"Building bridges: The role of the Relational Librarian"

Introduction
The link between interpersonal trust, participation, social capital and democracy is evident through scholarly work in different research areas (see for example Sullivan & Transue 1999). These concepts are also relevant to discuss in relation to “improved communities”, not least in connection to the recent “social turn” of public libraries, which encompasses an understanding of the library as “a locus and an enabler of social processes in the interpersonal sense” (Nolin & Söderholm 2015). Nolin & Söderholm adds that it entails “a turn in how library issues are framed: from a societal perspective to a social perspective, from the building of society to the building of relations”. Both public library practice and research has sought to discover how libraries contribute to community-building activities, which in turn can foster social and democratic sustainability (see for example Audunson et al 2019). The rise of participatory culture and processes in libraries (Nguyen et al 2012; Johnson 2016; Rasmussen 2016) adds to these developments.

But what are the implications for library professionals? Does this “social turn” require different or new competence? David Lankes’ refers to librarians as potential “positive change agents” (2016). Mary Ghikas of the American Library Association encouraged librarians to turn outward (2019), in order to support belonging and cocreation in local communities. Thus, the role of the librarian needs to be related to building trust and relations – within the library, in the neighborhood and in the community: building bridges.

To build knowledge about what librarians contribute to building relations, I propose an exploration of their contribution to community building, highlighting their “relational competence”.

Questions for discussion:

- How do librarians work with building trust and fostering connection in diverse communities?
- In what way is “relational competence” part of librarians’ professional role?
- Is “relational competence” part of LIS education?

In his article “Never neutral never alone” (2020), David Lankes argues that there is a need to reconsider the elements in the LIS education programs. The image of the neutral information professional does not comply with the newer ideal of the librarian as an activist, a knowledge professional seeking to improve communities. I propose that we should consider that librarians need competences or skills more directly geared towards developing community engagement or what we can call the social dimension of libraries. This paper explains and discuss the term “relational
competence” (Spurkeland 2012), which includes skills, abilities, attitudes and knowledge connected to establishing, developing and maintaining relations between people. To what extent are these concepts considered to be part of librarianship? I also want to include a discussion of “relational competence” in terms of LIS education.

The result will be a preliminary conceptualization of the relational librarian, and a discussion of how fostering connection can be a goal-oriented approach for librarians to engage in community building.

Librarians’ roles, competences and skills

In his Atlas of Librarianship, Lankes (2012) makes a distinction between librarians’ competencies and skills, the former being “broad and durable approaches to fulfilling our mission”, while the latter refers to “less broad and less durable means of fulfilling competencies” (p.137). The four overarching competencies consist of “access, knowledge, environment and motivation”. Traditional skills include well known areas such as knowledge organization, collection management, administration and so forth. Each skill has in turn certain – varying or changing – technologies and techniques attached. These are interesting distinctions to keep in mind while exploring “relational competence”.

Focusing on interpersonal skills in librarianship is of course not a novelty in itself. Especially when it comes to communication within different areas of librarianship. User interactions, especially in the form of reference interviews, readers advisory, and similar activities have been a common theme in both LIS education and practice. Through a comprehensive review of literature discussing skills and competencies of LIS professional, Nonthacumjane (2011) divides the findings into three broad categories: personal skills, like being flexible, creative, or analytical; generic skills, like information literacy, communication or critical thinking; and lastly discipline specific knowledge – like metadata, database development or user needs. Koh & Abbas (2015) studied which competencies was needed for information professionals in learning labs and makerspaces, and concluded that the ability to learn, adapt and collaborate was ranked as top three. Radford & Radford (2017) draw on interpersonal communication theory in their book Library Conversations, where they underline the importance of communication in interpersonal encounters. Lankes too, brings communication into focus (2012), when discusses – and shows – the importance of conversation in Library science, and how conversations form a bridge between Library Science and communications.
Librarians’ relational role

Building relationships with library patrons have always been part of the librarians’ role, but today librarians are expected – and need – to build relationships in different directions with different purposes. The catchphrase from collection to connection (Audunson & Aabø 2013) is just one symbol of how there has been a shift from focus on the library collection itself, to the social processes connected to the library collection. The responsibility of initiating and maintaining these social processes lie with the librarians, although they involve include and depend upon the community as well.

However, relational role of librarians has not been given much attention within empirical research, at least not in that particular wording. Many, however, touch upon librarians’ knowledge and skills connected to their relational role, especially when studying librarians’ work with children or youth, or cooperation within an organization, for example with school librarians, who depend on cooperation both with teaching staff and school management. Gärden, for instance (2017) show the importance of close working relationships between the school librarian and teachers in order for the school library to reach its full potential in the pedagogical work. Likewise, making the library’s role and contribution visible to the management is important for its place in the school’s organization. Establishing such cooperation proves challenging for school librarians – but no less important (Latham, D., Gross, M., & Witte, S. (2013). Similarly, for academic librarians, there is a need to connect both with students and student groups, as well as with teaching staff administration and management. For public libraries, the relations to the local government and local government administration, and the community surroundings. In order to develop and maintain a wider range of services and projects, cooperation with local organizations is vital. Last, but not least, the ability to connect with the individual user is vital to establish the library as a welcoming and inclusive community knowledge hub. Being aware of the importance of connection, and being able to work on relationship-building, run like a common thread through the librarian’s professional practice.

Johansson (2010) has studied children librarian’s self-perception and found that they describe themselves as a “different kind of adult”, someone that the children trust, but someone for whom they do not need accomplish anything. A later study by Johansson & Hultgren (2018) confirms this impression of how teachers and parents tend to regulate children’s behavior when coming to the library. Evjen & Vold (2018) explores how library professionals work towards developing participation in a library dedicated to children between 10 and 15. They find that developing a safe space, as well as establishing relationships with their patrons are key factors. While developing trust between
librarian and patron is important in any library, it is perhaps especially important when children are involved, thus elucidating the relational role of children’s librarians in particular.

At the same time, the librarian is not a welfare worker or a health care professional. Librarians are not supposed to heal or manage people – with the exception of library managers, who of course need managerial skills. But most librarians, regardless of their job environment, do come into contact with a wide range of groups and individuals. Being able to navigate and handle different types of user needs, situations and settings while maintaining boundaries is an important part of their professional role. Creating a safe space – for children and grown-ups alike – needs active involvement and awareness. Building relationships, not only within the library, but to the community surrounding the library will also ultimately contribute to “successful” libraries, successful in the sense that they attract people, are widely used – and make their communities better. Is this reflected in current LIS curriculum? Likewise, LIS education does not focus upon these kinds of topics.

Relational competence

The term relational competence (Spurkeland 2012) needs to be clarified. In short, it comprises the “skills, abilities, knowledge and attitudes needed to establish, develop, maintain and repair relations between people”. Thus far, this term has been used to investigate such competences within different professional groups, such as teachers, health care workers, social workers and managers/leaders. It is used both to look more closely into the professional’s relationship with those they care for or teach, but also in terms of relationships with co-workers, management or similar. Thus, it is not a term that is limited to one type of relation, for example between a teacher and a student, but encompasses any type of relation, including professional relations.

Below are the 14 dimensions that, according to Spurkeland (2012, p-. 16), constitute relational competence (author’s translation), described in brief:

- Interest in people: people-oriented behavior and ability to be interested and get to know people
- Trust: the cornerstone of a relationship, and this dimension relate to how trust is built in an interpersonal relationship
- Dialogue, individual: the quality and techniques of conversation, between equal parties
- Dialogue, group: the quality and techniques of conversation, between equal parties
- Feedback: providing feedback to others
• Relationship-building: networking as professional practice. Four phases: establishing, testing, building trust, maintaining
• Visibility: awareness of one’s role and visibility
• Development: providing encouragement and coaching to others
• Creativity: letting and encouraging others to contribute and use different aspects of themselves
• Conflict management: skills and attitudes used to actively handle conflict
• Emotional maturity: related to empathy and emotional intelligence
• Humor: a skill that impacts leadership, personal presence, health and workplace environment
• Performance support: supporting others competence and sense of self
• Performance orientation: ability to create and deliver results, works as a “control function” in regard to the other dimensions.

Clearly, dialogue and communication are important aspects of relational competence, but there are other components, like interest in people, building trust, visibility, and relationship-building, that overlap and add to the communication aspect. Some of these dimensions are perhaps less relevant for librarians than for managers or other professional groups. Empirical data is needed to test, clarify, and perhaps adapt the dimensions to the librarians’ professional context. A question that also needs addressing is whether or not these aspects are skills that together make out the relational competence, or if they need to be considered in a less specific manner.

When Lankes describes (2012; 2016) the competences librarians need, it is obvious that several of the aspects connected to relational competence come into play. Introducing relational competence as a separate concept is primarily to highlight relationship-building as part of the professional role of librarians, regardless of institutional belonging.

Competences and skills: LIS education vs needs in the professional field
What are the components of LIS education today – and in what way do they reflect the relational role of the librarian? This paper does not include a review of such literature, but it does present some studies giving insight into what needs there are in the professional library field, seen in context of curriculum in LIS programs. Chow et al (2011) did a comprehensive survey of library managers regarding LIS graduates’ skills. Ranked as most important were skills related to communication and people management. When they rated satisfaction with graduates’ skills in this area, the results were neutral to unsatisfactory. “Some of the comments reflected the opinion that working in a
library means working with people, and librarians need to be equipped with people skills. There are great differences in educational systems internationally, which sometimes makes it difficult to compare programs. A different, but related area is the lack of attention given to political understanding within the LIS program, according to Berry & John (2017). However, it seems as if the knowledge and skills sought after by the library field does have some common features. When exploring what knowledge, skills, and abilities are considered core for professional public librarians, Williams & Saunders (2020) found that soft skills, such as interpersonal communication and customer service were ranked highly among survey respondents consisting of LIS professionals, alumni and faculty. Gjestrum et al. (2018) analyzed job announcements from the library field and found that both ICT skills and communication was most frequently mentioned. Saunders (2015) raises the important issue of what I possible to teach in a classroom setting – are soft skills something that can be taught?

Formal education is one side of librarianship, professional practice is another. Not all aspects of being a librarian can – or should – be put on the curriculum. That being said, the LIS programs have a responsibility to create awareness of the knowledge, competencies and skills librarians need – as well as an understanding of how these will develop in professional practice.

Summing up
Librarians are more and more expected to engage in community building, both within and outside of their organizational affiliation. If the next generation of librarians are going to fulfill their mission to better communities (Lankes 2012) and be “radical positive change agents”, they might need more awareness of the relational aspects of their professional role. If we look at what constitutes librarians’ knowledge base, the skills and so forth, the relational aspects are not necessarily visible in curriculums and LIS programs. However, studies exploring what skills are needed in the professional field, show that so-called soft skills are ranked highly (Chow et al 2011; Saunders 2015; Williams & Saunders 2020). Librarians are not social workers, but most work in relation to other people and will need to build relationships – in terms of service provision, cooperation, and strategic positioning of the library. Building such relationships in a professional capacity need effort and should not be overlooked in LIS education.

Relational competence is an interesting term to develop in terms of librarianship, and in terms of LIS education, both because of its content, but also because it provides a framework where soft skills, as described by Saunders (2015) and Williams and Saunders (2020) can be directly related to the librarian’s role: as a bridge-builder both within and outside the library.
Relational competence also encompasses several features more or less visible when it comes to community building. Dialogue, trust, and conflict management and are clearly important. But I would like to especially point to the first of the 14 aspects: interest in other people. Taking a genuine and active interest in people lays the foundation for all the other components. Librarians who take genuine interest in people, both in their communities and their organizations have the best potential to be radical positive change agents.

In this short paper, I have attempted to explain the relevance of relational competence within librarianship and LIS education, both in terms of concept and content. However, there is a need for further empirical and theoretical exploration in order to clarify its validity and develop the term within an LIS context.
References


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