



Innovating Social and Digital Inclusion – Networking Across Institutions

Connect://able: Final Report

Authors: Reidun Faye and Bodil Ravneberg



© [Reidun Faye and Bodil Ravneberg]

[Faculty of Education]

[Department of Pedagogy, Religion and Social Studies]

Western Norway University of Applied Sciences

[2023]

HVL-rapport frå Høgskulen på Vestlandet



Utgjevingar i serien vert publiserte under Creative Commons 4.0. og kan fritt distribuerast, remixast osv. så sant opphavspersonane vert krediterte etter opphavsrettslege reglar. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Introduction

The Connect://able project was funded by the Erasmus+ program and ran from 2021-2023. The aim of the project was to develop ways for libraries to work as connectors in local network building with the aim to promote digital and social inclusion for people with low digital skills. Social networks, both digital and physical, were seen as important for participation in society, and the aim was to make citizens "able to connect" and be socially included in the local community through participation in learning activities for digital competence.

The partners in the project were two public libraries, one non-profit non-government organisation and one university: Bergen Public Library (BPL) in Norway, Aarhus Public Libraries in Denmark, Blenders in Belgium, and Western Norway University of Applied Sciences (HVL) in Norway. The project partners formed a network to discuss, develop and share knowledge, practices and ideas in developing learning activities. The learning activities were inspired by design thinking as a way of co-creation; striving to explore important user needs, criticising own assumptions and creating new innovative ideas and solutions.

Bergen Public Library, Aarhus Libraries and Blenders developed two learning activities each, which were implemented in their local communities. The target groups were people with potential low digital skills; senior citizens, refugees and immigrants and young adults neither in education, employment or training (NEETs). The partners worked with local sub-partners in recruiting participants and implementing the learning activities. HVL partnered to give research-based input along the way, and research the activities.

The learning activities that were developed in the project were:

Bergen Public Library: Workshop I: *Self portrait with Procreate*, 2022. Workshop II: *Label Making and Citizen Service Day*, 2023.

Aarhus Public Library: Workshop I: *Podcast for storytelling*, 2021. Workshop II: *Makerspace in Gellerup, Printing on textile, Gellerup* 2022.

Blenders: Workshop I: *My view. Digital Mobile Photography*, Turnhout, 2020. Workshop II: *Connectable print. Digital design printed with analogue mediums*, Turnhout, 2022.

HVL was in charge of the research. This report is written based on data collected throughout the three phases of the project (planning, implementation and evaluation). The data is based on 1) participating observation in bi-monthly digital meetings with partner representatives in 2021-2023, 2) two interviews with each partner 3) nine self-report schemas from partners, and 4) five surveys filled out by 25 participants in the learning activities.

The report will point to some “best practice” experiences as well as barriers and challenges that partner libraries/organisations met in their work with social inclusion and will point out possibilities for further developments.

Objects of the project

The project aimed to:

- 1) develop digital learning opportunities for individuals by activating resources in the community
- 2) explore how institutions such as libraries can work as connectors in local network building and
- 3) explore how professionals and staff can work closely together on an international level, in planning activities by sharing ideas, knowledge and experiences continuously in a virtual network

Main findings

In order for social inclusion to be the most effective, designing activities which reach out to several levels at the same time is crucial (Putnam, 2000). In order to describe how social inclusion was sought achieved in this project, we find that the concepts *bridging*, *bonding* and *linking* social capital is useful (Putnam 2000, Woolcock 1998). Bridging capital strengthens networks across individuals with heterogenous characteristics, whilst bonding capital strengthens networks between individuals with homogenous characteristics. Linking capital is a third type of network building across institutions at macro-level, like state institutions or public municipal institutions, securing the connection between important institutions, aiming at producing empowerment for the local community. Linking social

capital describes the local community at macro level linking people across organisations with those in positions of power or influence (Modood 2012).

The project explored the possible role of libraries as a driver for building networks for social inclusion on two levels; by connecting relevant institutions in the local community, and by connecting individuals together to form their own networks. At the individual level, strengthening contact between individuals who are not familiar with each other (bridging) is one way of building networks for social inclusion, and strengthening contact between individuals who already have something in common (bonding) is another way. At the institutional level, network building across institutions (linking), is a third way of building social inclusion.

1. Social inclusion at the individual level

Building networks for social inclusion at the individual level proved a bit challenging in the project. The main reasons were that the learning activities were short term, with one or two sessions. In order to build long lasting networks which can promote social inclusion, more time is needed than what was possible in this project. However, a small survey sent to the participants after the end of each learning activity revealed that they were over all very satisfied with their participation. Almost all participants reported that they enjoyed participating, that they learned something new, that they gained more confidence, and that the digital tool they learned was relevant for them. Many reported that they had gained new friends during the activities, and several said they had gained a new social network. Although far from everyone got new friends or a network, this indicate that the building of social network by the way of bridging and bonding among the participants was well on its way for several of the activities. By investing in activities where participants can meet over time, there is a great potential for building both bridging and bonding social capital.

2. Libraries as connectors in local network building

Networking across institutions (linking) was the most apparent way of working in the project. Through co-creation with civil society actors all three partners were able to recruit participants and to develop relevant learning activities for local citizens (Osborne 2018). Securing the connection between important institutions in the local community is vital for producing empowerment for the local community and for linking people across

organisations with those in positions of power or influence to make changes happen (Modood 2012). Libraries are natural meeting places where this kind of interaction takes place.

The project has shown that libraries have the potential of taking up such a linking role, which is vital for social inclusion work to be beneficial for the community and the target groups. In the project the partners functioned as a “spider-web”, connecting relevant institutions together in developing their learning activities. While all partners had experience with cooperation with partners in the local community, what was new in this project was that they worked more closely together with the local partners to recruit participants and to design the activities to match the participants needs. This type of co-creation was implemented in all the activities, and helped the partners in organising activities that were relevant to the local community, and reaching out and recruiting participants whom they anticipated the project would benefit. Blenders, since being a non-government organisation, had longer experience in co-creation with established partners in the community than Aarhus and Bergen. While the first round of learning activities in Bergen and Aarhus were less integrated in the local community, in terms of co-creation, compared to Blenders, the second learning activity had a stronger integration of co-creation with the local community and participants.

Through bi-monthly digital meetings over three years and two physical workshops, the partners shared ideas, knowledge and experiences, and integrated this knowledge into their activities. This learning arena and network building was important for developing ideas that were integrated in the community and relevant for the participants. The project also developed an Open Digital Inclusion Network using LinkedIn as platform in 2021, which, although a small, has functioned as network for people working in the public sector who are interested in digital inclusion to meet and be inspired from each other. The group has 82 members in 2023, mostly in public sector (mostly libraries in Norway, Denmark and Belgium), indicating that the project has been able to connect professionals together, also outside of the local communities.

Challenges in the project

Firstly, the project was launched in 2021, in the middle of the Covid 19 pandemic. This had significant impact on the activities in the project, which needed to be completely readjusted. This delayed the project and activities.

Secondly, the activities had major problems in recruiting participants. The main reason is that the pandemic made participation difficult in the first half of the project, as all activities were planned for physical participation. Because the target groups were people with no or low digital skills, digital participation was not an option. Also, throughout the projects it became clear that the pandemic had changed people's habits, making them less prone to participate in public activities than before.

Some lessons learned

This project has pointed to networking and co-creation between organisations in public and civil sector as a condition for success for developing activities for social inclusion. Libraries can fill a role as connecting actors by the way of linking relevant actors together and reaching out to participants (Osborne 2018).

The challenge is to reach out to and involve potential participants in the co-creation process and offering digital learning activities that can meet their needs, ambitions and skills (Røhnebæk & Bjerck 2021, Mulvale et al. 2021). In order to recruit efficiently, participants need to be invited personally by someone they trust and know, otherwise they might not attend, thus reaching out to groups of people is less efficient than individuals. This requires both time and already existing networks in the local community.

The project aimed at increasing social inclusion by raising digital skills, while at the same time building digital and social networks. We learned that digital ambitions need to be customised to the target group for the best result. Some of the projects assumed that participants had higher digital skills than what they really had, making the skill difficult to learn and perhaps less useful.

The project was inspired by design thinking that gave opportunities to be creative and flexible in designing and redesigning activities. In sum, all the project partners gained knowledge about new ways of collaboration between organisations in public and civil sector

and with the users (target group). This could for the future potentially result in better cooperation and co-creation between organizations and users.

Want to read more? An article will be published in 2024, with the detailed results from the research on the project.

Example from Aarhus Public Libraries: Tiny Podcast Studio

Aim: To explore the democratic potential of the podcast platform and produce podcasts featuring people from the Gellerup-area in Aarhus. **Activity:** A mobile podcast studio was developed and placed in Gellerup – a suburb in Aarhus. **Objective:** to invite the local community into the studio and record their experience of their community. **Lessons learned:** that the citizens were very interested in getting to know the podcast technology – and less interested in actually telling their stories. **Impact:** After the learning activity they weren't necessarily able to produce a podcast, but they could translate knowledge about this platform to other digital platforms and devices. They became familiar with the equipment and when they meet this kind of technology in other settings, they will understand it better. Also, the library learned that it worked well to use a *drop-in format* for this learning activity. It was a good activity for reaching out to people in their own neighbourhood and making positive publicity about the activities of their new library. In terms of bridging and bonding the activity had a great potential but lasted too short to give measurable results on this.



Literature

- Modood, T. (2012). "Capitals, Ethnicity and Higher Education", in Basit, N, and Tomlinson, S. (ed.). *Social Inclusion and Higher Education*. Policy Press, University of Bristol.
- Mulvale, G., Miatello, A., Green, J., Tran, M., Roussakis, C., & Mulvale, A. (2021). "A COMPASS for navigating relationships in co-production processes involving vulnerable populations". *International Journal of Public Administration*, 44(9), 790–802.
- Osborne, Stephen P. 2018. "From Public Service-Dominant Logic to Public Service Logic: Are Public Service Organizations Capable of Co-Production and Value Co-Creation? *Public Management Review* 20 (2): 225–231.
- Putnam, R.D. (2000). *Bowling alone: the collapse and revival of American community*. New York.
- Røhnebæk, M., & Bjerck, M. (2021). Enabling and constraining conditions for co-production with vulnerable users: A case study of refugee services. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 44(9), 741–752.
- Woolcock, M. (1998). «Social capital and economic development: Toward a theoretical synthesis and policy framework», in *Theory and Society*, 27(2), 151-208.