GUEST EDITORIAL
Impact Planning and Assessment (IPA) of the Global Libraries Initiative (GL) of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper has the aim of introducing the Special Issue on Impact Planning and Assessment (IPA) of the Global Libraries Initiative (GL) of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which aims to provide public access to information through computers in public libraries.

Design/methodology/approach – This descriptive paper introduces the work of the Global Libraries Initiative and its IPA Specialists.

Findings – As more countries have joined Global Libraries, there has been a gradual increase in interest by IPA Specialists and their colleagues in employing a broader range of evidence-collection methods in attempts to show more clearly whether and how greater access to information through public access computing leads to changes in users and their lives. There is still a great deal to be done before a likely move into the realm of systematic measurement of changes to people’s lives and it is highly questionable whether IPA Specialists could ever achieve such a goal by enthusiasm, energy and collaboration alone. There is scope for more consistent application of qualitative research methods within and across countries, as well as for developing common impact measures based on user self-assessment and reporting.

Originality/value – The paper introduces and discusses the Impact Planning and Assessment (IPA) of the Global Libraries Initiative (GL) of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and suggests how research to improve the GL Initiative can move forward.

Keywords Global Libraries Initiative, Library management, Measurement, Research methods

Paper type General review

What do Botswana and Vietnam have in common with Latvia and Indonesia? They are all part of the Global Libraries Initiative funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation – along with Lithuania and Bulgaria, Poland, Ukraine, Romania, Moldova and Colombia. What else do they have in common? Through their Specialists in Impact Planning and Assessment, (the preferred Global Libraries term to describe performance measurement and impact evaluation) all these countries are learning a great deal about the results of introducing public access to information through computers in public libraries (or “public access” for short) into an enormously varied range of settings. They are also learning what is important when seeking to evaluate this type of work at a national level (see the first paper in this issue).

Predictably, this work is showing that there are substantial differences across such diverse settings. However, some consistent patterns are also emerging in how
individuals, communities and their libraries respond to enhanced public access and how this information in turn affects people’s lives. (A “cross-section” of findings from countries at various stages in the process form the second paper below.)

More generally, this work is showing the commitment of the IPA Specialists themselves to communicating what they are learning to public library evaluation specialists and to library service managers in other countries contemplating any kind of service innovation. This commitment became clear as soon as the contributors began to pool their ideas about IPA issues, which are presented in the third paper. One topic that was consistently mentioned was how to communicate their growing understanding of the character of national evaluation of public libraries to colleagues and potential colleagues in other countries. Their own response to this issue (more fully described in the third paper) includes making use of relevant academic journals, notably *Performance Measurement and Metrics* and the *Library Review* to tell their stories of impact planning and assessment. How Emerald, as publishers of both these journals, has responded to the challenge of helping to broadcast what this growing “family” of IPA Specialists want to share with the wider world of public libraries is fittingly reported by the IPA specialists themselves in their “issues” paper.

The Emerald support for the IPA Specialists does not end there. As editor of this journal, Steve Thornton took two considerable risks: by first letting the group of IPA Specialists loose within these pages that he normally patrols with such care; and then by inviting me to share my entirely personal view of how “the IPA gang” has helped to develop impact planning and assessment in public libraries, as part of this special issue.

In my role as an Independent Impact Consultant to Global Libraries I have had been privileged to watch an increasingly coherent approach to IPA, emerge from under the benign wing of Global Libraries. This work focuses on what can be done effectively at national level to evaluate large-scale provision of public access. It really began with two public access initiatives in Chile (commenced 2001) and Mexico (from 2002), both focused on public libraries and both supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Although these programs stretched beyond the basic provision of computers for libraries and training for library staff, their early evaluation emphasis tended to be on monitoring and evaluation. “Traditional” performance data collection is still a major concern of all the IPA Specialists, but they have gradually pushed towards more systematic measurement (led by Specialists in two early Global Libraries programmes in Latvia and Lithuania – from 2006). This led in turn to more systematic planning and implementation of impact assessment, as reflected in the first paper below. As more countries have joined Global Libraries, there has been gradual increase in interest by IPA Specialists and their colleagues in employing a broader range of evidence-collection methods (from focus groups to pop-up surveys and assessment data observatories) in attempts to show more clearly whether and how greater access to information through public access computing leads to changes in users and their lives. There is still a great deal to be done before we are likely to move into the realm of systematic measurement of changes to people’s lives and it is highly questionable whether IPA Specialists country level could ever achieve such a goal by enthusiasm, energy and collaboration alone. Meanwhile, there is scope for more consistent application of qualitative research methods within and across countries, as well as for developing common impact measures based on user self-assessment and reporting. At
the national level on which this special issue is focused, there may well be scope for IPA Consultants to apply good practice from other evaluation domains in such areas as collecting, appraising and reporting stories from library users and staff. Here the aim might be to move beyond “cherry-picked” stories selected to demonstrate success for advocacy purposes, towards building a more complete and “balanced” picture to help public library development. Whatever the direction that impact planning and assessment takes at national level, it is important to try to share what we are all learning – but all this is only my view!

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