

COMMUNITY-LED WORK IN PRACTICE: EXPERIENCES FROM CANADIAN LIBRARIES

A CLA Community-Led Library Service Network series of papers

April 2015

Developing Community-Led Systems

By John Pateman

Systems are policies, procedures and processes which enable a library to operate. They are the rules and regulations which determine attitudes and behaviour. They should be driven by the library Purpose, Vision and Values. They should be in alignment with the organisation's Strategy, Structures (staff and buildings) and Culture. They should enable rather than disable. They should include rather than exclude. They should be used to guide rather than govern. But in so many cases this does not happen. Why? - because systems can also be used to create a comfort zone for staff which prevents them from having to make discretionary decisions. For example, I have heard many times that 'Library rules should be applied equally to all library customers because this ensures both fairness and consistency.' But equality is not the same as equity. Every library user is different. They all have different needs. So applying the same rule in the same way to every patron cannot meet their needs.

It is far less comfortable but much more empathetic to recognise that library users are not equal – some have greater needs than others. Our Systems should be nimble and flexible enough to recognise and reflect this. Library fines are a case in point. A \$5 fine for one person may be nothing, just the small change in their pocket; but for another person it

may be a big deal. An accumulated debt of \$15 may make the difference between them using the library service or not. What is more important – getting \$15 in income or getting the books back and the patron (and their family) using the library. Open to All? (Resource, 2000) found that those who use libraries the most, need them the least; and those who use libraries the least, need them the most. This is in no small part due to the exclusive Systems which we operate.

Systems form a huge part of organizational culture which is very difficult to shift or change. The discussion about the need to change Systems has to start internally, with library staff. They operate these systems and can tell you what works and what doesn't work; what they like and what they don't like. But staff generally like these Systems and so we need to seek a broader view from those who the Systems are applied to. This must go beyond Active Users who understand the rules and generally abide by them. We also need to talk to Passive Users, those who have used libraries in the past but no longer use them. Perhaps this lapsed use was triggered by a faulty System? We also need to consult Non Users because our Systems can sometimes be a barrier which prevents them from accessing our libraries. Maybe our membership requirements are too strict. Or it could be that the whole image and identity of our library has been shaped by Systems that make us appear exclusive.

There are four main barriers to library use: institutional barriers (policies, procedures and processes); personal and social barriers (low

income and poverty); perceptions and awareness barriers (image and identity) and environmental barriers (location and access). Systems can passively or actively exclude. For example: inappropriate rules and regulations; charging policies which disadvantage those on low incomes; book stock policies which do not reflect the needs of the community; lack of signage in buildings or signs which make no sense to library users. These Systems can create a lack of a sense of ownership and involvement by the community. In relation to the most excluded people, it is important to address the processes of exclusion rather than focusing simply on addressing the particular characteristics of excluded groups. The critical test of a system is that it is useful, usable, and desirable. If a system fails to pass this test it should be amended or scrapped.

Fines are the biggest barrier to library use and the most difficult System to change. They form part of the public library DNA, even though there is significant research which suggests that fines are both ineffective and inefficient. They do not encourage the return of materials 'on time', whatever that means (because loan periods are an arbitrary construct). And it costs

more to recover and administer fines than the income they generate (particularly if we factor in the 'opportunity costs' of patrons who can no longer use the service because they have a fine). Library fines make no sense and they should be scrapped (today) and replaced with more positive incentive models. Food for Fines is a great idea because it simultaneously removes the stigma of paying a fine (and turns it into a positive social action) and benefits those with the greatest needs. 'Paying it forward' (by paying someone else's fine) is another good approach. Random Acts of Reading also work – whereby patrons can work off their own or another person's fine through the restorative act of reading.

There are many ways in which we can make our Systems more inclusive and enabling. For that to happen we need to take both a community-led and needs-based approach. We need Systems which are Values driven. And we need staff that have the power to operate Systems with empathy and discretion. This means letting staff use their personal judgement and discretion. This may be messy and inconsistent. But it's the right thing to do.



The author

John Pateman has worked in public libraries for 36 years in a number of different roles ranging from Library Assistant to Chief Librarian. John was Chief Librarian of three library systems in the UK: Hackney, a diverse inner London borough; Merton, a multicultural London suburb; and Lincolnshire, a large rural county. John is currently Chief Librarian and CEO at Thunder Bay Public Library. John was part of the research team which produced *Open to All? The Public Library and Social Exclusion* (2000), which informed the Working Together Project (2004-2008) in Canada. John is the author of *Developing a Needs Based Library Service* (2003), *Public Libraries and Social Justice* (2010, with John Vincent) and *Developing Community-Led Public Libraries* (2013, with Ken Williment). John is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals and he received the National Culture Award from the Cuban government for his work in support of Cuban libraries.