Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Conceptualizing Practical Aspects of Public Library Initiatives Provides a Useful Model for Future Research

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Abstract

Objective – To examine characteristics of a
community engagement (CE) initiative in a
public library in order to identify and describe
essential elements of CE and develop a model
for CE in public libraries.

Design – Case study.

Setting – A public library in a mid-sized city in
England, United Kingdom.

Subjects – An unspecified number of
community members, library staff, and
external agency staff participating in a
community news program.

Methods – There were 12 semi-structured
interviews conducted with library staff,
community members, and participants from 12
community news agencies operating under the
umbrella of a larger community news
organization. The authors directly observed an
unknown number of undescribed program
meetings and events. They also performed
document analysis on unspecified government
policies, media reports, and program
publications to corroborate the information
gathered from their interviews and
observations.

Main Results – The data were analyzed in an
inductive manner using ATLAS qualitative
data analysis software. Results are described in
a qualitative manner and do not correspond
directly to the individual methods used. The

coding of data from interviews and observations (which are not analyzed separately) resulted in the identification of seven themes related to community engagement in libraries: belonging, commitment, communication, flexibility, genuineness, relevance, and sustainability.

Conclusion – The "essential elements" model that was developed from this case study can be applied by other public libraries in their processes and practices, and can contribute to the creation of a more genuinely community-driven approach to service.

Commentary

This study addresses a gap in the literature on libraries and community engagement (CE), a concept for community development that has been emphasized by government agencies in the United Kingdom. In its attempt to more clearly define CE in a library context and develop a useful model for understanding CE, the authors contribute to the future development of "wider, deeper and stronger levels of CE in library services" (p. 215). While this is an exploratory case study that does not present measurable outputs for CE that would qualify as evidence, the authors provide a means of gathering future evidence by identifying measurable elements for library practitioners to apply to programs and services. Future studies may use this "essential element" model, further define these elements and develop measurements for them, which would allow librarians to gather evidence of the value and significance of CE in their libraries.

This study meets many of the criteria described in Greenhalgh's (1997) critical appraisal checklist for evaluation of qualitative research. In particular, the authors are clear about the study's purpose and the need to address a significant gap in the LIS literature on conceptualization of community engagement practices. The results of this qualitative study are credible and significant for library and information practice. The authors have clearly identified the fundamental characteristics that impact CE,

setting the stage for future studies to work more closely with those characteristics. A qualitative approach was appropriate for the question the authors are trying to answer, which requires definition and description rather than measurement. The authors made efforts to ensure quality control and maintain reliability and validity, and one of the study's strengths is in its attempt to triangulate multiple research methods and data collection methods. However, its usefulness for library practitioners and researchers is limited by the lack of information presented about study design, data collection, and population, and by the presentation of information in tables and figures that are difficult to interpret. A more detailed description of the population, study design, and results, as well as a more explicit connection between the methods used and the findings would have improved the authors' argument for their study's validity and reliability, and made it possible for others to replicate and build upon this study.

The model presented in this article provides a framework for gathering evidence related to CE and making arguments for the value of authentic community engagement in libraries. Qualitative studies like this one remind LIS researchers that conceptualization of practices and theoretical approaches to research contribute to the field and provide a strong foundation for future research, both qualitative and quantitative.

The authors of this case study offer a suggestion that libraries are part of a larger community and a larger information ecosystem. This study suggests that positive reception among community participants and collaborators results when libraries take a grassroots, community-led approach, rather than a top-down, library-centric approach to engagement.

Reference

Greenhalgh, T. & Taylor, R. (1997). How to read a paper: Papers that go beyond numbers (quantitative research). *BMJ, 315*(7110), 740-743.