



Conversation-based programming and newcomer integration: A case study of the Språkhörnan program at Malmö City Library



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ABSTRACT

The potential of conversation-based programming (i.e., language cafés and conversation groups) for supporting immigrant integration is explored in a case-based study on the Språkhörnan (“language corner”) program at the City Library in Malmö, Sweden. The methodology includes participant observation, interviews with program participants, a focus group with program volunteers, and a questionnaire. The basis of the study’s theoretical framework is social capital theory, information grounds theory, and a multi-dimensional model of integration. Results indicate that, first, such a program offers a unique opportunity for many participants to use their Swedish language skills and gain conversational competence. Second, the program supports integration through information exchange during the informal conversations. Third, it offers participants a space for social interaction with Swedes and other immigrants. Conversation-based programming in libraries can foster integration by supporting language learning, facilitating the expansion of participants’ social networks, and increasing social capital in the form of increased knowledge and information about the new country.

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1. Introduction

Public libraries are widely acknowledged for their ability to act as meeting places. Frequently likened to community centers, they provide a public arena free of commercial interests in which individuals from diverse backgrounds can meet, discuss, and debate (Audunson, 2005; Buschman & Leckie, 2007). As both meeting places and information providers, libraries serve as a point of entry for international immigrants (Putnam, 2003). Libraries embrace this role by offering programming aimed at the unique needs of immigrants.

A common type of library programming worldwide is the use of language cafés and conversation groups, referred to here as conversation-based programming. This type of programming is usually led by native speakers and is based on informal conversations, the intents of which are to improve participants’ linguistic abilities and facilitate integration (Johnston, 2015). This case study describes the Språkhörnan program at the City Library in Malmö, Sweden. The program, organized by the Red Cross, is part of the Red Cross integration initiative. Språkhörnan takes place once a week, with attendance on a drop-in, voluntary basis.

2. Problem statement

Reports from libraries and research suggest positive outcomes from conversation-based programming, such as language learning and integration. However, empirical research is needed regarding whether and

how such programming actually facilitates these reported benefits. Furthermore, a definition of integration, which lacks in many of the articles on the topic, is necessary for evaluating program outcomes.

A consideration of the potential benefits of conversation-based programming is essential for libraries both offering and planning to implement conversation-based programming, as it can serve to inform practice, provide evidence for libraries seeking funding for such programs, and enable libraries to improve upon preexisting programming. Moreover, a better understanding of this type of programming has relevance within and beyond the library community. Immigration and newcomer incorporation has become an increasingly pressing topic, especially in Europe and North America. Designing ways to foster integration on the local level is of the utmost importance. Using the Språkhörnan program as an example, the research question is: can conversation-based programming benefit participants in and beyond the main language-learning aim of the programs and in ways that facilitate integration?

3. Literature review

Many societies struggle with social divides along cultural and ethnic lines, especially as societies become more multicultural due to increased immigration (Blokland & van Eijk, 2009; Bråmã, 2006; Burgess, Wilson, & Lupton, 2005; Finney, 2009; Phillips, 2006; Pred, 2000). Therefore, reports from library staff suggesting that conversation-based programming supports language learning and integration are a glimmer of hope for fostering greater social cohesion. Hjerpe (2014), from the National Library of Sweden, reports that there are language cafés in

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libraries all around Sweden and that attendees report increased feelings of confidence in speaking Swedish. Likewise, [Atlestam and Myhre \(2014\)](#), from the Immigrant Institute in Gothenburg, Sweden, report that in addition to language learning, language cafés at local libraries offer the opportunity for participants to receive information and discuss how things work in Swedish society. Moreover, they note that programming results in intercultural exchange and mutual integration. In Norway, [Gundersen \(2011\)](#), from the National Library of Norway, notes that language cafés and conversation groups are increasingly common in Norwegian libraries. He reports that organizers have indicated that participants are expanding their social networks and that this type of programming supports integration. Lastly, empirical research by [Ulvik \(2010\)](#) at Oslo and Akerhus University College on the multicultural memory group at the Torshov branch of Oslo Public library found that participation in the group resulted in increased feelings of trust and safety and appeared to motivate language learning amongst participants. These reports suggest positive outcomes from conversation-based programming; however, empirical research is needed regarding how such programming actually facilitates integration. Moreover, a definition of what integration is and is not is necessary for analyzing program outcomes.

Does it matter that these programs are in libraries? There appear to be advantages in three areas for having this programming in public libraries. First, newcomers are already using public libraries as meeting places. Research conducted under the auspices of the PLACE¹ project suggests that libraries are able to promote meetings and varying levels of interaction between individuals of diverse backgrounds ([Aabø & Audunson, 2012](#); [Aabø, Audunson, & Vårheim, 2010](#); [Audunson, 2005](#); [Audunson, Essmat, & Aabø, 2011](#); [Audunson, Vårheim, Aabø, & Holm, 2007](#)). One PLACE study ([Audunson et al., 2011](#)) found that the library as a meeting place supported the inclusion of immigrant women into Norwegian society in multiple spheres that ranged from friendship to education and employment. The women reported going to the library early on in order to minimize feelings of isolation and loneliness, and then gradually they began participating in library programming and engaging with other library patrons. Likewise, [Berger's \(2002\)](#) research on public libraries in Denmark found that ethnic minorities use libraries more intensely than the population in general. Older male users of minority backgrounds and minority youth make particularly heavy use of the library, which often leads them to form close relationships with library staff.

Also, and in line with the findings, recent immigrants reportedly are already seeking contact and personalized information provision from library staff. A report issued by the Swedish Library Association entitled *Framgångsrikt men förbisett* (prosperous but overseen) stated that branch librarians are often the first Swedish people with whom newcomers establish a relationship ([Svensk Biblioteksforening, 2008](#)). [Jönsson-Lanevska \(2005\)](#) found that library services relating to the provision of information and advice about navigating Swedish society seemed to be of particular importance in helping immigrants overcome the so-called disappointment phase of the integration process during which they often struggle with isolation, depression, and negative feelings towards the society of settlement. The term 'advice' suggests a more personal element to the provision of information and reliance on the library staff's knowledge of Swedish society. [Fisher, Durrance, and Hinton's, \(2004\)](#) study on how newcomers benefited from library programs on literacy and coping skills at Queen's Borough Public Library showed that the expansion of social networks, bridging of cultural landscapes, increased self-confidence, preparation for employment, and greater English-language skills could be partially attributed to the

serendipitous information exchange that resulted from socializing between program participants and library staff.

As a final point, public libraries are, in general, trusted institutions. Moreover, [Vårheim's](#) work suggests that public libraries in Norway and the United States are able to generate social capital in the form of greater societal trust, which is considered necessary for facilitating interaction between individuals of different social and cultural backgrounds ([Vårheim, 2009, 2011](#); [Vårheim, Steinmo, & Ide, 2008](#)). His research on trust and the role of the public library in the integration of refugees in northern Norway found that newcomers who were more fluent in Norwegian frequently spoke with Norwegians in the library. However, they reported only exchanging greetings with Norwegians outside of the library ([Vårheim, 2014](#)).

In summary, it appears that newcomers are using public libraries as meeting places, benefiting from personalized information provision by library staff, interacting with other patrons, and gaining linguistic competence from attending library programming.

4. Theoretical framework

An understanding of integration and what it means to be integrated is necessary to understand program outcomes. The present analysis is grounded in three theories: information grounds, social capital, and [Diaz's \(1993\)](#) multi-dimensional model of integration. Social capital and information grounds theories explain the mechanism of conversation-based programming. To capture the nuances of integration, what is meant by integration, the present research applies the multi-dimensional model of integration.

4.1. Social capital

As reported in the literature, conversation-based programming offers participants an opportunity to expand their social networks. Social capital theory provides insight as to how one might benefit from their social network. [Bourdieu \(1986\)](#) theorized that social capital is the monetary and non-monetary resources made available to us through our social connections and that the volume of social capital is determined by the size of one's social network and the capital possessed by individuals within that particular network.

Increasing one's social capital has been associated with an individual's weaker ties. These so-called weaker ties are an individual's social connections that link outside of their primary network of close friends and family, an individual's stronger ties. Research suggests that weaker ties can lead to greater opportunities for individuals as information and knowledge is available from weaker ties that might not be available within their stronger ties. This is because an individual's weaker ties are more likely to move in different circles, thus having access to different information ([Granovetter, 2003](#); [Lin, 2002](#); [Putnam, 2000](#)). This is referred to as bridging social capital, "which functions as a social lubricant and has potential to work as social leverage, to help one 'get ahead'" ([Widén-Wulff et al., 2008](#), p. 350).

Research suggests that public libraries play a role in facilitating bridging social capital. The results from [Johnson's \(2012\)](#) study on public libraries and social capital indicate that library use is significantly associated with community involvement, which may result from individuals meeting community leaders and other prominent individuals at the library who can inform them about and/or facilitate opportunities for local participation. The present research considers how information made available through group facilitators and other participants at conversation programming helps support newcomer integration, and how it might help them find opportunities to become involved and get ahead in their new society.

¹ Public Libraries, Arenas for Citizenship (PLACE) was a four-year research project (August 2007 to April 2012) financed by the Norwegian Research Council that focused on the potential of public libraries as public spaces and meeting places in multicultural urban communities with a capacity of fostering social capital.

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