The Co-operation Across Cultures In Public And Scientific Libraries: The Co-operation In Net Librarian / BiblioteksVagten: A Danish "Ask The Librarian" – Service

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Abstract
An important task for the libraries is to provide the citizens with information and in Denmark the two library sectors have joined forces in carrying out this job. They co-operate in the service Net Librarian.

Introduction
The Danish library service has a very long tradition of joining forces to provide the best possible service for the citizens of the country. Over the years co-operation between the public and the scientific libraries has been operating on several levels, the best known and most successful up till now being the interlibrary loan functions and the national bibliography/DanBib.

One of the reasons for this co-operation being able to work is that contrary to most other countries, all larger Danish scientific libraries and many of the smaller ones are open to the public. Everybody is entitled to apply for a borrower's card and access the libraries' resources.

So far the co-operation between the two sectors has concentrated on the mediation of materials, but another important task for the libraries is to provide citizens with information. This is precisely the purpose of Net Librarian.

The service, which was established in October 1999 with financial support from the Danish National Library Authority, has been a great success in the public libraries. From a tentative start in

1999 with only three participating libraries and ten librarians covering the service, Net Librarian grew to 34 Danish public libraries and just over 150 librarians by August 2002.

Some of the Danish scientific libraries wanted to offer a similar service and therefore it seemed a good idea to find out whether it would be possible to work together on this task across the two sectors.

The public libraries' interest in establishing a co-operation with the scientific libraries was based on the desire to give Net Librarian a greater professional impact by providing easier access to the scientific libraries' knowledge and resources for the general public and the amateur researcher. The scientific libraries not only were able to provide an inquiry service - they also were able to extend their opening hours considerably and at the same time improve the possibilities for exploiting their common electronically licensed resources.

The start of a joint service

The advantages of establishing a co-operation were obvious for both parties and consequently - in August 2002 - a joint project between the public libraries and four scientific libraries was launched as a pilot with a view to developing a model for the future co-operation.

Denmark's Electronic Research Library (DEF) provided funding for the establishment and the pilot ran until the end of the year 2002.

In order to establish a common service in such a brief space of time, it was essential to create a sound collaboration between the libraries involved, both at management level and among the "practising" librarians. It was also essential that the "working Net Librarian" should be able to function normally during the building of the joint service.

Accordingly, a steering group was set up to ensure various organizational requirements were met, including one management representative from each of the participating scientific libraries, one representative from DEF, two representatives from Net Librarian and two project co-ordinators (one from each sector).

The steering group appointed a project group consisting of a member from each of the scientific libraries, as well as the two project co-ordinators to deal with the practical work in the libraries. If time had not been of essence we probably would have formed a project group with several public librarians. Because of the time pressure the project manager from the "working Net Librarian" was charged with the task of representing the experiences and ideas of the public libraries derived from working with Net Librarian since October 1999.

Finally, a software group was appointed to examine the market and try to find a new common software for future co-operation.

What to be aware of…

When setting out on a co-operative effort such as this involving several libraries with different 'cultures' and at the same time having to make our co-operation work across the two library sectors, it is important to allow time for discussing the problems and possible solutions thoroughly.

It is no good having too many preconceived ideas, and it is important to listen to each other's points of view in order to find solutions that everyone will be able to live up to. Quality rather than quantity is the operative word. As mentioned above time was also of the essence, so we made a kick start with a working seminar - for members of the project group - running over two days, during which the members of the group got to know each other and were able to concentrate on the various problems which had to be faced.

Prior to this seminar the project group was presented to some potential barriers to our ultimate sucess formulated by the project manager from the public libraries:

Technical barriers:
- Firewalls – 34 public libraries participate and all of them are "protected" by firewalls. Public libraries have found that the use of a lot of software is complicated by firewalls. Some programs simply cannot function through different firewalls (i.e. NetMeeting)
- Simple hardware – You have to offer librarians detailed descriptions for how to switch such basic equipment as telephones and answering machines

Practical barriers:
- Virtual contact with patrons allows for greater convenience and efficiency but doesn't allow for non-written communication to occur between patrons and the librarian
- The enquiry form – the form is divided into 2 parts and it is optional to provide Net Librarian with information about purpose of the question, level of education, which language they master…etc. Of course it is possible to make these fields required, but it is a known fact that asking too many "personal questions" in an enquiry form must be avoided. Patrons do not want to be put through the third degree. They just want an answer!
- Written answers – librarians are not used to putting their answers in writing. It is time-consuming in itself and requires skill to answer the question fully and ensure that the answer cannot be misinterpreted.

The most difficult barriers to overcome are however the

Mental barriers:
- Different corporate cultures in 34 libraries – although Denmark is a small country there are big differences between a library in Jutland and one in Copenhagen!
- Librarians are not used to be looked over their shoulder – normally nobody is able to hear your conversation with the patron, but each of the 150 librarians can read your answer to a certain question – It had better be correct so you tend to double check!
- Local pride/competition between libraries – your answer must be very good. You must show your colleagues that you are very smart…
- Lack of personal acquaintance – that is acquaintance with your colleague. In your own library you know people and you know how to respond to them. You need not consider how to put a small correction…
- Fear of losing local resources – some librarians are afraid that management will cut local resources if Net Librarian is a success.
- Using Net Librarian is regarded as "cheating" – For some years now Danish public libraries have been working on making patrons more and more resourceful: we point them to the computers, give them some guidance as to seeking information, but we expect them to carry out the search themselves. Net Librarian finds the answer – to some extent, that is and therefore some librarians believe that Net Librarian is not the correct way to use the library. They believe that patrons should visit the physical library and so often supply answers which force patrons to go to the library to lend books!
- Lack of ownership to Net Librarian – Depending on how long you have been working in Net Librarian you come to consider Net Librarian a part of your library. The image of Net Librarian becomes your image too – but this feeling has to grow from the inside – and it takes a while.

How to overcome these barriers…
The project group was also presented to the initiatives that have been taken by the "working Net Librarian" to overcome these barriers:

Seminars – at the very beginning of Net Librarian a starting-up seminar for the three libraries/ten librarians was held. The seminar spanned two days and allowed participants to:
- give a short presentation of the cultural particularities of own library and town
- experience some co-operative exercises to grow trust and build a good group dynamic
- discuss mutual expectations for the project
This seminar created a sound basis for the co-operation.

At the end of the pilot project in November 2000 another seminar was held and the steering committee participated mainly because an evaluation report of the project was to be discussed. The focus of this seminar was to discuss and establish a common framework including prototypes for some possible answer scenarios.
This framework and these prototypes were later discussed in the following seminars for Net Librarian.
Before each "expansion" of Net Librarian a "starting-up-seminar" for the new libraries is held
These seminars have very much been arranged in the same pattern:
- run two days to add a social element to the course
- a short presentation of the cultural particularities of own town, library and stock of materials
- a presentation and discussion of common basis – "framework" and prototypes
- presentation of experiences from "old Net Librarians"
-work routines demonstrated and tested by "new Net Librarians"

Common basis – "framework"– in the original pilot project ten librarians worked in Net Librarian and they got to know each other very well. But as more and more libraries were to participate in Net Librarian, it was necessary to have some written agreements – a "framework" – regarding how to answer questions in Net Librarian.
This "framework" consists of eight statements:
- The patron must have a specific answer to his question or must be helped one step further – it depends on the character of the question whether or not it is possible to give a specific answer
- Quality instead of quantity – a very long answer with many references is not necessarily the best answer. What is important is to find the best reference/resource….
- The answer must be adapted to the patron – the patron must be given the feeling of a personal service
- The answer must be polite and kind – as the answers are given in writing it is necessary to consider the impact on the patron. Example: if you try to be funny in your answer, does the patron feel amused? or does he feel dismissed or ridiculed?
- Web-resources must be pointed out if possible – as Net Librarian is a service on the web we feel an obligation to point to web resources
- Sources must be given in the answer – it is a service manned by librarians! – and anyway – by giving the sources the patron is able to check the information – and perhaps find additional information
- The answer must be delivered within 24 hours – if at all possible, but it is not always possible! Sometimes because you need to contact an institution to find the answer. That institution may be closed and Net Librarian will not be able to observe this time of reply. And sometimes Net

Librarian is too busy to observe the time limit, but you always send an answer telling the patron, that you will return with an answer as soon as possible.
The patron is also given the possibility to request a reply within a certain timeframe: within 2 hours, 4, 8, 12… hours.

- The desk must be cleared – if at all possible – this statement is included because some librarians tend to double check too much before answering…It is however important to emphasize that clearing the desk is not as important as giving answers of high quality!

The public libraries have furthermore agreed on prototypes of questions:
- Questions concerning local library
- "Everything about…"
- School papers – elementary school
- School papers – grammar school
- Factual questions (definitions, translations, quotations…)
- Technical / specialist / scientific questions
- Crosswords
- Questions concerning specific books
- Common questions
- Questions sent by minor children

To all of these prototypes sample minimum requirements answers have been drawn up based on the results of seminar discussions. No details here, but the public libraries have agreed on rather detailed requirements to the answers.

Manual – all procedures concerning how to work in Net Librarian are described including: how to start your shift, how to end it, how to use the chat software, how to observe different rules (copyright, digital copying…), stock answers, confidentiality … etc

A **Mailing list –** all 150 librarians are able to participate in professional discussions about working in Net Librarian

Based on these experiences the project group at the seminar discussed and agreed on a rough sketch of the model for the future co-operation model and the work continued at meetings where ideas have been argued, and often the final solutions have been formulated via mail.

The work of both the project group and the software group resulted in a paper outlining a model for co-operation and a recommendation as to the purchase of new software.

The co-operation model

A prerequisite for being able to establish this common service in such a short time was that it was possible to learn from the public libraries' experiences regarding barriers and initiatives to overcome the barriers. You did not have to start from scratch, but were able to build on an already well-functioning and thoroughly tested service, with roster, manual and fixed routines.
However, it has not been possible to just blindly copy the "framework", prototypes or other parts of the system.
This co-operative project is 'barrier-breaking' in the sense that the two library sectors in Denmark are working together on manning an inquiry service that to the end user appears as one common

service. At the same time the truth is that there are quite marked differences between the two sectors such as:

- In principle the public libraries are universal as far as subject is concerned, while most Danish scientific libraries cover specific subject areas (commerce, agriculture, technology etc.)
- The public libraries do, to a greater extent, guide the borrowers towards the answer, whereas the scientific libraries tend to advocate assistance supplementary to one's own efforts – this is particularly true for students.

Both differences become relevant when discussing for instance roster and the depth of the answer given, but the differences have not been allowed to hinder the establishment of a co-operative model.

The result was, in the first instance, an inquiry service consisting of two parallel systems with a common password that enables you to monitor each others' questions.

The model can be described as follows:

- The eight scientific libraries "duty" for each other, i.e. answering questions from each others' borrowers, but only when it is professionally justifiable. The roster is worked out so that all libraries are on duty almost every day and that makes it possible to exploit the individual library's specialist knowledge and not cause too much waiting time for the user
- At the end of a normal working day, the public libraries keep an eye on the scientific libraries' service and answer any general questions or else promise the user that 'the specialist' will answer the question in more detail the following day
- The idea is for the public libraries to pass on questions to the scientific libraries when the question goes beyond the public libraries' competency/collection etc. Likewise the scientific libraries can pass on questions from school pupils to the public libraries, for example.

Software

One of the tasks in connection with the project was to examine the possibilities for acquiring new software for Net Librarian.

A group of experienced IT people from public as well as scientific libraries have searched the market under the chairmanship of the project manager and have settled on the American firm LSSI which has developed an integrated chat/formula/database system that is now being examined in order to find out whether it can be adapted to Danish conditions and whether it will be affordable to subscribe to!

You need a new system that can accommodate the differences which exist and which have been described here. Part of the success in the present service is based on agreements that may be subject to human error. Standardizing our systems and routines provides a better service in the long run.

We would also like to make allowances for incorporating new members in Net Librarian. In a co-operation between the scientific libraries it is particularly necessary to take into consideration the differences in professional capacity.

The LSSI software has some very exciting features that enable the librarian to guide the user through a search by pushing images onto the user's screen. These functions are made for the virtual environment and will contribute to an increased interactivity in the service. Due to uncertainty as to the future financing of Net Librarian it is at the present moment not yet decided whether Net Librarian will choose to subscribe to the software from LSSI.

Net Librarian – new place of work? – new librarian role?

The service provided via Net Librarian does not really differ from the service that Danish libraries have provided for generations. The "new" aspect is that the answers are delivered via the web, and that the individual partners enter into a binding co-operation across municipal boundaries and library sectors. Net Librarian as such is placed in virtual space, but it is a place of work, with an independent organisation, its own corporate culture, colleagues, rosters, agreements on co-operation etc. etc.

As a Net Librarian it is important to see oneself as part of a national service. We should not consider ourselves as an employee of Herning County Library or the Aalborg University Library when we are manning the service, but as soon as the duty period is finished we must be prepared to change identity and realise that we are back again as a member of staff in our local library.

The co-operation is founded on openness as work is done via the web where all the participants may look over any one else's shoulder. Librarians will feel pressure to do their very best when working in an open environment. We believe that the rewards offered in this unique working environment to share and learn from one another ultimately increases the competencies of every librarian

Every place of work needs a manager to keep the organization on track and in this respect Net Librarian is no different from the physical library. From the very beginning Net Librarian has had a project co-ordinator who was responsible for roster, work manual, news and information dissemination to the participants as well as ensuring the level of quality in the service provided.. This model has been passed on to the scientific libraries and an overall management is necessary when more than 180 librarians are to work together in an inquiry service where the end user must be guaranteed an answer of high quality.

Problems and gains

It has been a definite advantage that a well-functioning inquiry service was already in existence in the public libraries, but we have had to consider how to best include a new co-operation partner into an existing service.

Net Librarian has been designed by great enthusiasts who have devoted their hearts and souls to this work, and it might therefore become a potential area of conflict when a prospective partner arrives on the scene who has to be accommodated in some ways.

But it has to be said that in the process we have observed great tact and understanding of each others' differences. The co-operation has at all levels functioned according to the book, and up till now we have been able to talk our way through to solutions that both parties can accept.

We have had to take into consideration the scientific libraries' professional differences when working out the roster, and it has been necessary to add some mutual agreements to the system. The final solution has not been achieved yet and some adjustments have been made when incorporating the four new scientific libraries in April this year. A new common software will hopefully solve some of the problems.

At the end of the pilot in January 2003 a joint steering committee was founded with two management representatives from the scientific libraries, three management representatives from

public libraries, one management representative from the economically responsible library (at present a public library) and the two project co-ordinators.
The steering committee is responsible for further developing Net Librarian, for ensuring the influence of all participating libraries, for increasing the use of Net Librarian and for marketing the service.

Despite some difficulties arising in this co-operation process, they are greatly outweighed by the advantages. Both parties had some preconceived ideas about each other and each others' institutions. But these myths have slowly, but surely been demolished over the past 9 months, and through our common project we have gained insight into each others' ways of working, built up a well-functioning network and learned to respect each others' qualities and competencies.

We are in no doubt whatsoever that through this common inquiry service we are able to exploit the resources far better, both in terms of materials and competencies – to the benefit and joy of the Danish citizens.

Net Librarian is open 84 hours a week and no single library could possibly provide this service. The long opening hours are only possible because we are many who pull together and in this way provide the users with the opportunity of "visiting the library" when otherwise it would be closed.

The future
The co-operative inquiry service has now been running since November 2002 and at the moment we can ascertain that the users are beginning to find their way to the service, and that our ideas about the sharing of duties can work in practice.

In the immediate future we will concentrate on
- creating a sound financial basis of the joint Net Librarian
- marketing the service in order to increase usage
- incorporating more scientific libraries in the collaboration in order to obtain an ever greater professional depth and thereby improve the quality of the service
- finding a new software to the joint Net Librarian

The pilot period has shown that co-operation between the two sectors is a sound idea – and that it has been possible to carry it out in practice.
We have observed a great interest in the project, and we hope that during 2003 we shall be able to create a real NATIONAL inquiry service across the two library sectors.