Claudia Lux

# Supporting Breakpoints in Life – A New Concept for Public Libraries

**Abstract:** This article develops a concept for public libraries by analysing "breakpoints of life", e.g., first school-day or last school-day, wedding or divorce, the first job, or losing a job as a particular moment for a library visit. To respond to the non-user's need, the library has to develop ideas supported by its collection, e-resources and outreach activities.

**Keywords:** Public library strategy; breakpoints of life; customized library services; regaining library users

**Wendepunkte im Leben unterstützen – ein neues Konzept für Öffentliche Bibliotheken**

**Zusammenfassung:** Das hier dargestellte Konzept „Breakpoints in Life" für Öffentliche Bibliotheken versucht, kritische Lebenssituationen, sogenannte Bruchstellen im Leben, wie Schulanfang und Schulabschluss, Heirat und Scheidung, erster Job und Verlust des Arbeitsplatzes als besonders geeignete Momente für einen Bibliotheksbesuch zu propagieren. Das Konzept kann in Öffentlichen Bibliotheken in Verbindung mit ihrem Bestand, elektronischen Ressourcen und Aktivitäten angewendet werden, um insbesondere Nichtnutzer damit anzusprechen.

**Schlüsselwörter:** Öffentliche Bibliothek; Konzept; Wendepunkte im Leben; kundenorientierte Bibliotheksdienstleistung; Rückgewinnung von Kunden

## 1 Introduction

Concepts of public libraries are diverse and have developed during the last 10 years in different directions. From "Open Libraries"[1] in Denmark to the Netherland's DOK Delft library[2] new concepts have activated the public librarian to do more than just presenting a collection in a multimedia environment. Nevertheless, surveys from 2010 show that public library users still want to have access to a printed collection[3] and an additional need to have access to the Internet and to online resources. Public library collections are often presented in an attractive way, close to the needs and interests of the library customers with action areas, "Interessenkreisen" (Germany), or browsing options by theme as the easiest access for library users. Public libraries present services for different topics from mathematics to sport, fiction and picture books, and special action spaces for Christmas and Ramadan. They have developed multiple ways to serve people in their search for knowledge and information and they focus on topics that can be found in the collection of the public library.

## 2 Non-users of public library services

Public libraries analyse their customers and find out their needs through scientific surveys. From a business perspective, this is an important task, as to know how clients are using the library and what services they want, will improve the library services. When the data are analysed the libraries learn more about the age of the customers and how they are using their public library. But the public library still does not know, who is not using the library and why.

In those public libraries, where annual library cards are issued, the annual statistics can tell us, how many active users (Definition of active users: borrowed at least one item once during the last 12 months) are using the

---

**1** Thorauge, Jens: Editorial – a new open library concept. In: Scandinavian Library Quarterly 44(4) 2011: http://slq.nu/?article=a-new-open-library-concept (accessed January 25, 2015).

**Prof. Dr. Claudia Lux:** clux@qf.org.qa

**2** Boekesteijn, Erik: Discover Innovations at DOK, Holland's 'Library Concept Center'. In: Information Today – Marketing Library Services 22(2) March/April 2008. http://www.infotoday.com/mls/mar08/Boekesteijn.shtml (accessed January 25, 2015).
**3** The Seattle Public Library Community Survey Summary, July 28, 2010, p 11–19: http://transforminglifeafter50.org/files/community_survey_summary.pdf (accessed January 25, 2015).

library.[4] Over a certain period, when old library cards become invalid and need to be renewed, the figures of library members may show that one third to half of the library users from last year are renewing their card this year. The definition of active user means that these members are using the library at least once during the current calendar year. In addition there is a significant number (of one third to two thirds) of public library users who are not renewing their library card every year regularly. This means fifty to seventy percent are new library users in the current calendar year – but may have been passive members before. Nevertheless, it was never clear, how many of these new members have used the library before and how they can become active users again. There was an urgent need to find out reasons for a non-usage of public libraries and to find a way to approach these people with a new concept.

During the last 5 years the interest of surveys in Germany shifted more and more to surveys of non-library users, and these data are now discussed and analysed. Some basic results we can find in a significant study[5] of the non-usage of public libraries in Germany, conducted by the German Library Association (Deutscher Bibliotheksverband) in cooperation with the Institute for Research on Reading and Media of the German Reading Foundation (Institut für Lese- und Medienforschung der Stiftung Lesen) and published in 2012. The study shows that 29 % of the participants have used a library during the last 12 months and 71 % are non-users. A deeper analysis shows that 41 % of the participants have not been in the library in the last 12 months, but have used the library before, and about 28 % have never used a library in their life. Is there a chance to win back the people who have used the library in their youth? The study gives answers: improvement of library buildings and design, better opening hours, coffee shop in the library, digital resources etc.[6] These are very important ways of bringing people back to use the library. However, by analysing the study, these answers by non-

users were related to current library services and prepared by the researchers of the survey itself[7] and then chosen by the participants. There are more interesting results published in this study.

All these surveys seem to have good results and action can be followed up to change the public library. But there is still an option that the results do not really give us a clue, why people would start to use the library or to come back after they have stopped using it as a child or a young adult. The above mentioned study cites personal reasons of non-users, for them the library is just not part of their life. Sometimes surveys are very much circles of the same groups of questions and it is really difficult to produce a new or fresh perspective to look at our clients, but we can at least produce results to our stakeholders. But a study as this one is a very good base to build on and find out more about our customers, follow up with focus groups or individual interviews. From a different perspective results out of these methods might not be statistically relevant, or are too specific to follow up as a full strategy. These results are just description of how things are. No attempt is done to explain and analyse the environment of these results. But if this is done, a creative mind will see more interesting aspects in a narrative interview of a person about his library experience and will be able to develop ideas and concepts out of these narratives and develop new approaches to non-users. As an example in one of these longer interviews at a public library[8] a male in his mid-fifties from Berlin explains that he was a frequent library user when he was young but then stopped using the library and only came back when he had a crisis in his life. Now he is a regular user of the library again.

## 3 How to turn non-users into users of the public library

"A crisis in life" – is this, what brings people back to the library? What kind of crisis is it? Are these only crises with

---

**4** Deutsche Bibliotheksstatistik. Fragebögen für Öffentliche Bibliotheken 2014, Nr. 2: Benutzer, Besucher. https://www.hbz-nrw.de/dokumentencenter/produkte/dbs/aktuell/frageboegen/2014_oeb/FB_2014.pdf (accessed January 25, 2015)

**5** Ursachen und Gründe für die Nichtnutzung von Öffentlichen Bibliotheken in Deutschland. Repräsentative Telefonbefragung bei 1301 Personen im Alter von 14 bis 75 Jahren. Deutscher Bibliotheksverband, Stiftung Lesen, 2012. p. 4 (Kurzfassung): http://www.bibliotheksverband.de/fileadmin/user_upload/DBV/projekte/2012_04_26_Ursachen_und_Gründe_zur_NN_kurz.pdf(accessed January 25, 2015).

**6** Ursachen und Gründe (note 5) p. 9–10.

**7** Ursachen und Gründe für die Nichtnutzung von Öffentlichen Bibliotheken in Deutschland. Repräsentative Telefonbefragung bei 1301 Personen im Alter von 14 bis 75 Jahren. Deutscher Bibliotheksverband, Stiftung Lesen, 2012. (Langfassung) p. 36 (accessed February 3, 2015). http://www.bibliotheksverband.de/fileadmin/user_upload/DBV/projekte/2012_04_26_Ursachen_und_Gründe_zur_NN_lang.pdf (accessed February 3, 2015).

**8** This was a research interview within the Central- and Regional Library Berlin, but it was not published.

a negative impact or also crises or breakpoints in life with a positive one? These questions can only be answered, when a proper research about this phenomenon is conducted. Nevertheless, to take this moment of a crisis as a trigger for people to go to their public library is a very interesting idea for getting adults drawn back into the library. If this can be integrated into a new strategy for public libraries, how would this strategy look like? One of the reasons to think about new concepts is the library's need for change, the need for new activities and services to fascinate the current user groups and reach out to additional groups in society. This new concept is not based on a research project on this topic, but based on random information from a certain type of library users. Some library users visited the library when they were children and young adults, but then they did not come back for a long time to visit and use the library. Why didn't they come back? They either did not like the atmosphere of a library when it is not modernized, or their lifestyle did not give them time or the possibility to use the library, and sometimes they did not come back to the library just because they had no reason to come back. But others came back to use the library for a particular reason, often a specific moment in their life: divorce, sudden unemployment or severe illness. These moments explain a lot about a certain category of library users that need to be analysed a little bit more in detail. We are talking about users or clients of a public library who are not the regular reader, who is borrowing literature or CDs every month, and who are not the student, who is doing assignments or learning for a test and using the library for his or her education. What classifies these users is the moment in their life that makes them look for specific information. And many of them will search the internet for answers before they go to a library, to look for diverse answers and more support.

What are these moments in life that have the potential to bring users into the public library and how will the public library respond to these requests? These special moments can be named as breakpoints in life. A breakpoint is often defined as an interruption of a running software program, a breakpoint in life is a moment of halt, of rethinking. Mostly these are special or difficult moments in life, maybe really tough times, when a new orientation is coming up. In these moments, when life comes to a halt, additional and new information is needed. This will help to understand the situation, to comfort the unrestful mind and support a new step in life. In addition, literature will help to acknowledge the feelings in situation of changes, to look into the future and find new trust to go a new way. If the library devel-

ops a concept around breakpoints in life, the library will be attractive to people like those 50-year-old man from Berlin mentioned above. The library will become a place to support and give answers in these particular circumstances.

# 4 Analyse breakpoints in life and how the library can support this

In life, several moments are important for most of us and they might be called as breakpoints in life. All these breakpoints build a kind of circle of life that can be used by public libraries to hook into and help different clients with information, knowledge, and literature. On this basis, one can develop the concept of breakpoint in life as a new concept for public library services to this specific group. Here is an outline of some breakpoints in life that show potential to develop the public library to a place to find support. Some more can be added.

**Birth** is the first breakpoint, when parents have their new born child there is so much need of knowledge and many parents go to their nearest public library before birth of their child to look for information. Librarians use this moment to present the library to the parents and explain to them the importance of reading to a baby for their brain development and how the parents can learn more about their parenthood by reading or through additional online information provided by the library.

**Kindergarten** and the first day in Kindergarten is another breakpoint of life: for the child and the parents. Today, there is enough literature to support this new situation with picture books, parent's literature, and psychology studies. As the collection in the library is diverse, there is a lot of information with male and female aspects of parents and grandparents, which makes it more valuable for the customer.

**First school day** as an important breakpoint of life for everybody and a great start with a library to connect to the parents in a moment before the child learns to read. Libraries work a lot with schools but for a breakpoint of life it is getting more important to work with the parents. The growing interest of parents in the school development of their children makes it easy for libraries to focus on this breakpoint of life. Even children and youth libraries recognize the interest and need of parents and grandparents and may focus more to serve them directly in their need to support their children in education.

**A new school** is a breakpoint of life for the child but also for the parents; it is either a need when moving to a

different place or a conscious decision of the parents as a further step in education. Parents are aware of the changes that the child needs to comply with new requirements, and that the support of the parents is absolutely necessary for a successful school life. Here, the library can provide knowledge before the decision is made, as well as inform about the new contents, all the different education materials, and learning methods for different kinds of schools.

**Selection of a recognized apprenticeship** might be the next step for a young adult and his/her parents, when their boy or girl does not want to go to higher education. Even more libraries are able to support talents in their choice, and inform about a broad range of professions and the requirements of vocational training. In addition, the library's material showcases the reality of different professions and jobs, and a broad selection may introduce new professions to the family they have not thought of before.

**Higher education** is another breakpoint of life, and here, the close work of libraries together with the young adults is essential. There is already a high need for information about different universities, specialization, and scholarships, and many libraries are already focusing on these information.

**First professional job after graduation** is of particular focus for young people after graduation, when they start their carrier in their profession. Here, specific management topics on how to work in a team or time management are of special interest. No doubt, this is a breakpoint of life that can be well supported by libraries.

**Weddings** are getting extremely big and costly, so young couples and their families are more interested in new styles and ideas. They check specific wedding magazines and videos to see examples for their wedding. New partnerships are another version of a breakpoint in life that can be supported with additional material and information from the library.

**Buy or build a house** is a goal of many young families. Quite a few of them look seriously into it before they start. They do not only consult one book but many different books to understand all the risks to overcome and activities to do. Many public libraries have a specific collection on this topic to support the information need of the public.

**Severe sickness** of oneself or a family member turns many people to more health information on the web. Supported by libraries which give recommendations for trusted web sites, this is a high supported field in libraries' services. In addition, there is an activity of Bibliotherapy, as in Lithuanian Public Libraries. Bibliotherapy does, be-

sides other activities, poetry reading for depressive and suicide endangered people and other therapeutic actions.[9]

**Loss of job** can be a very tough breakpoint in life, and it brings people easily into the library. The library gives support for jobless people to write the required CV, how to find online job opportunities, and be trained in certain competences, if they do not have them. London's public libraries' idea stores[10] have hundreds of training courses to offer. Moreover, the library has to offer a wide spectrum of quality entertainment, and lifelong learning for a jobless person.

**Care for parents** is another important breakpoint in life. When one's parents become helpless and need daily care, a lot of information is needed. No matter if the person himself or herself cares for the parents or engages a professional service to do that, there are lots of social and legal aspects one has to know and a library can help with all this needed information.

**Moving on or travels** can be seen as a breakpoint in life when this change takes people into very new situations, where they feel uncomfortable or discover a complete new side in themselves. With books and videos from the library, people can be informed better in advance and prepare themselves for a different lifestyle, customs and traditions in a different place inside or outside the country.

**Divorce** is another breakpoint in life that draws people into the library. Irritation, new responsibilities, money – there are many unsolved questions for people in this situation and the library cannot only give information but also give consolation with fiction and other literature.

**Death:** Whenever a person is confronted with death, either in his or her family, or among close friends, the situation is a breakpoint in life. Very often life does not just go on and consolation and comforting is needed. Here again, literature becomes an important means to comfort feelings and remembrance.

This list just gives short examples of the concept of breakpoints in life. Destroyed homes in New Orleans by hurricane Katrina or earthquakes in China produced the same breakpoint situations in life, and there are great stories of how public libraries supported and helped people. However, public libraries in many countries are not yet seen as problem solvers or as a comfort place in critical situations. But this is a concept that public libraries can adapt to reach out to non-users.

**9** Janaviciene, Daiva: Bibliotherapy in Lithuanian Public Libraries: Service Identification and Analysis. In: Torunskie Studia Bibliologiczne 2(9) 2012. http://www.home.umk.pl/~tsb/sites/default/files/numer9/janaviciene.pdf (accessed January 30, 2015).
**10** http://www.ideastore.co.uk/ (accessed January 26, 2015).

# 5 Breakpoints in life as a natural concept for library services

Breakpoints in life is a new concept, but it fits well into all public libraries. As an example, the public library of Traunstein in Germany analysed their users along the ages combined with all life situations in 2008 and developed their own concept,[11] which contains some of the same elements as the breakpoint of life concept. They analysed their users and defined different ages and life stages for children, young users and adults.[12] This includes the first school-day, change of schools, building a family, a house and time of divorce and all are defined as a chance for the library to serve user's information need or where the library service in Traunstein can be developed. What is missing in this paper are the elements of breakpoints as a model for a very specific situation in life, where a person is motivated to look for more information and emotional support in the library collection. In addition, the elements in Traunstein are too many, as the librarians from Traunstein want to be very comprehensive, but the outstanding elements are not as clear as they are defined in the breakpoints. The breakpoints in life concept cannot be the only concept to present a library or organize the public library's services. But it is a specific additional element to win users back and create an attractive service for them, which produces an important add-on to the general public library strategy.

# 6 Internet versus public library information

People in breakpoint in life situations also turn to the internet to find help and information. However, this information is not always trustworthy or easy to access. Public Libraries support access to the internet and offer bookmarks or other controlled information on different levels to support quality information from the web for the client. They help their clients to find the right information in good and trustworthy sources. In addition, the vast amount of printed and digital resources in a public library supports the service for break-

points in life. The non-users very often buy their own books and do not go to the library. But if the client buys just only one book about the breakpoint in life topic, it will not have all different views to help him through the breakpoint of life. At this juncture, the library is able to give more extensive information, and is able to support different aspects, a male or a female aspect, an urban or a rural aspect etc., and most of all, the quality of information is guaranteed. The public library can also provide, in addition to information, an important service for breakpoints in life, which is the emotional supporting service, a direct contact with a person who understands the client's need. As breakpoint in life is not just a moment of a particular need of information, it might also be an emotional moment, where the librarian can provide fiction and other material to support and comfort the library user in this particular moment. The public library provides users with good literature, and organizes readings and book clubs for them. In addition, as a part of the public libraries' activity and to support the emotional life of their users, librarians may organize special activities for certain groups. If this is organized along with the breakpoints of life topics the library may have a significant social impact, as can be shown in the project of Bibliotherapy from Lithuania mentioned above.

# 7 Integration of life-long learning activities into the breakpoint in life concept

Life-long learning is a long standing concept for public libraries of all levels. Life-long learning may start from individual support of "how to use the computer" to all levels up to the elaborated programs of the idea stores in London or the Volkshochschulen in Germany[13]. Libraries do provide many different courses in the form of books and other media for life-long learning. Training in information literacy is still underestimated by most of the users. Libraries provide this knowledge to open up printed and electronic resources for all aspects of life-long learning. Life-long learning can be, but it must not be integrated within the breakpoint in life concept. Some users might not be in the situation to learn again, as the breakpoint of life left a severe mark on them. Very often it needs time to overcome a difficult situation and develop interest in learning again. However some users are eager to start their life-long learning concept during a critical time in life. The

**11** Hagenau, Anette: Stadtbücherei Traunstein. Bibliothekskonzept der Stadtbücherei Traunstein, Lesen, lernen, leben. Unter Mitarbeit des Teams der Stadtbücherei Traunstein 2008. https://www.oebib.de/fileadmin/redaktion/management/Materialien/Bibliothekskonzeptionen/Traunstein_Bibliothekskonzeption.pdf (accessed January 26, 2015).

**12** Hagenau (note 11) p. 44–45.

**13** http://www.vhs.de/ (accessed January 26, 2015).

Berlin Central and Regional Library developed the "E-learnbar", a place for electronic learning inside the library. The concept was to target young people who were unable to finish school and who now get the chance to learn by themselves with a little support from the librarians. Here the library tries to change a negative breakpoint – dropped out of school some years ago – to turn it into a positive breakpoint – get the power back to learn again – through a well-designed space and a motivated atmosphere for supported e-learning. Life-long learning can be very specific for breakpoints in life. It is naturally aligned to it as it helps to overcome the negative or complicated situation of a breakpoint in life. It creates new motivation, supports a fresh analysis and brings the person back into a community of learners with tasks to accomplish.

## 8 Conclusion

Supporting breakpoints in life can be installed as a concept in all public libraries. Partially it is already integrated in library's concepts, although the focus has to be renewed at these specific situations. There is a big chance that non-users may come back into the library, when the offer reaches out to them. However, the concept still needs to be more elaborated by the librarians with activated content from the collection, from e-resources and aligned with outreach activities of the library. A specific marketing strategy and specific training for staff have to be implemented to deal with the situations and clients in a professional way. First of all, a public library is a place for information and knowledge, and librarians support people to help themselves. This aspect is another important part of the breakpoint in life concept.

**Prof. Dr. Claudia Lux**
Project Director
Qatar National Library
PO Box 5825
Doha
Qatar
**clux@qf.org.qa**