



Bognasker.dk¹

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Meeting:

214 — Libraries for Children and Young Adults Section

Abstract:

The old book-based library and the literary ways of communication are dead along with the traditional view on children and children's culture, which were a part of it. Children are no longer merely malleable and receiving, they make active choices, interpret and transform from their earliest years. This is the point of departure for the web-based reading and writing community for young people, Bognasker.dk. Through this, the young people enter the library as hosts and main characters and set the agenda for their shared interest in books and the act of writing and co-creating.

Background – cultural history and procedural

“In Denmark the old book-based library with its information thinking and literary ways of expression is dead – along with *the* view on children's literature and *the* opinion on how to perceive children and childhood, it once was a library for. Children are no longer merely malleable and receiving individuals; they are active participants, who choose, interpret and re-create from their early years (...) We are in the future, and we cannot just re-arrange and re-decorate in order to maintain the children's interest. We will have to put the traditional preconceptions behind us

¹ Bognasker=Bookmuncher

and contribute actively when it comes to creating new ones that will have an crucial impact on the children's library and its existence"²

The two primary reasons why the Danish libraries' information function is changing these years, is the emerging of the information society and the investment in global communication, not least in capacity of the technological progress that especially the internet and the satellite-based transmitting of TV and cell phone signals constitute.

The libraries – and more specifically the children's libraries – are facing and undertaking a shift in focus from the traditional purchase and lending of primarily books to a new and changed media culture. This shift in focus is elaborated in two central committees, which form the basis and give directions for the transformation that takes place in within the libraries right now.

One committee under the Danish Ministry of Culture, "The Committee on Libraries in the information society"- less formally known as the "Carina Christensen- committee"- has recently prepared a report with the purpose to draw attention to further development of the public library. This development highlights the public libraries as an easily accessible service for everyone, with the challenges that the information society and the globalization strategy's focus on: education, life-long learning and the so-called "public cohesiveness"³.The "Carina Christensen-committee" report constitutes the latest and most striking response, defining the way the public libraries are perceived with national eye, and which direction the decision makers perceive the libraries' develop. The committee had to understand the entire background, like the discussions on the present position of the public libraries and their future role, and it is therefore also a part of the strategic work, which the children's libraries must act in accordance with.

In relation to what is at stake at Boggnasker.dk, it is especially relevant to focus on two of the committee's recommendations:

² Fremtidens biblioteksbetjening af børn, SBM, 2008

³Folkebibliotekerne i vidensamfundet: rapport fra Udvalget om folkebibliotekerne i vidensamfundet, Styrelsen for Bibliotek og Medier, 2010

- Inspiration and learning – further development and an enhanced focus on the tasks connected to learning
- The Danes Digital Library – shared digital communication for the entire Danish public

The libraries represent an institution that until only a few years ago, first and foremost communicated analogue media – primarily (paper) books towards its audience. Ever since the Danish library law has put new media , like games, music and movies, on the same footing as the traditional printed media, which has resulted in a shift in the libraries' focus and attention in a new direction. Especially, when it comes to the children's libraries where the users are used to new media before they can talk and walk. The new media culture has, along with the shift in play culture, forever changed the reality within which the children's libraries must act.

In 2007, the children's libraries anticipated this development, when the Danish Ministry of Culture appointed a committee with the purpose to prepare recommendations on how the children's libraries could constitute a relevant cultural offer for *all* Danish children in the future. The committee presented the report "Future library service towards children" in 2008, which contains ten reasoned recommendations on library services towards children and youngsters.

Two of the recommendations in the latter report respectively points out a development in the libraries' online services and a support of learning and general education, which I find that Bognasker.dk places itself within the boundaries of.

The Danish Ministry of Culture has through many years wished to position the book as the cornerstone of the children's libraries, just like the central administration of project funding around the book as such, has challenged the libraries position as a neutral space with another agenda than the instrumental agenda, which the Danish public schools naturally fulfills. Thereby, the Danish children's libraries have often been given a slightly more missionary and pedagogical role towards the children, whose attention were drawn to other media. In this effort there are successful examples of placing the children's libraries' specific qualifications in a relevant and effective context.

The longstanding focus on the Danish children who **do no** place the book on the top of their Christmas list, via e.g. campaigns to promote the joy of reading and other local initiatives, in 2006 made me wonder why nobody put extra effort into motivating the children who **do have** the fictional novel as their preferred media. When I looked around the children's library, as it was at the time, I did not see the initiatives that supported this specific group of children, who are the most loyal fans of the library.

It therefore seemed obvious to create a national website, Boggnasker.dk, with the purpose to spoil the group of children who loved to read and write, – and maybe we would find more of them than we expected? At the time of initiating the site, the social media already had their grip in children and youngsters, especially via the very popular Danish chat portal, Atro.dk, so the amount of potential users could actually turn out to be quite large.

At the time, I was involved in the pioneer work on establishing platforms for children's libraries on the Internet, e.g. in the project Children Online, 1997 and www.dotbot.dk – your children's library online (now developed further as www.pallegavebod.dk), where experience showed that it was a media that the children's libraries had to acknowledge and take seriously.

For the majority of the Danish children and youngsters today, the Internet along with the cell phone represent a central part of both fun, communication and not least building social relations. The everyday of Danish youngsters is characterized by often shifts in social relations and physical spaces between parents, siblings, school and activities in their spare time. Via cell phone, internet and SMS, the youngsters are able to participate in different social networks at the same time. E.g. when they are on vacation with their parents, they are able to communicate with their friends and check who's participating in e.g. a party back home.

The new social online-based technologies like e.g. Facebook and Twitter provides the children and youngsters with a unique possibility to become co-producers in the daily culture and at the same time mediates dialogue between these. Therefore, it was an obvious opportunity for me to choose a platform based on social software for my project, www.boggnasker.dk.

Bognasker.dk - facts and fiction

Target group:

Teenagers (age 13-19 years) who are interested in literature

Technique, structure and organization

Bognasker.dk is basically made up of two pieces of software that technically integrates with each other. At the front page, which also contains navigation, the latest content is highlighted as well as other content, which speaks to both existing and potential users.

Main content on the site is gathered in a forum, which is structured in main groups based on content: *Fede Bogtips (Awesome Book tips)*, which includes reviews and discussions on literature, *Skriv Selv (Write Yourself)*, containing own short stories and text-based role playing games, and *Blogs*, which typically are characterized by being personal diaries from the users everyday lives, often with a literary touch. *Diverse (Various)* contains everything that cannot be sorted in the other categories, hereunder *Legestuen (Playroom)* with word games etc.

When registering as a user on the site, it is voluntary whether one wishes to register with ones given name or with a username of one's own choice. Most choose the latter, which – in my opinion – generally is the most prominent solution online. It is also voluntary whether one wishes to enter one's date of birth, but many choose to do so. However, it is not possible to validate this information via the Danish Civil Registration Number index⁴. As administrator I have chosen to show at my profile that I am an adult and that I work as a librarian at Odense Central Library.

Responsibility is placed on an administrator/editor, who at the same time takes care of technical maintenance at the site. Furthermore, the site is edited by so-called moderators/editors, who are experienced, young users of the site, selected by the administrator. Their task is primarily to help the new users getting started and monitor that e.g. reviews etc. are placed in the right forum to ensure that the site is well-arranged.

They also take action if they think that the language-tone is too aggressive or obscene. In these cases, they consult the administrator in order to create sanctions for the users in question. These cases rarely occur – youngsters with an interest in literature seem to be able to communicate with a certain polish.

At the site, I have tested a couple of systems that could function as incentive for the users to become more active on the site. Both systems are based on the fact that more interaction and participation generates status linked to their user profile.

⁴ In this connection it should be mentioned that not many countries have established a equivalent index or something similar to it

In one system, the user-title changes with the number of posts, which the individual user posts. The user starts out being a *Bogsnuser (Book sniffer)* and moves upwards in steps in order to become *Overboggnasker (Senior Bookmuncher)* and *Überoverboggnasker (Super Senior Bookmuncher)* and the sublime *Bogekvilbrist (Book Equilibrist)*, which can only be obtained after a very large amount of time and activity spent on the site.

In the other system, *Boggnaskerstatus (Bookmuncher status)* the all user-activity is measured – or a lack hereof – as a whole. When the user logs on to the site, it adds a certain amount of points and points are also accumulated when the user makes a post, a blog post and comment on other users posts. In this system, awards are given to the user in different types of activities, e.g. *Blog-awards, Activity-awards* and *Community-awards*.

The accumulated amount of points can be used in *The Shop*, where virtual *goods* can be purchased and sold with the sole purpose to decorate the user's profile. One is also able to give another user a virtual present.

At the front page of Boggnasker.dk it is possible to view the present top-posters of the site, the newest member, the total number of members and posts. What is common for these systems, is that the user is able to profile him- or herself as a "forum-expert" around the focus on books and literature, something that often is perceived as low status in the users other social networks.

Whats going on in there?

Book reviews

Everybody is free to post reviews on the site, but there has been established a "Review Group" consisting of about 30 young people, who get books from the publishing houses in order to review them via the libraries.

My point of departure for creating the site was a genuine desire to enable children, who are interested in literature, to have a dialogue through reviews of the books they have read. Here they are able to give each other feedback as a part of the individual reviews. When reviewing a book, one has the possibility to – beyond just the textual review – rate the book with a rating scale ranging from 1-5. If other users have read the book as well, they are able to comment on the review and/or provide their rating of the book.

The review-part is divided into the most known literary genres, and several of these are created on request from the users. In each genre there is a sub-forum for more "free" communication, which is not possible under each review. Contrary to the physical library, open questions like: "I'm in

desperate need of a good fantasy novel” are asked and other users can then give their recommendations. It is my feeling that this holds more credibility in the eyes of the users to have a book recommended by their peers, than to hear it from a maybe graying children’s librarian at the local physical library. In principle, it can however be my own adult user at the site, who answers the question along with other users, and where the answer then will be accepted.

Write yourself

In relation to the theme of the module, this part of the site is interesting, as creative and playful elements are present. In *Write Yourself* the users are able to upload their own short stories and poems and get feedback from the others. In a sub-forum one is able to provide good tips on writing that he or she wishes to share with others. Over the years, I can see that there is a growing interest in letting others read one’s short stories and poems. This part of the site is growing fast and with a lot of dialogue between the aspiring authors. At the moment, work is being done to create a virtual authors school, connected to a number of established authors, who can give the best of the young aspiring writers feedback on their work.

Role playing

On demand from the users, a Role Playing section has been established under the *Write Yourself* section. *The Role Playing* section is intended for text-based role plays and the game is on! In a text-based role play, the user is represented by a character. This can be a fantasy character, e.g. a wizard or an orc, but it can also be a boy from The Middle Ages or maybe a young school girl from our present time. In a text-based role play, the framework and the setting in which the game takes place are created by the participants. The character of the game varies from a loose concept to a more detailed set-up, depending on the mood of those who initiate the game. The broad framework is also set up by the promoter(s). Some prefer to plan parts of what is going to take place in the game. Others prefer a looser framework, where they will see where the game takes them along the way. The game is played by, purely textually, acting ones character and express what the character thinks and experiences. In order for the game to function, the players communicate in writing to make sure that one character is not strolling around in the streets of Odense, while the other is sitting at home eating dinner.

The game thereby becomes *a reflective laboratory and free space*, as Beth Juncker describes it: “Whether they are playing theatre, music or making movies, they use art as a reflective laboratory. But the display is also used as a free space for relaxation, and it must never become so serious that it is not just “really good fun”. Playing becomes the pivotal point for the activity, and therefore the youngsters often do without the formal union and instead express themselves in independent

groups and projects with their "playmates". Through playing the game they create themselves and at the same time create networks with other young people."⁵

The Playroom – word games

In the Playroom the users play different types of word games and association games, which seen from an adult – more superficial – perspective, are more or less meaningless rhythmic repetitions and improvisations with the word as the central element and point of departure.

Beth Juncker casts light upon the meaning and context which is at stake here: "With the conditions of childhood, which we have created today, we have broken the children's natural possibilities to let the cultural heritage – games, patterns of play and storytelling, meters, rhythm, rhyme, bodily expression – pass on from generation to generation. It requires loads of children at different ages, where the oldest children pass on knowledge to the younger, and it requires spaces that are not under a constant surveillance of adults who can interfere. We have taken away these possibilities and have replaced them with institutions that are under pedagogical surveillance and where groups of children at the same age are placed together. One will not learn new cultural forms of expression from this! Therefore, children of today use media, which re-establishes networks across age and institutions – computer games, role playing, CDs, movies, commercials, TV-shows." ... "The meaningful part of these aesthetic processes lies in the creation itself, in the game and in the social togetherness it creates between the participants – in the shared joy it brings with it. When the process comes to an end, meaning does too..."⁶ (Beth Juncker, p. 10)

Conclusion

Beth Juncker defines children's culture with a quote from Flemming Mouritsen: "By this is meant the cultural expressions that children create within their own networks, i.e. what collectively could be named their play culture. It consists of a pallet of ways of expression and genres: games, stories, songs, rhymes, jingles, riddles, jokes and other parts of the classic children's folklore, but it also contains sporadic aesthetically organized expressions linked to the moment, like rhythmic sound, nonsense, pestering, ways of walking and types of sounds. Also the children's ways of using different media and "places" belongs in this category, e.g. writing, video, computer. ..."⁷

⁵ Beth Juncker: "Gab – det er kedeligt: om børns smag. Artikel fra Tidsskrift for Børne- og Ungdomskultur, nr. 47/2004

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⁷ Beth Juncker: Gakkede gangarter, Vilde vitser og rallende råb (<http://annemiedkk.blogspot.com/2010/04/gakkede-gangarter-vilde-vitser-rallende.html>)

When Mogens Vemmer, the former head of the children and youngsters section at the Danish National Radio, was asked to define the sections most prominent purpose, he answered after thinking for a while, that it is important for children to know that somewhere in Denmark there are other children who collects *white stones*, in order to let them know that they are not alone. Through my work on Boggnasker.dk, it is my experience that in present Denmark it is not high status/cool to be interested in literature. Boggnasker.dk's most prominent purpose is therefore to offer a virtual national space around this interest across age and geography.