

Norwegian Public Library Language Cafés Facilitate Discourse Between Immigrants and Norwegian-Born Citizens

Johnston, J., & Audunson, R. (2017). Supporting immigrants' political integration through discussion and debate in public libraries. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 29 May, 1-15. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0961000617709056>

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Evidence Summary

Norwegian Public Library Language Cafés Facilitate Discourse Between Immigrants and Norwegian-Born Citizens

A Review of:

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Abstract

Objective – To investigate if conversation-based language cafés in Norway provide a platform for improving communication between immigrants and Norwegian-born citizens, potentially setting the stage for better participation by immigrants in civic dialogues.

Design – Multi-site case study.

Setting – Public libraries in Oslo, Moss, and Horten, Norway.

Subjects – Language café participants (immigrants and Norwegian-born volunteers).

Methods – Participant observation and questionnaires for immigrants (Norwegian, English, Somali, and Arabic language versions) and volunteers (Norwegian language only) who took part in café activities.

Main Results – 64 immigrants (21 in Oslo, 30 in Moss, 13 in Horten) and 31 volunteers (7 in Oslo, 14 in Moss, 10 in Horten) completed questionnaires. Language cafés at all three sites led to informal, respectful discursive interaction between participants. Though each café had a unique set of participants and conversational topics, all cafés enabled immigrants to improve their Norwegian language skills while providing all participants

with a place to meet new people, exchange information, and discuss political issues.

Conclusion – Having attended the cafés and improved their knowledge of Norwegian language and culture, immigrants at all three sites were potentially better equipped for future participation in the Norwegian public sphere.

Commentary

While public libraries in many countries still debate the extent to which they should participate in the political process (Jaeger, Bertot, & Gorham, 2013), Norway's 2014 Library Act provides a mandate for public libraries to actively foster public discussion and debate. Conversation-based programs in public libraries, including language cafés, support this mandate by providing neutral fora for participation in the so-called Habermasian public sphere. This study contributes qualitative richness to prior examinations of the public sphere and public libraries summarized by Widdersheim & Masanori (2016). Tangentially, the study also adds to the broader corpus of social scientific investigations about immigration and multicultural societies. For example, the study describes specific aspects of Norway's approach to social integration of immigrants that may be useful to researchers who study how national integration policies differ (Alba & Foner, 2014).

The study achieves the three primary aims of case study research—generality, accuracy, and complexity/coverage (Woodside, 2010, pp. 19-20)—but only in relation to the specific question *Do language cafés facilitate discourse in settings where immigrants must learn a new language?* The study is not longitudinal in scope and does not investigate whether or not immigrants, armed with new language and cultural skills, actually do participate in the political process following participation in a language café. Future researchers may wish to pursue this question.

At the theoretical level, generality is strengthened with the universally applicable, in-depth discussion of the concept of the public sphere applied to multicultural settings, including descriptions of so-called weak/strong publics and social capital (Putnam, 2005). This supranational “theoretical anchoring” provides any public library, anywhere, with a conceptual roadmap for advocating conversation-based programming.

In terms of the case study itself, conducting research at multiple sites and gathering data with three mechanisms were strategies employed for ensuring adequate accuracy and complexity/coverage. In future presentations of this research, it would be helpful to include the questionnaire for volunteers as an appendix (even in the original Norwegian), which was missing in this study. Additionally, while the discussion of findings includes highly relevant questionnaire responses and field note excerpts, numeric data about questionnaire responses would enable readers to understand the study more completely. As an illustration, the authors note “the vast majority of participants reported they think attending the language café has improved their language skills somewhat or a lot” (p. 7), but the phrase “vast majority” is open to interpretation by different readers. Summarizing this statement with a specific percentage would clarify meaning.

Overall, this study provides public libraries with examples of how conversation-based programs can enrich civic dialogues. Rich in theory, the study also provides conceptual ammunition for public libraries wishing to engage more actively in political discourse for use in defending democratic discussion in hostile environments.

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