self-assessed by library borrowers* – This gives us our first opportunity to look into the ‘closed box’ of

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the informal learning process.

■ *The survey methodology is light on staff time* – Handing out the surveys, receiving them back and inputting the data is the extent of their input.

■ *The methodology readily gives us the numbers needed to demonstrate value at a national and local level* – For instance, Devon Library Service gained over 1,000 open responses. There are not many local authority surveys, whatever the department, which can claim this number of returns for so little work.

■ *The data obtained has many levels that can be used for many different things* – From learning more about our stock, to understanding public attitudes, to convincing politicians how truly useful we are.

In summary, the learning outcomes survey was applied across both fiction and non-fiction books. This is an important point to make because the two 'sides' of stock give very different results. However, as a total:

- 81.4% of books borrowed entertained the reader
- 50.2% of books borrowed resulted in new insight
- 49.8% of books borrowed helped learn new facts
- 28.7% of books borrowed inspired the reader
- 19.6% of books borrowed challenged attitudes
- 14.9% of books borrowed helped develop skills
- 13.2% of books borrowed changed opinions
- 4.2% of books borrowed changed the lives of those that borrowed them.

When we look at the numbers, this is big news. Let's play with some of the possibilities:

The annual issue figures during 2004/05 for the 67 libraries that took part in the South West were just under 5 million (around 416,000 book issues/month).



The survey was handed out for a month; so we can say that 416,000 issues generated 5,379 surveys – containing results of the informal learning outcomes gained. This, of course, would still be a very conservative estimate because not every book issued during this time received a survey form, and many of the borrowers given a form would not have returned one even though they gained learning outcomes from their books.



If we project these proportions onto the national picture, 330.2 million books were borrowed from public libraries in 2004/05, or c.27.5 million loans a month. This survey, if extrapolated up to national level could therefore be estimated to generate in the order of 355,798 responses returned in a month. This is a lot of data to show our value to each individual and the communities we serve.



However, it does not end there – if we multiply the prospective returned national forms to give annual figures, we can obtain even more data. On that basis, we can project that during 2004/05, library users individually gained learning outcomes from borrowed library books on c.4.3 million occasions. And that is still a conservative figure – based only on numbers of likely returns.

I could go on but you get the message!

### From the information...

The uses of this information is potentially manifold – to confirm the knowledge that has previously seemed self-evident but in

these times of performance measurement needs to be reaffirmed in a way that speaks clearly to those that fund and set the policy context for us; for library authorities to gather information about many other aspects of the service under this umbrella; to encourage library staff that the 'everyday' tasks of issuing and discharging books really does change lives; and to become more reflective practitioners, i.e. to consider how this knowledge changes the way we provide services.

In this survey we also took the opportunity to ask some further questions. These helped flesh out the focus on learning outcomes and also provided more than 1,000 open comments that could be used to develop stock and services.

These supplementary questions included:

- Was the book read?
- Why was the book borrowed?
- Was it easy to find the book?
- If the book was non-fiction, what was the Dewey number?
- Did the library have a good range of books on the subject you were looking for?

Plus, there was a request for further thoughts on library stock and services.

I would like to provide an example of a more focused use of the results. We know that one of the key indicators the government is using when looking at public services is the impact of services on public health. Local services across departments are expected to provide evidence of how they are improving the health of their users. Well, let's give it to them!

We used the knowledge we had of the subject areas that were covered by the borrowed books (using Dewey) to give us some figures on how useful 'health' books had been for borrowers. In our survey, the number of non-fiction 'health' books that had been issued came to a total of 175 books. Of those books:

- 82.7% of books borrowed helped learn new facts
- 63.1% of books borrowed inspired the reader
- 55.3% of books borrowed resulted in new insight
- 54.7% of books borrowed helped develop skills
- 36.1% of books borrowed entertained the reader
- 34.5% of books borrowed challenged attitudes
- 29.7% of books borrowed changed opinions
- 27.6% of books borrowed changed the lives of those that borrowed them

The flexibility of the survey process is shown by these results. If we are now living in a world where evidence needs to be constantly raised, let's do it this way; a way that stays on the firm ground that public libraries are built upon.

I am concerned we in libraries have been dancing to the tune of others. If we need a partner for a project we so often measure the project according to their criteria, which tend to be very specific and tied to whatever narrow definitions they need for funding and 'success'. In doing this we have begun to lose ourselves. I sense a loss of confidence in the world of public libraries which is beginning to be damaging.

Let's start again. Look at what we are still doing in the lives of many millions of people at a very fundamental level and work outwards from there. When we know and can articulate our value at this core level, then we can look again at measuring all the many great things we do. But first of all we need to recognise (once again) that our major work is in the hearts, minds and homes of those that use us. Let's celebrate this and remind everybody that libraries have been changing the world every day since the library at Thebes first declared its status as "Medicine for the Soul".

### Further information

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