

Library as the Student's Cornerstone or Obstacle: Evaluating the Method of Empathy-Based Stories

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The paper discusses the use of qualitative methods – especially the method of empathy-based stories (MES) – in evaluating what students consider as their ideal library. The study was carried out in the Kuopio University Library in Finland. First-year students of nursing science wrote the stories that were subsequently analysed. From the stories a

model of five steps could be derived that described the fundamental elements in the students' ideal library and how they would use it. These are student's self-esteem, student's competence, other people, library staff and library contents. Also some suggestions on how to improve the library services are given.

University library use has been studied mostly with quantitative methods. In particular surveys have concentrated on defining the facts about the library use. During recent years information science has been criticised for the superficiality of the results achieved solely by quantitative means. These facts need to be supplemented with methods that consider the qualitative side of human information-seeking behaviour and thus broaden the picture we have of our clients and how they act (for example, Järvelin & Vakkari 1993, 140). In the Kuopio University Library one qualitative method was tested to clarify how well the library's student services work. The qualitative method used was the method of empathy-based stories (=MES) as defined by Eskola (1998, 10):

The method of empathy-based stories as a means for collecting data is (technically speaking) writing short essays or stories according to the instructions given by the researcher. Respondents are given a short framework, which helps them to orientate to the situation they are supposed to write a short story about.

One essential aspect of MES [1] is that two different versions of the same story are given to the respondents so that each respondent receives only one of the versions. Thus those aspects that the respondents regard as being most important should become clearly identified. On the other hand the quality of the versions is important: they differ usually only in one aspect from each other – highlighting out the different sides of the same situation, usually negative and positive, and the different solutions to that problem.

According to Eskola (1998, 80–81) MES' strengths are its potential in solving practical problems, e.g. gaining rapid feedback from teaching programmes or planning future curricula. Since it can be readily carried out in most cases, it is very suitable in exploratory studies. MES can also be very useful in supplementing traditional survey methods.

This study has two aims. First it evaluates the use of this qualitative method and its potential in studying the library's services. On the other hand

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we hoped to identify which services the students consider as being most crucial for their own studies. In other words, what should a university library do in order to serve its student clients?

Nursing science students and the stories they wrote

The material for this study was gathered in the Kuopio University Library during the fall term 1998. The writers of the stories were first-year students in nursing science. They all had studied only for a maximum of a couple of months in the university and thus were not fully acquainted with the library. The students had already used the library to find material for examinations as well as for writing essays.

The actual writing of the stories took place during the 'Library and Information Retrieval Skills' course. From the groups that participated in the course two sub-groups of similar size were chosen. A total amount of 25 stories were written, 12 positive and 13 negative stories. Before handing out the framework stories, the students were told that the library was carrying out the study and the aim of the study was to improve the library's services. After that they were instructed to continue the story that was written on the paper they were given. Fifteen minutes was reserved for the writing and it was suggested that they would write only on one side of the paper. After collecting the stories, the students were told that there had been two kinds of variations from the same story.

The following two stories were given to the students as frameworks for their own stories. Also the age and the sex of the respondents were recorded on the sheets handed out.

Mark/Mary graduated quickly because he/she had all the material and services he/she needed from the university library. How was the library so useful to Mark/Mary? Use your imagination and write a story on this sheet about what happened.

Mark/Mary graduated slowly because he/she could not get all the material and services he/she needed from the university library. What hindered Mark/Mary in the library so much? Use your imagination and write a story on this sheet about what happened.

The difference between the stories should highlight the catalyst effect of the library's ser-

vices on the students' education: i.e. what are the services (or the lack of these services) that have the greatest effect on the student's success in his/her studies.

Data analysis data with the aid of matrices

The content analysis of the stories was made with the aid of matrixes (Miles & Huberman 1994, 207-24). The type of matrix that was used in this study was the case-ordered predictor matrix (Miles & Huberman 1994, 213). With the aid of this matrix, one can explain the observations, highlighting those aspects that are chosen as the possible effective variables. In this study the observations that required explanation were the different kinds of services and materials that the students need in order to study effectively. The possible explanatory variables on the other hand were the respondents' age and their status as a student.

In addition to the factual contents of the stories, the stylistic aspects and their discursive elements were evaluated. The most important of these was how the personality of the writer affected the story and how well the respondent could put him/herself into the role of the hypothetical student or did he/she write from his/her own perspective in the university.

The entire data set was read and analysed by both writers of this paper. This was crucial for the analysis of the stories written. Especially when using qualitative methods one's own subjective opinions can and do have an effect on the analytical process. Furthermore, the different viewpoints of various readers increase the critical attitude toward the findings and conclusions that are based on the data collected.

Main differences between the younger and older students

The initial finding that became apparent from the stories was that role-playing was actually very difficult for the respondents. Most of the stories contained the hopes or actual incidents that had happened to the writers and on the other hand word-for-word summaries of the aspects that had been taught to them in the first courses they had taken. This shows that the respondents' own student identities had not been fully formed – they

all were first-year students. On the other hand, this reveals also something about the method used: the stories are always written based on one's own experiences and thus always reveal something about the writers and their attitudes to the problem under study.

Thus some students wrote directly about their own experiences and did not refer to the role person mentioned in the framework story. Even in the negative stories where the beginning of the story was about the miserable adventures of student Mark/Mary the end of the story would contain positive concluding remarks about the services that the writer had used in the library. Negative stories that also had negative endings had been written satirically or ironically as if in order to ensure that what happened to the hypothetical character would not happen in the real world to the writer. Also the situation – the stories were written during a course and under the supervision of a member of the library staff – had apparently an effect on the stories written.

The age of the writer affected to stories. The older students knew already what they wanted: in their stories Mark/Mary started to work on his/her master's thesis at the beginning of the studies and the goal was to graduate as soon as possible. On the other hand the younger students felt somewhat lost in this new situation they were facing: e.g. in some of the younger students' negative stories, poor Mark/Mary had almost entered into a Kafkaesque world of the unknown university and its library. Kasesniemi and Talja came to the same kind of interpretation (1997, 79–80): a novice student views the library as a system he or she has no actual contact. For example shelf classification and its function in the library may represent an insurmountable obstacle at the beginning of the studies.

In one of the negative stories Mary did not learn how to use online databases. So she tries to retrieve the material she needed by browsing through the shelves. Even when she found some useful books they had too short loan periods. And when the "currency service" by reading all the periodicals was also impossible the end was quite hopeless:

Mary's time was wasted in looking for books, but also many books remained on the shelves because she did not know they existed. (Female, 25 years)

The social and psychological support of the community was of utmost importance in the stories written by the younger students.

Five basic resources

The student's ideal library as well as its negative has inherent in it the same basic resources. The following five basic components were identified as important in creating the students' ideal library:

- Library's material resources: collections, premises, equipment,
- Library staff,
- Student's competence,
- Student's psychological resources and
- Other persons.

The stories highlighted the fact that the students consider it essential that the library has sufficient collections and equipment for search and retrieval. Also rapid circulation of the most wanted materials as well as equal rules for all clients were typical of an ideal library. The stories emphasised that the library fees should be reasonable. Thus in the negative stories one hindering factor for Mark's/Mary's studies was too short loan periods as well as the lack of availability of books, especially course-books (Kautto 1997, 63).

The most important pieces of equipment were computers. Mark/Mary used computers for searching and for writing reports and essays:

Because Mary did not have her own computer she was able to access the library's computers and was able to complete her assignments in time. (Female, 46 years)

It seems that many social science students still do not own a personal computer or have network connections at home, at least not at the beginning of their studies. One hindering factor in the negative stories was the lack of computers on the university campus. Furthermore, in the negative stories someone else was always using the library's computers and when Mark/Mary finally accessed the computer, the connections failed:

Mary thinks about the story she just heard: What's the difference between airplanes and University's computers? Airplanes crash only once. (Female, 27 years)

In some of the negative stories Mark/Mary wondered why one could not use one's own laptop computers in the library's network if there is lack of computers.

Photocopiers were another group of equipment that was emphasised in the stories. In the ideal library there were enough copiers and their use was well regulated. One story suggested even that a copying card should be integrated into the library card.

The library's premises were one factor that was important in the stories. Good premises are ideal surroundings for efficient and peaceful study:

Preparing for the examinations was easy in the library's peaceful atmosphere compared to the bedlam of the dormitory. (Female, 46 years)

Also the ideal library's opening hours were long, in some stories the library was always open. These same aspects appeared in the negative stories. Those Marks/Marys who had daily jobs and tried to use the library during the weekends encountered closed doors. In the negative stories, libraries were also very noisy and full of distractions.

Another and even more important factor in the ideal library was its competent and friendly staff. The staff had two kinds of roles in the stories: on one hand, they were professional information specialists, and, on the other hand, they were companions and supportive for the student when he or she needed help in the everyday problems of studying. The latter was more evident in the stories of the younger students. To them the library staff plays an important role in identifying with the academic community:

The staff is there to help and CLEAR THE CHAOS that comes sometimes into one's mind. (Male, 33 years)

Also the negative stories emphasised the meaning of competent staff but in them the contact between the client and the staff was hindered because of the work pressures – the staff did not have time to really attend to the student and solve his or her problems. This barrier to ask questions from the staff could also be interpreted to be due to the student's shyness. One shy Mary expressed it as follows:

The library staff seemed to be irritated by the customer ... but ... oh, how to find that book from the shelves or how to reserve books, make interlibrary loans. (Female, 41 years)

Student's self-esteem and competence

The stories had two categories belonging to the students that hinder or help them in their library use: resources of self-esteem and resources of competence. The stories emphasised that even if library is full of all kinds of material resources that is not enough. First of all students must know how to use computers and also have good information skills in order to benefit from the equipment.

At the start of the university course there was a course on information skills. There were also other, specific information skills courses available throughout the study years. (Female, 29 years)

According to a Finnish survey (Väyrynen 1998, 103–105) it seems that in academic libraries there still is too little time reserved for user education.

Another category that was linked to the students was the strength or the weakness of the student's self-esteem. Mark/Mary did quite well if he or she had the courage to find out about things.

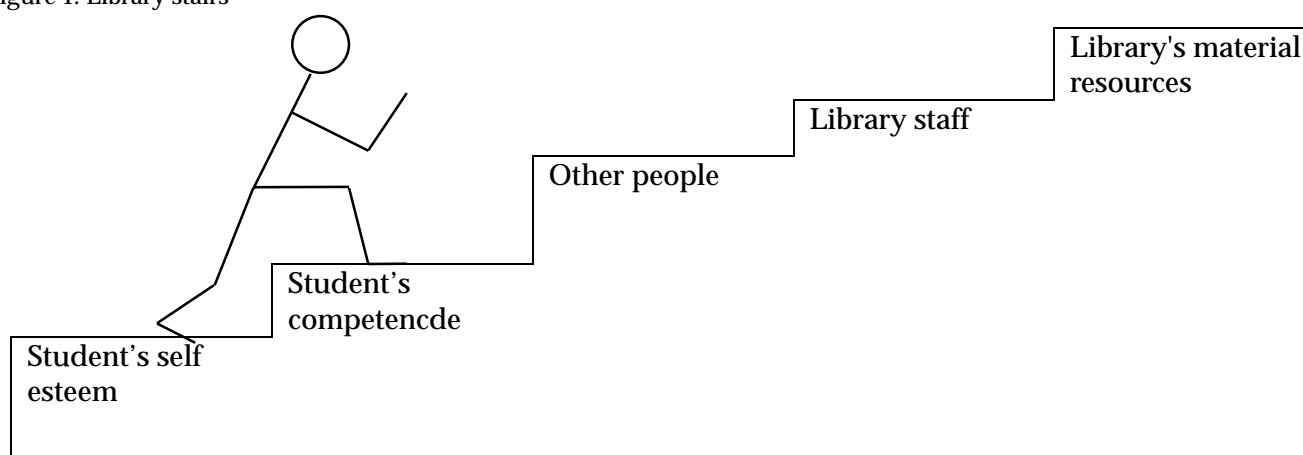
Mark had always used libraries ... New demands confused him and especially the terrible information searching with new methods made him shiver. Nonetheless he started to become acquainted with information searching with the help of the other students and the library staff. Thus he learned quickly how to make searches in a quick and systematic manner and how to use information skills in his studies.

That same novice students' dread of computers and new methods of information searching was noted in a study from Tampere University Library (Kasesniemi & Talja 1997, 76).

Student's self-esteem was emphasised in this material because most of the respondents were first-year students. It was quite evident that the main process they were going through was learning how to act in a completely new life situation and how to manage to live on their own.

In the above quotation the fifth resource, i.e. other people, appears. Most important here were the other students and especially those who acted as tutors. These individuals acted as helpers and

Figure 1. Library stairs



guides in difficult situations and in problem solving.

From one step to another

Student's use of the university's library can be presented as a staircase that consists of five steps (see Figure 1). Each step forms the basis to the next – a new step can be reached only if the previous ones are in good condition. The steps also emphasise the meaning of socialising to the academic community as well as the meaning of the basic information skills and how they are learned. The available recourses can only be used if the student is encouraged and tutored in the use of those resources throughout their academic studies. Philosophies based solely on the material recourses are thus superficial and too narrow (Andaleeb & Simons 1998, 163–6).

The foundation for the effective use of the library and its services is dependent on the student's personal abilities – the courage to use the available material resources – as well as possession of good information skills. The next step that encourages and helps the students are other individuals – other students and the university (library) staff. The final step consists of the library's material resources that can be used only if the previous steps are in good condition. The material resources are not sufficient *per se* for the students in the way they seek out information.

Pros and cons of the MES

MES was an excellent method in identifying what effect the student's personal characteristics

had on the university library use. MES can be regarded as an intermediate between surveys and interviews. The results of surveys are usually impersonal and formal and it is in the nature of the surveys that the respondents answer only the questions that are asked. MES could be used in preparing the questionnaires. Even a small sampling with MES can identify those aspects that are worthy of closer examination. Thus a survey's questions based on these aspects would describe more the actual opinions of the respondents instead of the researcher's opinion of what ought to be asked.

On the other hand MES suffers the same drawback that is typical of all qualitative methods: the results are still based predominantly on subjective interpretations. This can be avoided by teamwork while interpreting the stories and by a critical attitude towards the interpretations utilising modern methods of analysing qualitative material. For example, in this study adding a non-library member to the research team could have altered how the stories were interpreted. MES can be considered as an excellent and quick method in identifying the respondents' own opinions about their problems and their suggestions on how to solve those problems.

Conclusions

This study also highlights the fact that in the future the library's and librarians' role will be that of a teacher and tutor. Learning information skills is and will be a lifelong project for library staff and their clients. Thus it would be optimal while teaching information skills to the students, if the

courses could be tailored to the students' personal ways of learning and skill levels. The needs of a novice differ greatly from those of graduate students, which in turn are different from experienced researchers. Novice students' seem to be more in need of social and psychological support, and they are not so interested in the actual information skills at the beginning of their studies.

Computer technology provides us new possibilities and solutions in serving our clients. These include personal user interfaces that individually guide users of different skill levels as well as computer-based teaching aids and materials. These can be also accessed outside the normal opening hours via computer networks.

It is also evident that the library must be staffed by an adequate number of trained staff. This was an important factor in the students' ideal library. Staff ought to have time for their clients, even for their personal problems. The need for material resources is also never-ending. The most important thing to the novice student is that he or she can locate course material without difficulty.

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Note

1. The MES is basically a variation of role-playing (Ginsburg 1978 and 1979).

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