

Library Programming in a Learning Age

The emerging issues identified on page 2 as significant topics for the discussion of future programming are almost all from the concept of the world in a new learning age. The widely used term “lifelong learning” is not a new concept, but it has taken on a new urgency and importance in the last few decades. The driving force behind that urgency is the speed and all-pervasive nature of change in the modern era. Change is not a short-term trend, but a state of being in the 21st century, and it demands human adaptation of all sorts, especially in the need to become learners across a lifetime. To stay abreast of change, rethink threatened values, make sound decisions, participate in our communities, families and nation, develop new skills, and strengthen our own identities and self-worth, there is nothing more imperative than learning.

Most learning in this intense environment will be learner-driven, fueled by personal motivation and styled to meet individual needs. It is already estimated that most of us gain only 9% of our education in formal learning environments, i.e., schools. The enormous bureaucracy of most of our public school systems is burdened with old systems, tied more to the industrial age than the knowledge age. More and more responsibility for providing resources, models, and access to learning is falling outside of the school system. In addition, the extraordinary developments in all kinds of technologies are transforming our social, societal, economic, and community lives. Although none of what is written here is new to any of us, what is most profound are the challenges, opportunities, and imperatives for the learning institutions of our communities – the libraries, museums, media organizations and others – to assess the implications of all of this change to their own practices and public responsibilities.

INFORMAL LEARNING: As noted, informal, self-directed learning is very different from the formal lessons of classrooms and curricula. It is notable for its personalization. It is often characterized by a sense of immediacy and relevancy. It is intentionally sought out and highly intrinsically motivated. Such personal motivations may be to obtain new skills or information, to take on more responsibility for one’s own well-being or to become more closely engaged with others. Meeting the needs of the new learner requires an understanding of his/her learning needs. Consequently, one key consideration is planning a research agenda is determining the most effective methods for assessing the audience’s learning needs.

THE IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGY: Libraries have already stepped to the fore to provide access and training in the use of new technologies. This well-known role is likely to continue as the new programs, applications, and technologies continue to emerge. Research has already determined, however, that the “personal” role of the librarian in providing these services is essential – a service that will continue to have implications in educational programming for libraries. In addition, the access to information provided through technology is one of the driving forces shaping the new learner. This new learner can tailor-make his/her searches to personal needs. At the same time, however, the social conditions of learning are harder to maintain in an era when group problem-solving and collaboration are touted as important ways to work. Consequently, the opportunities for people to learn together may be ones of importance in future programming.

INTERGENERATIONAL AUDIENCES: The intergenerational audience – parents or caregivers, grandparents, and children – has become increasingly important. It is in part a product of the current economic climate in which both parents may work – which results in more use of unrelated caregivers as well as increased desire to spend limited family time together. It is also a pattern seen in the households of many immigrant families where three generations may be doing things together. The intergenerational audience usually has its own agenda. Families often seek to create memorable experiences and learn things they can continue to do together. The new intergenerational audience is likely to seek activities in which everyone is engaged and that allows for conversation and exchange. This audience poses new and often exciting programmatic activities.

CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS: For the past decade a national dialogue about the importance of 21st thinking skills is changing the focus of education. In an age of rapid change and an environment glutted with information, it is increasingly important to have the skills to sort, analyze, judge, adapt and recombine that information. Creativity and problem-solving, innovation and skill at collaboration are becoming the most desired skills in many environments. Today's lifelong learners are seeking a range of new literacies, including information and media literacy, along with civic, health, and environmental literacies. To meet the demands of a complex society, learners must be able to work across disciplines, to take initiative and assume personal responsibility. The teacher of the past is increasingly the facilitator of the present, working with students to guide the development of their thinking skills. How will continuing education, formal or informal, respond in the development of new programs?

THE LEARNING CITY: Across the globe, cities are being redefined, taking on such labels as *Smart Cities*, *Digital Cities*, *Legible Cities*, and, quite prominently in Europe, *Learning Cities*. The definitions of these terms are quite fluid, but what they have in common is a commitment to building partnerships and networks across the city that enhance the quality of life for its citizens. When IMLS envisioned collaborations between museums and libraries, and ultimately its program entitled *Museums, Libraries and the 21st Century Learner*, the agency was responding to the new demands of the learning age, the impact of technology, and the potential of collaboration. The concept of a Learning City expands that early initiative by recognizing that every city has numerous informal learning institutions that, joined together, would create an unparalleled learning environment. Not only does the Learning City concept envision the city as campus, it also defines ways to bring neighborhoods together, support more participatory government, and create many routes toward learning for all. Although transforming the whole of the city sounds daunting, considering program partnerships one at a time and defining collaboration as a civic virtue are possibilities that hold great promise.

EVALUATION: Ultimately, the promise of every one of these new ideas needs to be tested. Creating a cycle of collaborative goal setting, engaging the audience and the library, and measuring outcomes is critical to creating and sustaining successful new programs. A research agenda may want to include testing approaches to defining common metrics and integrating useful evaluation at all levels of the library's programming efforts.