



“Sense and Sensibility”. “Blended living and learning” in children’s libraries as places of virtual, social, sensual, esthetic and creative experiences – including practical examples from Germany

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Abstract:

With different examples of best practice in Germany, the presentation shows a vision of librarianship for young people as a concept of blended living and learning: Special programs with experiences in the nature, artistic impressions, conversation or story telling in dialogue with different methods characterize the library as a meeting place with virtual, sensory, social and esthetic aspects. In this way libraries are able to strengthen their independent position and open their rooms for “blended living” to support the orientation and sensibility of young people in the virtual and real world.

Sense and sensibility – those who are looking for a reference between these two terms and libraries may think of Jane Austen’s novel that bears the same title. What interests and inspires me here and now, however, is the tension that exists between these two terms. And that tension has a lot to do with our work at today’s children’s libraries.

Sense and sensibility – these terms relate to each other similar to the way the words “information and intuition” do. They describe the field in which our children’s libraries move and the digital offers they provide:

The dimensions and ways of transmitting information have changed so drastically that the emotional and esthetic experiences language and culture provide sometimes seem to pale behind the digital flood of information. And many of the debates about the ever-present dominance of virtual worlds emphasize the discrepancies rather than the connection and sense of belonging between the two.

Yet what is really happening here? The virtual access to the world occurs mostly via abstract constructions and data. Though the mind might comprehend them, they fail to achieve the emotional and sensual depth and authenticity of real experiences. These, on the other hand,

allow for an intuitive access and forms of expressions without which the experiencing of art, the philosophical pondering and the perception of one's own feelings and those of others are impossible.

Now if we focus on children, we know: Such primary experiences, i.e. the sensual dealing with objects and people, are considered to be the basis of all processes of developing and learning during the first years of their lives. Today learning processes with digital media are doubtlessly part of that. Yet without a kind of "intuitive knowledge of body and soul" that develops through direct experiences, digital media cannot be a meaningful component for gaining and developing knowledge. The mind needs emotions. Information requires intuition. And vice versa. One won't work without the other one.

Things are not always that well-balanced in daily life, however. The loss of real experiences that address all of the senses, the lack of versatile opportunities to test oneself and to meet others socially, emotionally and creatively are tangible.

This is where children's libraries become essential:

When children get less chances in their daily lives to collect direct experiences with their own bodies, with movement and a multitude of sensual perceptions, with people, nature and materials, educational and meeting places that are freely accessible, such as libraries, can contribute to compensate such deficits.

They don't do that as a "good force" to counter the "bad" digital media available but rather as important pioneers and companions in a digital world.

The multimedia environment of children's libraries is literally perfectly suited to consciously balance and connect virtual experiences on the one hand and direct real experiences on the other hand in the sense of "blended living and learning".

One of today's essential responsibilities of education is to make the connections between digital processes, human actions and physical as well as social reality transparent and to practice an increasingly sophisticated way of dealing with them.

So the fact that very versatile methods with elements that are social, sensual, esthetic, creative and close to nature may be among the range children's libraries have to offer is not a sign of random at all.

On the contrary: When these methods are used with awareness, professionalism and purpose, libraries that make the interaction of real and virtual experiences their purpose will excel in being places that provide orientation to children, promote their self-efficiency and offer them inspiration. While doing so, they focus as much on the social, emotional and esthetic needs of each individual child as they do on the responsibility for a sustainable environment and the issue of justice regarding a free access to information.

Yet how may this be realized on the job:

Let me describe it by giving a few examples. I'm taking three aspects that play a major part in children's libraries into consideration:

- Promoting dialog
- Transferring information into knowledge
- Stimulating the child's imagination

1. Libraries promote the dialog between people

Projects that offer special attention to a dialog-like reading to children as a social and preventive task in libraries are in demand here. I am thinking of offers based on the idea of “Family Literacy“, such as the “Reading to children in families” Project offered by the Phantastische Bibliothek in Wetzlar:

http://phantastik.eu/images/stories/projekt_vorlesen.pdf

What is special about this project is its sensitive and respectful attitude towards children. Though carefully selected books from the library serve as “door openers” when talking sensitively with individual children and their families during a reading event, what can happen while reading to a child is that the book itself starts to take second place if the conversation with the child takes a different direction.

A situation like that takes on therapeutic aspects and is accompanied by intense schooling and consultation with the adult that does the reading. Here the term “therapeutic“ should be understood in the sense of the Polish pediatrician and pedagogue Janusz Korczak (1878-1942). His ideas and activities have been and still are important aspects of orientation for the project.

By the way, Janusz Korczak never shied away from new forms of media. He did not only read books to children but also knew how to use the radio – broadcasting being a new form of media at the time – whenever he found an opportunity to evoke the interest and needs of a child and to offer the child a forum for his or her own thoughts and means of expression with the aid of some broadcasting program.

Today he would probably investigate the opportunities computers provide and evaluate them by asking himself: How can I reach children through this medium so they feel addressed sincerely and tangibly and feel understood? And how can they themselves connect with other people and promote a fair exchange of opinions?

In his own times Janusz Korczak was already a master of “blended living and learning“ by knowing how to link the application of “new media” to the intensive personal and lively contact with individual children.

2. Libraries transfer information into knowledge and stimulate the joy of research and learning in a sound relationship with our environment

Here I am thinking of a natural science library project from Northern Germany: the EGON Project “Stories about Nature”.

<http://www.opus-bayern.de/bib-info/volltexte/2008/525/pdf/Brandt-EGON-Folien.pdf>

“Egon” is the German abbreviation for “Discover mysterious places in nature”. And that is exactly what this project is about: It is the mysterious aspect in nature and landscapes that will evoke children’s curiosity and interest – and who could talk about this aspect better than people with their stories and experiences with nature? Children who perceive their natural environment as exciting and mysterious will usually develop a positive relationship to it – and therefore also the willingness to handle it with care. The library project involves a repeated invitation to children to go outdoors. Children walk through the woods, smell, touch and taste their living environment, they move, they climb trees – and while doing all

that, they learn things that can be wonderfully supplemented with pertinent information they find in books or on the internet. So here it is blended living und learning as well!

3. Libraries stimulate imagination, movement and creativity

Here I am considering all forms of narrating and reading to children, forms that open up new space for creative, moving and imaginative activities.

You all may know the lively methods of telling stories offered by the “Kamishibai” narrative theater.

http://www.bz-sh.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=211:projektstart-erzaehltheater-kamishibai&catid=16:alles-fuer-ihre-buecherei&Itemid=272

The children’s libraries of Schleswig-Holstein apply this method deliberately to link narrating and reading to children more intensely than ever before with children’s imagination and creativity. In comparison to the pictures on monitors the Kamishibai appears rather “old-fashioned” as well, yet it has found to be a wonderful supplementation of same. Especially younger children experience the “reading of pictures” with the Kamishibai method at a pace, a comprehensible course of movement, a sensuality and personal empathy that particularly concurs with their perceptive faculties. And what they also learn is: I can actively contribute to this process. I can envision my very own images. I can use them to describe a course of action and to discover the power of imagination. All of those are essential competences for learning processes in front of a monitor as well.

Particularly the promotion of imagination such an encounter with stories effects cannot be overemphasized as the core responsibility of children’s libraries: Because imagination encompasses more than just creativity. It puts thinking and experiencing on the same level as creating. It lets mind and soul roam freely beyond the daily reality of life. This lets imagination remain essential regardless of the level of education, social or national origin or cultural imprint, current phase of life or situation. Furthermore imagination neither unilaterally depends on the creation of art nor on spending habits, neither on books nor on monitors but instead is relevant to a versatile range of media and experience. It provides for the development of a multitude of available cultural models of identification. This goes hand in hand with respecting and appreciating other life styles, other people, other cultures – invariably including feelings of belonging as well as those of opposition.

To summarize it:

More than ten or twenty years ago, today children need

- imagination as an experience of openness and incalculability beyond predictability and routine;
- social experiences in direct human encounters and interaction;
- a sensual and emotional relationship to their environment so they do not only learn how to understand it but also how to sense and love it.

In her discourse on “Library Services to children and urgent international cooperation” at the 2003 IFLA Congress in Berlin Professor Birgit Dankert presented globally relevant questions pertaining to the programs offered by children’s libraries. These questions are no less relevant today – nearly ten years later – and should be pondered anew, considering the background I have just described:

- Which library service and which cooperation help children to survive?
 - Which library service and which cooperation help to overcome deficits in children's everyday life?
 - Which library service and which cooperation make children independent from a violent surrounding?
 - Which library services and cooperation support intercultural values?
 - Which library services and cooperation guarantee most environmental and cultural protection?
- Let us all keep asking these questions with "sense and sensibility" and use them as a foundation on which to build our programs with love and joy.

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http://www.ib.hu-berlin.de/~libreas/libreas_neu/ausgabe5/003bran1.htm