Difficulties in accessing information in libraries : pilot study of Osijek library customers

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Abstract

The main purpose of this paper is to see the extent of librarian's professionalism and to see how much librarians observe ethical principals of their profession. The interviews with various types of library customers are supposed to reveal the kind of problems in accessing information they have had in their lives.
One of the basic rights of any individual is a right to information. Libraries are places that, among other things, mediate information/knowledge, but sometimes that does not happen and people cannot get the necessary information. Even though library profession, like any other profession, is regulated by a number of documents that insist on customers' right to obtain information in the library, this does not always happen. One of the most important documents that regulate the behaviour of librarians is the Code of Ethics. Croatian Library Association also has the Code. This document determines basic principles of behaviour that oblige members of the library profession.
This study will reveal in what degree librarians in Croatia behave in accordance to the Code of Ethics and what kind of problems customers meet when they look for information.

Key words: obstacles, access to information, satisfaction, Code of Ethics

1. Introduction

For a several decades now, libraries have been struggling with two concepts - the concept of library service quality and user satisfaction: are they related and/or dependent concepts or not? In fact, those two concepts have been and still are used interchangeably, the mistake which has caused even more confusion. The library service quality concept has been the subject of much research (Andaleeb & Simmonds, 1998; Cook & Heath, 2001; Martensen & Gronholdt, 2003, etc.). Although the topic may seem rather straightforward, it really is not; it includes many aspects, from the fact that the quality is many-faceted concept, and that it can 'lay in the eye of the user' to the fact that it depends on customers' needs, expectations and desires. Similarly, the user satisfaction may and may not depend on the objectively perceived quality of the library. It may and may not be directly related to the performance of the library (Hernon & Altman, 1998). It is often described as "the emotional reaction to a specific transaction or service encounter"(Elliot, 1995). However, it cannot be dismissed by the library and has to be taken into consideration. For a library, service quality includes the interactive

relationship between the library and the people whom it is supposed to serve. How the library sees and interacts with its customers clearly affects the perceived quality and nature of the services rendered (Hernon & Altman, 1998). In contrast to customer satisfaction that is transaction-based, service quality has been described "as a global judgement, or attitude, relating to the superiority of a service" (Elliot, 1995). This means that the satisfaction levels from a number of encounters that an individual experiences with a particular service institution fuses into an impression of service quality for that person. Therefore, it is vital to stress out the importance of identifying the obstacles or barriers to information customers have in their encounter with library services because those obstacles may lead to frustration, discomfort and ultimately to dissatisfaction on the side of the customer.

In addition, the research has shown that there is clearly a discrepancy between the idea of aspects of library service quality on the side of the library and the idea in the mind of library customers (Cook & Heath, 2001).

Many service and library and information science researchers have defined service quality in terms of the Gaps Model of Service Quality (Parasuraman, Zaithaml & Berry, 1985). Library researchers, driven by the desire to adhere to user-driven perspective, have focused their attention to the fifth gap – "The quality that a consumer perceives in a service". A protocol, SERVQUAL, developed in the 1980s by Berry, Zeithaml and Parasuraman (Parasuraman, Berry, & Zeithaml, 1988, 1991) for evaluating service quality from the customer perspective, measures what customers value as important across five dimensions: assurance (knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence), empathy (caring and individualized attention), reliability (ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately), responsiveness (willingness to help customers and provide prompt service) and tangibles (physical facilities, equipment, and appearance of personnel). These dimensions are important because if library fails to perform on any of them, it may cause the discomfort and dissatisfaction on the customer side.

A study in Danish libraries from 1999 (Martensen & Gronholdt, 2003,) came up with similar, but slightly altered, quality dimensions. According to them, six dimensions of quality can impact the customer satisfaction and, consequently, their loyalty to the library. Those dimensions are: electronic resources (e.g., the library web, online catalogues, database search systems and access to electronic publications), collections of printed publications, other library services (e.g., library user courses), technical facilities (e.g., computers and copying machines), the library environment (e.g., atmosphere, reading room and library hours) and the human side of customer service (e.g., the library staff's expertise, helpfulness and

friendliness).

Clearly, the biggest obstacle to satisfying the information need for a customer would be the lack of necessary resource. In fact, the literature reports that the most frequent customer disappointments in libraries centre on the unavailability of materials (e.g. cannot find, do not own, or missing) (Hernon & Altman, 1998).

Unfortunately, sometimes the obstacle to information can be found in the person of a librarian. In academic library setting for instance, it is extremely important for undergraduate students that the interaction with a librarian be enjoyable– if the staff is approachable, if they provide a caring, empathetic response this will raise students' level of satisfaction with library services. However, sometimes even more experienced, graduate students can be intimidated and/or frustrated by the librarian behaviour – in one case, a graduate student decided to leave a graduate programme for another university due to the problems she had at the old university; among other things, she also had a problem with a librarian. So, even though the library had some good resources, it was impossible to her to access them and the librarian was disinterested in helping her to access any other resources (Cook & Heath, 2001). Also, customers are invariably frustrated if they encounter a librarian who appears to be unwilling 'to go the extra step', a librarian who is not committed enough.

Cook and Heath (2001) found that customers want to be confident and self-reliant in using a library, and to be treated with dignity if they have a question. The need to be treated with dignity is obviously one of the most important user requirements for all service areas, such as medicine (see Rogers, Karlsen & Addington-Hall, 2000). For instance, the authors of this paper suggest that the causes of dissatisfaction with hospital-based care arise from a sense of being 'devalued', 'dehumanized', or 'disempowered' and from situations in which the 'rules' governing the expected health professional-patient relationships were broken.

Other obstacles to information in a library setting may include those that interfere with customer ability to make full use of library electronic resources (e.g. printing problems, campus computing difficulties, inability to submit ILL requests electronically, lack of online citation indexes), limited library hours (especially on holidays), lack of study and use space (Starkweather & Wallin, 1999). Also, a very common obstacle to the use of electronic resources is reported to be the lack of knowledge about what is available (Adams & Bonk, 1995).

2. Librarianship and Codes of Ethics

Codes of Ethics in library and information science represent documents of core values of the profession with which library associations usually codify and make known to the profession and to the general public the ethical principles that guide the work of librarians. Along with the changes in library information environment it was necessary to modify some of the professional values in the Code, still, some values remain constant. Those are, among others, the values that refer to:

- selection, organization, preservation, and dissemination of information,
- the urge to provide the highest level of service to all library customers through appropriate and usefully organized resources; equitable service policies; equitable access; and accurate, unbiased, and courteous responses to all requests,

Croatian Library Association also has created its own Code. However, it must be said that it took more than 40 years for the Association to write the first Code and make it publicly known[1]. Since this paper deals with obstacles or barriers library customers in Osijek (eastern Croatia) have had in access to information, it is interesting to see what the Code of Ethics of Croatian Library Association postulates when it comes to access to information. First of all, the Code defines seven core principles of the profession and invites the library and information professionals to adhere to them. Principles related to access to information are:

Principle no. 1

Croatian library professionals are invited to uphold the highest level of professional behaviour in accordance with international and Croatian professional standards, with the aim to improve library services.

Principle no 3

Respect for the right to knowledge and uninhibited access to information for all.

Principle no 4

Availability of various types of materials and resources to all customer groups.

In addition, the Code insists that the library professionals must act professionally and ensure the equal access to information for all customers regardless of their personal qualities, gender, special needs, nationality, religion, political or sexual orientation, etc.

Adherence to the principles of the professional Code of Ethics contributes to the feeling of satisfaction and service quality in the minds of library customers. The ideal library is the one in which librarians respect and follow principles from the Code and customers have no objections to the quality of the service the library provides.

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[1] The Association was established in 1948 and the Code was first written in 1992. It was amended in 2002.

The pilot-research described by this paper was conducted with the aim to provide insight whether Osijek inhabitants have had any obstacles when accessing information in libraries anywhere, and if so, what types of barriers or obstacles they've come across to.

3. Pilot-research

3.1. Purpose of the research and the hypothesis

The main purpose of this research was to see the extent of librarian's professionalism and to see how much librarians observe ethical principals of their profession. As already mentioned, the Code of Ethics of the Croatian Library Association contains a number of principles of library profession and librarians are expected to follow them in their work.

The problems reported by our interviewees depended solely on their previous life experience.

The ideal situation that was the starting point of our research was that librarians follow the stipulations of the Code of Ethics and provide professional and courteous service to the library customers. Therefore our main hypothesis was that the customers do not perceive to have any obstacles in accessing information in libraries.

3.2. Methodology and instrument

The methodology chosen for the data collection was the personal interviews. The interviews with various types of library customers were supposed to reveal the kind of problems they have had in accessing information in their lives. The research was carried out during two weeks in December 2009.

It is important to point out that our research was not connected to any particular type of library. Interviewees were not asked to clarify where and when the particular problem occurred.

The interviews were conducted at Osijek University, authors' homes, schools and libraries. The interviewees were asked to answer only one interview-question: „*So far, have you come across any obstacles when you tried to access information in libraries?* " Their answers were recorded manually and later semantically analyzed.

3.3. Sample

All together there were 37 interviewees. They came from all social and age groups. Tables 1 and 2 illustrate the age groups and the professions of the interviewees in our sample.

Table 1. Age groups in the sample

	16-18	19-29	30-49	50-70	TOTAL
Interviewees	3	23	7	4	37

As you can see from Table 1, the biggest age group is the one ranged from 219-29 years of age, and it is followed by the age group 30-59. The least represented are age groups 16-18 and 60-70.

Various professions were represented in our sample. The biggest group were university students, but there were also high school students, university teachers, primary school teachers, senior citizens, etc.

3.4. Results

All together, 50 problems in accessing information in libraries were reported. The problems were clustered into semantic groups and we came up with five groups of problems. The identified types of problems were clustered into the following groups:

- RESPONSIVENESS, EMPATHY, COMPETENCE
- TANGIBLES
- RESOURCES AND COLLECTIONS
- SERVICES AND POLICY
- DISCRIMINATION

The first and the group with the highest number of reported problems is the one entitled RESPONSIVENESS, EMPATHY, AND COMPETENCE. It contains 16 problems, reported mostly by student population in our sample. All the problems in this group are related to the person of a librarian: the attitudes to work, friendliness, approachability, skilfulness, expertise, etc.

Table 2 lists problems for the group RESPONSIVENESS, EMPATHY, AND COMPETENCE .

Table 2. Problems from the group RESPONSIVENESS, EMPATHY, AND COMPETENCE

RESPONSIVENESS, EMPATHY, AND COMPETENCE (16)
1. Librarian doesn't know how to find a literature about certain field (incompetence in searching catalogue)
2. Library doesn't work but according to working hours it should be open
3. Lack of notice about the change of working hours
4. Librarian talks on the phone about private matters and customer is waiting
5. Librarian talks with one customer about private matters and other customers are waiting in the line

6. Lack of enthusiasm for searching in catalogue or databases due to a complicated information problem
7. Incomplete cataloguing
8. Student brings a list of seminar literature, stating that she already has one of the titles on the list. After a few days student comes back into the library but the librarian hasn't found anything from the list, apart the title student emphasized she does not need. Student goes to look by herself and founds all the titles from her list.
9. Customer brings a literature list she needs for her state exam, librarian doesn't even look at it and says there are no such materials in the library, customer goes to look by herself and finds everything she from the list.
10. Filled-out library form with a student's seminar topic was lost several times in the library, librarian sends student to look for literature by himself
11. Customer asks for a book in English, librarian says they don't have it, though she hasn't looked in a catalogue, and she doesn't recommend anything similar
12. Librarian refuses to serve a customer, because it's the end of working hours, but it's half an hour until closing time
13. Unkind and incompetent staff
14. Librarians don't know how to use computers or technology in general
15. Librarians don't implement information interviews
16. Librarians don't pay enough attention to high school students

The group entitled TANGIBLES is the second biggest problem group in the sample. It contains 11 problems related to the physical organization of the library and/or equipment. Table 3. lists problems for the group TANGIBLES.

Table 3. Problems from the group TANGIBLES

TANGIBLES (11)
1. Lack of appropriate space for individual or group work
2. Lack of personal computers – invalid computers
3. Invalid computers are not marked as such
4. Computers don't have access to the Internet – lack of wireless connections
5. Only one out of eight computers has LAN access to the Internet and the rest of them have wireless which is very slow
6. Uncomfortable chairs
7. No access for disabled persons
8. Disorganised library – no visible marking, signs, call numbers
9. Bad hygiene conditions
10. Very warm and humid in the library, bad ventilation system – impossible to work longer in these conditions
11. Library is very far from one's house or apartment

RESOURCES AND COLLECTIONS group counts 9 problems connected with the organization and content of the collections.

Table 4 brings problems for the group RESOURCES AND COLLECTIONS.

Table 4. Problems from the group RESOURCES AND COLLECTIONS

RESOURCES AND COLLECTIONS (9)
1. Lack of exam literature
2. Lack of seminar literature
3. Lack of literature for scientific work
4. Periodicals are stored in the storage room and not readily available
5. No literature for blind or visually impaired persons (audio books)

| 6. Lack of student obligatory reading materials (obligatory reading) |
| 7. Lack of fiction books |
| 8. Small font in books |
| 9. Catalogue indicates the book is in the library, but it is not on the shelf. |

The fourth group entitled SERVICES AND POLICY has 9 problems and they all deal with customer perception of obstacles that are, in most cases, a direct result of library policy. The list of problems from this group can be found in Table 5.

Table 5. Problems from the group SERVICES AND POLICY

SERVICES AND POLICY (9)
1. Restricted number of items that can be borrowed
2. Restricted time in using computers
3. The customer must pay interlibrary loan fee
4. University teacher cannot borrow a book because it is on students' obligatory reading list
5. Long time of waiting for the newest titles to be acquired by the library
6. Those that are not members of library can not use library services – (University library)
7. Long time of waiting for photocopies in library
8. *Photocopying form is* too complicated and difficult to understand
9. Photocopying in the library too expensive

The last problem group, DISCRIMINATION, is also the group with the fewest number of problems. Only five problems are reported and they deal with the customer perception of being discriminated while searching for information in a library. Those problems can be found in Table 6.

Table 6. Problems from the group DISCRIMINATION

DISCRIMINATION (5)
1. "Ask a Librarian" service refuses to serve LIS students (reported by 2 students)
2. Librarians in a public library decided not to help LIS students
3. Double standards – university teachers can keep library books as long as they want, students are allowed only a 2-week-borrow time or get fined
4. As a teenager was not allowed to look on his own in library catalogue because he was 'too immature to understand it. "Tell us what you need, and we'll look for it"
5. (to a student) "This book is not for you! Even professors do not understand it, let alone you (being the first year student)."

3.5. Discussion

Our pilot-project revealed that library customers in Osijek do have obstacles in accessing information. Thirty seven interviewees reported 50 problems that were clustered and divided into five groups of problems: RESPONSIVENESS, EMPATHY, COMPETENCE, TANGIBLES, RESOURCES AND COLLECTIONS, SERVICES AND POLICY, and DISCRIMINATION. The first group of problems, RESPONSIVENESS, EMPATHY, COMPETENCE, was the one

connected mostly with the person of a librarian. This type of problems is mostly reported by students and by employed individuals. Our findings regarding the student population are therefore consistent with those of Cook & Heath (2001) who found that it is extremely important for (undergraduate) students that the interaction with a librarian be enjoyable– the more courteous and empathetic the librarian is, the higher the level of student satisfaction with library services. Our interviewees complain mostly that librarians are not motivated to do their job (to perform searches), that they are not helpful and sometimes librarians are even perceived as incompetent.

The second group of problems, TANGIBLES, deals with physical characteristics of library facilities (space, furniture, equipment). Even four groups of customers reported obstacles that came from this group: research assistants, high-school students, university students, seniors. The most common problems from this group are those related to computers and connectivity to the Internet.

The third group of problems refers to resources and collections. Almost all the customer groups (apart from the university students) consider this type of problems to be among the two biggest obstacles to information. Naturally, different customer types have different complaints – e.g. university teachers and research assistants do not think there is enough research literature in library collections, senior citizens need books with bigger font, whereas employees want more fiction books.

The fourth group of problems, SERVICES AND POLICY, is considered to be among the biggest obstacles only for the population of university teachers in our sample. However, this does not mean that also other customer groups do not have problems related to library services and/or policy. Things customers complain here about are usually considered to be universal library policy (e.g. loan policy, computer usage, etc.). This means that libraries failed to inform their customers of their policy and as a result have to face unreasonable customer expectations, their frustration and dissatisfaction.

The last group of problems deals with the perceived discrimination by the side of library staff. Very often LIS students report of being discriminated by their fellow librarians who refuse to perform searches for them or to treat them as they would other customers. Instead, as soon as they recognize the LIS student, the librarians insist students look for information on their own.

4. Conclusion

This paper reports of the findings of the pilot study conducted among the library customers in Osijek, Eastern Croatia regarding their experience in using libraries, i. e. perceived obstacles in accessing information in libraries throughout their life. The research was carried out in Osijek, however, this does not necessarily mean that the problems and obstacles identified by this research are related only and exclusively to Osijek libraries. Although the majority of interviewees reported of obstacles they have come across while using Osijek libraries, some more mature interviewees in the sample may have reported of obstacles in libraries outside Osijek, even outside Croatia.

The project revealed that our customers have obstacles in accessing information and those identified obstacles were divided into five groups. What is more, not only that our customers have obstacles in accessing information in libraries, but also that the biggest group of problems is the one connected to the person of a librarian. At the same time, Croatian Code of Ethics prescribes (Principles no. 1, 3, and 4) the highest level of professional behaviour, uninhibited access to information to all and availability of all types of resources to all customer groups. Therefore we must conclude that the principles from the Code are not followed and that our initial hypothesis that customers do not have obstacles in using libraries i.e. in accessing information in libraries must be rejected.

This project has certain limitations. For the better and more reliable results a bigger sample would be recommended, possibly from other parts of Croatia. This would give a better insight into problems customers have in accessing information. Also, a better and evenly distributed representation of age groups and professions would be desirable. In addition to those limitations, it would be interesting to repeat this research in a decade or so, when the new generation of librarians who received a formal LIS education and were instructed about the ethical issues of the profession replace some of the librarians currently employed in Croatian libraries. Hopefully, the results of that research would be different from ours.

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