International Network of Emerging Library Innovators (INELI)

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Public library leaders around the world are facing unprecedented challenges, and this turbulent environment offers a unique opportunity for public library leaders to redefine what it means to be a public library. Peter Drucker says “the greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence; it is to act with yesterday’s logic.”

The Global Libraries initiative (GL) of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation believes that the most effective way to ensure that emerging library leaders don’t act with yesterday’s logic is to provide them with opportunities to connect with each other to explore new ideas, to experiment with new services, and to learn from one another. This will result in a network of leaders from around the world who have shared vision of what public libraries in the twenty-first century can and should be and have the skills they need to implement that vision in their respective countries.

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In der ganzen Welt sehen sich die Leiter von öffentlichen Bibliotheken beispiellosen Herausforderungen gegenüber, und diese turbulente Umgebung bietet ihnen die einzigartige Gelegenheit neu zu definieren was es heißt, eine öffentliche Bibliothek zu sein. Peter Drucker bemerkt: „Die größte Gefahr in turbulenten Zeiten ist nicht die Turbulenz; es ist das Handeln nach der Logik von gestern.”

Die Global Libraries Initiative (GL) der Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation ist überzeugt, dass die effektivste Möglichkeit für die kommenden Bibliotheksleiter sicher zu stellen, dass sie nicht nach der Logik von gestern handeln, ist, ihnen Gelegenheiten zu geben, zusammen neue Ideen zu erkunden, mit neuen Diensten zu experimentieren und voneinander zu lernen. Das wird zu einem Netzwerk von Bibliotheksleitern aus aller Welt führen, die eine gemeinsame Vision davon haben, was öffentliche Bibliotheken im einundzwanzigsten Jahrhundert leisten, und sie sollten die Qualifikationen haben, um diese Vision in ihren jeweiligen Ländern umzusetzen.

The Global Libraries initiative at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation spent more than two years developing the concept for the International Network of Emerging Library Innovators (INELI), researching and learning from coordinators and participants of other leadership programs as well as discussing the concept with our valued colleagues from around the world. I’m so pleased to be able to share with you a little about our journey up to this point. I myself am a librarian and as we developed INELI, I thought hard about all the opportunities I wish I’d have had more of in my own professional development. I’m not joking when I say that I wish I was an innovator in the network!

I want to take a moment to explain how INELI relates to the rest of the work at the foundation and specifically that of the Global Libraries initiative.

Bill and Melinda Gates have built their foundation on the belief that “all lives have equal value” and to me, there is no institution that better embodies this belief than the public library. Public libraries are changing lives and strengthening communities around the world.

The Global Libraries initiative works to make libraries relevant and vibrant information and community centres. Technology has had a revolutionary impact on the ability of libraries throughout the world to provide information resource for their users. Computers with Internet access have literally transformed libraries from dusty reading rooms to vibrant community access points. Libraries provide the link between information creators and consumers; librarians create the link between information need and usage.

Global Libraries works with our country program grantees to understand the needs of each community where we are engaged, and provide libraries with appropriate hardware, software, training, and support. Country grants are defined as a multiple-intervention approach, supporting wide-scale implementation of public access computing in public libraries. We currently have active programs in 13 countries, including: Mexico, Chile, Latvia, Lithuania, Botswana, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Ukraine, Vietnam, Colombia, Indonesia and Moldova. These programs are a core component of Global Libraries’ work and they account for the majority of our grants and effort.

In addition to our country grants, we have several other grants that aim to strengthen and build the global libraries field at large, which include investments to support library associations, train advocates for public libraries, support innovation, conduct research into library access and usage, and also to develop library leaders.

We invest in the development of library leaders because we recognize the importance of library workers. We’ve worked
around the world and we have learned that the most important indicator of a successful library is not the size of the building or the size of the library’s budget. It is not the number of books on the shelves or the number of computers available for the public. The most important indicator of the success of the library is the staff – specifically the skills and the passion of the librarian.

This is where INELI comes into the picture. We want to provide emerging library leaders with the opportunities to connect with each other to explore new ideas, experiment with new services, and learn from one another. The network has three primary goals:

- Create an international network of future library leaders to build and sustain public libraries throughout the world.
- Explore or address global library issues that have the potential to stimulate, expand, or improve public library service.
- Enhance the leadership skills of new professionals to enable them to re-envision public libraries for the future to meet the unique needs of the people in their respective countries.

We asked current library leaders from around the world to nominate emerging innovators for this network, we received many applications, and out of those the participants, otherwise known as ‘innovators’, were selected.

Driven by the shared belief that access to information can transform lives, 20 colleagues from 17 countries across the globe have come together to form the network. The participants come from a variety of countries and backgrounds, and each has different experiences, skills, and needs. Over the course of their two years in the network, the innovators are conducting self-assessments, gathering face-to-face for three convenings, completing online skills building modules, and collaborating with others on a group project.

Through the robust online community we have created, the innovators are enhancing their skills and expanding their knowledge on topics such as:

- How to Create Successful Teams
- Turning Ideas into Actions: Develop Your Innovation Skills
- Identifying and Taking Acceptable Risks: Lose Your Fear of Failure
- Conflict Resolution
- Project Management
- Organizational Change

The innovators, in teams of three or four, have begun exploring topics of shared interest and international value. Each team will produce and create something that will become important and will benefit each other and the field at large, such as developing best practices, replicable models, and innovative solutions to the problems facing public libraries around the world. The teams have quickly learned that being part of a voluntary team is very different than being part of one in the workplace. It can be challenging to come together to refine a scope, establish a timeline, and decide what each person will do when no one has the positional authority conferred by a job title or delegated by library management. But, the teams are making progress, and we’re all looking forward to seeing the results of their work in the fall of 2013. Below are brief descriptions of the group topics currently underway:

- **Community Stories**
  In the Internet age, everyone can be a content creator. Consequently, many libraries are moving from just being content curators to content creators and even the facilitators of content creation. This project will identify public libraries that are successfully engaged in supporting community residents to share their stories. It will also define a best practice model that library staff could utilize to enable the creation, collation of, and access to the memories, stories and rich past of their communities.

- **The Perfect Library**
  The purpose of this project is to explore the factors or elements required for the development of “The Perfect Library”. It will focus on the processes required for development of new library buildings and the planning steps to be taken to ensure long term relevance of the physical space, particularly in light of rapidly changing and transforming technology, digital content and demographic and cultural shift.

- **Reimagine your library**
  Library service is changing and the spaces within our existing buildings need to change to accommodate those new services. This project will identify libraries that have transformed rooms or areas to meet the changing needs of library users. Some of the case studies will highlight libraries that actively engaged community residents in determining how the space or spaces should be modified.

- **21st Century Library Skills**
  The skills that were essential to an effective librarian 25 years ago are not the same as those that are needed to provide quality public library staff today or in the next 10 years. This project will identify the core competencies that public library staff need to possess and will explore whether those core competencies are different in different cultures.

- **Strong partnerships build strong libraries**
  Libraries all over the world have found that partnerships can be very beneficial. This project will explore the types of partnerships that libraries have established and the benefits those partnerships to the library and to the partners. The selected case studies will also be used to create a list of things to consider prior to establishing a new partnership.

Despite differences in size of the library, geography and language, some things are the same everywhere. Public libraries make a difference every day in people’s lives. I am sure all of you reading this article have stories to tell about how this has happened for your users and your community. The importance of serving our communities is a value we all share. Our strength comes from our common values, values that transcend nationality and language.

One of the key lessons I’ve learned from my brief time with INELI is that we all have something to learn and we all have something to teach. I’ve learned something from every
member of the network, and I know that I will continue to do so. I also know that the bonds of friendship that are being formed will stay with us long after the calendar says our time in INELI has come to an end.

Global Libraries is investing in the INELI innovators, the next generation of public library leaders, so that they will become an agent of change in their communities and countries. They’ll be expected to take what we are learning together and share and multiply it in their communities and to continue the tradition of changing lives and strengthening communities. We have so much to learn from each other, I can’t wait to see what INELI teaches us all.