

**The Career Library presentation, held at the IFLA Satellite Meeting  
“Navigating with youth”, in Montreal, 5 & 6<sup>th</sup> of August 2008.**

**The presentation was part of the session called “Innovative practices and reading programmes” on the 6<sup>th</sup> of August.**

**Intro**

Dear colleagues, my name is Mikkel Helldén-Hegelund, I am from Copenhagen Libraries in Denmark and before I begin my presentation I want to say that I am very grateful to be here, and I would like to thank the arrangers for their work – it has been two very inspiring days, thank you!

The theme of this session is “Innovative practices and reading programs”, and the next 15 min, I will introduce to you *what I dare to call* an innovative practice from Copenhagen Libraries which involved user driven innovation and user involvement in an attempt to establish a living library and a human network as a new service to a young clientele.

In my presentation I will first of all give you facts and the background for the project and then try to share our experiences and some of the benefits of creating such a service.

The project which I will present to you is called the Career Library, and the aim of the project was to create a human-network available at the library as a service to youth, seeking information about education, future jobs and career opportunities.

Through the Career Library we wanted to give our local youngsters the opportunity to “borrow” a career in the shape of person with a job or an education of their interest.

Of course these career persons shouldn’t be taken home by teenagers for a month, but instead they should be available for a face-to-face meeting with the young loaners at our library.

The objective of the project was two things,  
first of all we wanted to present an alternative source of information which could help the young choose their education and future on an informed basis –  
and secondly,  
we wanted to create a practice in which our large population of youth with a non-Danish background, could meet and get a chance to know some Danish grown ups and role models

as you maybe noticed I am using terms as non-Danish and Danish background and the reason for that is that the Career Library project has its source in the problems of the neighbourhood where I work.

Therefore I will just give you some facts about the neighbourhood and background for inventing the Career Library project:

### **Facts and background**

My branch is called Noerrebro library, its is one of the larger branches of the Copenhagen Libraries and its situated in probably *the* most diverse place in Denmark.

The neighbourhood hosts people from more than 45 nationalities, with inhabitants primarily from the Middle East and Arabic speaking countries. Around one third of the population here is of non-Danish origin.

The Noerrebro area is facing a range of challenges mostly of a social and educational nature and the immigrant youth here, are having difficulties in school and at home, theyre trying to navigate between two cultures and trying to cope with cultural the differences.

The statistics tell that 80% of the youth here do not continue their education after finishing primary school, and thereby they easily inherit some the problems that their parents are facing such as unemployment and low paid jobs.

The rate of unemployment and a large youth population creates social tension and tendencies towards a divided society where Danish and non-danish people don't mix, - and in Noerrebro we already have large areas only inhabited by immigrants with low income.

But of course this doesn't mean that the immigrant youth and their parents don't share the same dreams and hopes for a bright future as youth everywhere.

At the library we are aware of the challenges that our local youth are facing since a lot of them come to our library, but it was one of our partners from a Danish NGO called the Danish Refugee Council who pushed us towards taking on the issue of non-education.

What our partner knew was that the local youngsters among others were suffering from their parents lack of experience from the Danish educational system and labour market

In an interview a young girl from the block expressed to her that

“even if I reeed a book about being a doctor, I still don't really understand what it is like...? I don't know how a normal day at work is like, what about the colleagues how do you get on with them, and how much money do you make.?”

And if I ask my parents they don't know...

Parents, grown up friends and the personal network are a substantial and influential information resource - and not having this backup, leaves our local youth even more vulnerable to inherit their parents low social status.

Our answer was to create a Career Library– a living library using volunteers with different jobs and educations to create a human-network available for face-to-face meetings with our local youngsters at the library.

The meetings should be arranged by us after a short interview with the loaners who should be presented to the service at the library and through a website listing the jobs and educations of the volunteers.

The target-group of the projects was decided to be young people between 14-25 years, and of course open to everybody no matter of their background.

So we worked on the fundraising for about half a year, and ended up receiving the funding from the Danish Agency for Libraries and Media.

The project period was about a year and the project officially ended the 1. of April this year but is now being integrated in our normal service. Furthermore we are working on exporting the concept to other branches of the Copenhagen Libraries.

What I will speak of now is our experiences from the project especially in regards to the targetgroup, the volunteers, and the benefits of the project.

Generally speaking the project was a success.

The project hit the target-group, succesfull meetings between people who otherwise would have never met were arranged, and we attracted a large number of enthusiastic volunteers.

The meetings functioned as a valuable source of information for the local youth and the library proved to be a very suitable cultural meeting place and finally the the projected resulted in a lot of positive media attention for the library.

To attract the target-group was of course our main concern and even if we didn't reach our optimistic goals in terms of the quantity of users, the users where very satisfied with the quality of information that the meetings provided them.

After every meeting we asked the loaners to evaluate it, and they pointed out that the real life experiences of the volunteers gave them valuable insight in the everyday worklife it also gave them tips and tricks how to finish the education and they liked to be able to ask their questions at their own pace.

Furthermore many of them felt inspired by the volunteers and expressed their gratitude to the library for giving them this opportunity.

Presenting the project to the target-group often resulted in an immediate and positive response like “what a brilliant idea” and “can I take the volunteer home” and the benefits of meeting a person in the Career Library came through to them even though some youngsters also found it challenging to meet a total stranger.

What we did to attract users was first of all to engage in partnerships with organizations and municipal administrations to benefit from their contact and activities for the young.

Our experience in this regard was, that its very important to make alliances outside the library - to benefit from the partners knowledge and second to communicate the existence of the project to the relevant people.

A key partner for our project was the local schools and student advisors and therefore they were invited and presented to the project and an effort was made to discuss and communicate that the project was supplementary to their work.

Later on we also teamed up with a role model project which gave us a better platform for visiting the local schools and throughout the project we also attended different education-fairs and workshops and did an effort to meet the young not only in the library but outside as well.

Before we started the project my personal concern was whether we could attract any volunteers. Even though there is a tendency in Denmark towards more people volunteering - it's uncommon in relation to libraries and without any volunteers we would have no project to show for.

What we did to start out with was to contact the local businesses and shops through their local organization. We went to a meeting and they embraced the idea of helping the young and on the same time have the opportunity to recruit them and promote their business.

Soon after this our aggressive press strategy paid off. To begin with we had written a lot of mails to promote the project to the press, but it was first when we made a follow up, on a story in one of Denmarks largest newspapers, that they picked it up.

This resulted in a massive coverage of the Career Library in radio, national tv and other media, and after this the volunteers signed up to the project themselves an soon after we had more that 150 volunteers.

The volunteers were from all over Copenhagen and it was all kinds of people, - - academics, business-men and women, shop-owners, craftsmen you name it!

Its an easy recommendation to other projects just to say - “get in the papers”, but what I think we can learn from this is that libraries can do more fieldwork when it comes to promoting their services. In Denmark the libraries do not get a lot of publicity even though there are numerous innovative and fantastic projects all over the country, which could benefit from more media coverage.

What affected the volunteers was the idea of helping the youth and many of them looked back at their own problems with choosing education and told us that “they wished they have had a Career Library when they were young”.

A couple of times during the project youngsters wanted to speak with careers that we didn't have in project – and in these cases we also felt the potential of project when we made a polite enquiry to a potential volunteer, because everyone we contacted agreed to help, and so it happened that 14 years old Hassan with a dream of being an actor, met with one of Denmarks finest young actors at our library.

What we were also happy to notice, was that that main part of the volunteers were not regular library users.

In Denmark many library projects are trying to attract the non-users and here we actually succeeded in attracting some of them - a new audience – and we were able to show them, what a modern library is.

In these times where user involvement is talk of the town in regards to libraries and their Internet services – web 2.0 – it was fantastic to be able to have user involvement I the physical library as well.

The reason to this is that in my sense, user involvement can give us new ideas and solutions, and bring us closer to our users so we can attract and keep them.

To involve people in the library like we did in the Career Library project is also in continuation of the idea of the library as a democratic institution where different kinds of people can meet regardless of their social status, age, background and religion.

As I spoke of earlier in my presentation we found that partners outside the library are a key factor for projects like this and fortunately we experienced throughout our project that many doors opened and many partners offered their partnership.

I believe that one of the reasons for this were that we through the project were able to communicate and show potential new partners that we as a library are ready to go outside the box so-to-speak, and engage in field workout side our collection.

That was welcomed by a range of players engaged in youth work, varying from our Ministry of Integration, to other municipal youth projects.

The connections and the professional network that we made here were not only an asset to the present project, but have been beneficial in relation to new ones, and it was our experience that the library as an institution was welcomed as a partner in relation to take on social problems.

In relation to take on and engage in social problems, there are though some things to consider as a library. One of the strengths of the library as an institution is that people and youth come here voluntarily in opposition to some of the other municipal places.

The library is a haven - a place of refuge - and these advantages should not be jeopardized when engaging in social work.

In relation to our project, we had to refuse other projects because they wanted to make our meetings in career library mandatory for a selected group of youngsters.

in our opinion a thing like this could easily rub off to their perception and use of the library in general which we didn't want.

Saying no we also wanted to protect what we think is a special asset of the library, namely that the library is a place that seems to even out the power-structures between people.

Everybody has the right to use the library and nobody has the right over others in there and thereby it is an ideal platform for a dialogue and the meetings we arranged.

With our experiences from the Career Library project, we feel an urge to tell that it can really pay off and be a positive experience to get involved and explore the social role of the library in relation to youth, and we think that this can be one of the ways to attract them.

Libraries have potential in relation to be a democratic meeting point and can be platforms for more user involvement and we have a good reputation among the citizens

If we then are willing to open up, get involved and take on the challenges and needs of the young and furthermore take them seriously and present unconventional and creative solutions – than we are on our way!

Thank you.