

Supporting immigrants' political integration through discussion and debate in public libraries

Journal of Librarianship and

Information Science

1–15

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DOI: 10.1177/0961000617709056

journals.sagepub.com/home/lis

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Abstract

Using Habermas' theory of the public sphere, this article examines the potential of conversation-based programming (e.g. conversation groups and language cafes) in public libraries to bring immigrant voices into the public sphere and thereby to facilitate their political integration. To both support and illustrate the theoretical explorations of the article, research findings are presented from a study on language cafes and integration at Oslo and Akershus University College, Norway. Four ways in which the language cafes can support immigrants' political integration and the formation of a comprehensive public sphere include the fostering of linguistic competence, expansion of social networks, promotion of information exchange relevant to political integration, and facilitation of 'messy conversation'.

Keywords

Conversation circles, conversation-based programming, immigrants, integration, language cafes, public libraries, public sphere, refugees

Introduction

In Norway, the amendment to Paragraph 1 of the Norwegian Library Act states that public libraries are to be 'independent meeting places and arenas for public discussion and debate' (Ministry of Culture, 2014). The implications of the Act, especially in respect to its ability to activate the public sphere, are a current topic of discussion in Norway (Ericson, 2015; Evjen and Audunson, Forthcoming; Schjeide, 2015). The role of public libraries in facilitating discussion and debate is also an emerging topic internationally as libraries increasingly offer organized discussions about current issues and topics of universal interest (American Library Association, 2016; Putnam, 2016).

However, one area that demands special consideration is how public libraries can use discussion and debate to bring immigrants' voices into the public sphere, which can be seen as an indicator of their political integration. In this article, *integration* is considered to be a process that results in immigrants being able to participate fully in the social, cultural, economic and political life of the receiving society,

with the majority accepting that the immigrants do not have to change all aspects of their culture of origin, traditions and behaviour (Diaz, 1993; Valtonen, 2008). Political integration is considered one dimension of integration that ultimately ends with the acquisition of citizenship, but includes other forms of civic and political participation such as voting, social organization and political mobilization (Diaz, 1993: 71). All of which includes 'becoming part of mainstream political debates, practices, and decision-making' (Bloemraad, 2006: 6).

Public libraries are of particular importance in regard to integration because they frequently act as a point of entry for immigrants into the receiving society (Putnam, 2003).

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Furthermore, research shows that library programmes can play a key role in this respect. For example, a study on a language cafe at Malmö City Library in Sweden found that the programme supports language learning, expansion of social networks, as well as information exchange relevant to economic and social integration, yet showed limited evidence for information exchange relevant to political integration. However, the study called for further research on the topic, acknowledging that such programmes might support political integration in other ways (Johnston, 2016a, 2016b).

In fact, programming based on conversation, such as language cafes and conversation circles, presents a crucial opportunity for understanding how public libraries can serve to bring immigrants' voices into the public sphere as the programming facilitates conversation – discussion and debate – between immigrants and members of the majority. Therefore, using the theory of the public sphere, this article examines the potential of conversation-based programming to bring immigrant voices into the public sphere and thereby facilitate political integration. In addition to the theoretical discussion based on Habermas and other authors, the research question will be elicited by presenting findings from a Norwegian study analysing the outcomes of conversation-based programming in three public libraries.

This article provides insights regarding how public libraries can act as meeting places for immigrants and members of the majority. Library staff internationally will likely find this article important for reflecting on their conversation-based programmes and services. In addition, policy makers interested in interventions for facilitating immigrants' political integration should find it informative, as well as students of the public sphere considering the formation and role of a public sphere under the changing conditions of globalization.

The term *immigrant* will be used to refer to 'any person who lives temporarily or permanently in a country where he or she was not born' (UNESCO, 2016). For the purposes of this paper, the term immigrant will include, but not be limited to, economic immigrants, foreign spouses, refugees and international students.

Conversation-based programming: A definition

Conversation-based programming in public libraries generally includes any programme based on conversation and social interaction that brings together immigrants and members of the majority. Most common are programmes in which members of the majority and immigrants engage in informal conversation with the aim to improve participants' linguistic abilities in the language of the receiving society. Many programmes are essentially the same, but are called by different names, such as

language cafes and conversation circles. Therefore, an overarching term is needed.

This type of programming is generally based on unstructured or semi-structured conversation. Semi-structured conversation has themes, topics or questions chosen for discussion; however, other topics can be discussed should they come up in the course of the conversation. Unstructured conversation does not have any preselected themes or topics for discussion. Programme attendees simply discuss topics of interest (Johnston, 2015).

Regardless of the structure, programme conversations are usually informal. Some programmes start with a short presentation of the theme before attendees break off into smaller groups. Other programmes begin with the attendees gathering into small groups before starting the conversation(s). In some cases, programme organizers invite representatives from relevant organizations or government bodies, as well as local experts, to introduce themes and engage in the small group discussions. Programmes are typically offered on a weekly, drop-in basis, and are open to all who want to attend.

The public sphere in multicultural societies

All too often, multicultural societies are characterized by social divisions that run along cultural and ethnic lines, especially between immigrants and members of the majority (Blokland and van Eijk, 2009; Burgess et al., 2005; Finney, 2009; Pred, 2000). These divisions are likely to influence and possibly hinder the formation of a public sphere in which immigrants are able to make their voices heard. Therefore, the following discussion of the public sphere will be viewed through the lens of how conversation-based programming in public libraries can facilitate meetings and fruitful interactions in societies marked by these divisions.

To begin with, Jürgen Habermas (2010) conceptualizes the public sphere as a realm of our social lives in which something approaching a public opinion can be formed; an arena in which citizens behave as a public body by conferring in an unrestricted fashion. He postulates that the formation of a public sphere requires the guaranteed freedom of assembly and association along with the freedom to express opinions regarding matters of general interest. Moreover, he suggests that the norms and modes of behaviour undergirding a functioning public sphere include: 'general accessibility, elimination of privileges and discovery of general norms and rational legitimations' (Habermas, 2010: 119).

Habermas proposes that communication is the basis of the public sphere, with media being the primary means for facilitating debate, critique and supervision of the state through its provision of 'unfettered', or freely accessible, information. Accordingly, it is through communicative action (written or spoken) that general norms and rational

legitimations are worked out, argued and, ideally, agreed upon within the public sphere (Buschman, 2003; Habermas, 2010).

Reflecting on the concept of the public sphere within the context of multicultural societies, Nancy Fraser (2010) acknowledges that Habermas' concept of the public sphere is indispensable to critical social theory and democratic political practice; however, she contends that the bourgeois public sphere was more of a normative ideal than the inclusive arena that Habermas envisioned. She points out that the bourgeois public sphere generally limited access to middle- and upper middle class men; largely excluding women and 'racialized' men. Thus, the public sphere and the communications that took place largely reflected the needs and interests of men from the privileged classes while excluding the interests of the less privileged and marginalized members of society. Therefore, she argues that the claim for open access was never achieved.

However, Fraser notes that many other smaller public spheres have co-existed alongside and even challenged the dominant public sphere, such as elite women's groups, working class publics and popular peasant publics. Fraser suggests that these smaller public spheres, which she refers to as subaltern publics, serve as 'parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs' (Fraser, 2010: 136).

Of particular relevance for immigrant-receiving societies, Fraser asserts that an equalitarian multicultural society¹ will inherently be comprised of 'a plurality of public arenas in which groups with diverse values and rhetorics participate' and that 'by definition, such a society must contain a multiplicity of publics' (Fraser, 2010: 138). However, she states that such a society can be a participatory democracy only as long as a comprehensive public sphere exists in which deliberation on matters of common concern occur between the various publics (p. 139).

Fraser's critique is echoed in Habermas' later more nuanced comments on the relationships between the spheres and the formation of a comprehensive public sphere. He asserts:

The technologies of communication ... make utterances available for practically any context, and make possible a *highly differentiated network of public spheres* – local and transregional, literary, scientific, and political, within parties or associations, media-dependent or subcultural. Within these public spheres, processes of opinion and consensus formation, which depend upon diffusion and *mutual interpenetration* no matter how specialized they are, get institutionalized. The *boundaries are porous; each public sphere is open to other public spheres* ... All partial public spheres point to a comprehensive public sphere in which society as a whole fashions a knowledge of itself. (Habermas, 1987: 359–360) [emphasis added]

The concept of porousness is extremely valuable for gaining an understanding of how conversation-based programming can facilitate political integration. The idea that the public sphere is made up of a *network of highly differentiated public spheres* whose boundaries are *porous and open to one another* rather than closed off and existing in parallel brings us to the importance of the relationships between the smaller spheres. Any social network will necessarily be based in social relations. Accordingly, Erich J Sommerfeldt (2013) draws our attention to the importance of the relationships between the groups for fostering a comprehensive public sphere and ensuring a healthy democracy. He asserts that the benefits accrued from a variety of diverse contacts are necessary for fostering a robust, inclusive public sphere, thus emphasizing the need for bridging social capital.

The concept of bridging social capital, originating from social capital theory, is useful for understanding 'porousness' between the partial spheres as conceived by Habermas. Bridging social capital is the social ties that link people together with others across social groups or divides that often run along race, or class or religious lines (The Saguaro Seminar: Civic Engagement in America, 2012) – such as the divides that often run along cultural and ethnic lines in multicultural societies. Accordingly, for there to be porousness between spheres, for the spheres to be open to other spheres implies that the people who make up the respective publics are able to connect and engage with each another in order for diffusion and mutual interpenetration to take place. Simply stated, social engagement between publics – bridging social capital – is necessary for porousness and communication between the spheres to occur.

However, porousness between the publics takes on a different significance or role depending upon the type of public. Public sphere scholars generally agree that there are two types of publics: weak and strong. The different publics have different characteristics and different roles to play. Fraser distinguishes between *strong publics* as publics 'whose discourse encompasses both opinion formation and decision making' and *weak publics* as publics 'whose deliberative practice consists exclusively in opinion formation and does not also encompass decision making' (Fraser, 2010: 143). Additionally, Hauke Brunkhorst (2002: 677–678) asserts that a weak public is characterized by communicative power, but lacks administrative power; 'a weak public has moral influence but no legally regulated access to political or administrative power'.

Peter Dahlgren (2006) further describes weak publics as informal social settings that 'allow not only for the circulation of ideas and the development of political will and public opinion, but also for the important development and emergence of collective identities'. He stresses that the health of a democracy depends upon there being open lines of communication between the weak publics and strong

public(s); what he refers to as ‘successful mediation between the formal and informal tracks’, in other words, that ‘democracy resides with citizens who interact with one another and with power-holders of various kinds’ (p. 274).

Of particular relevance for conversation-based programming, Dahlgren (2006: 279) specifies the importance of informal, everyday talk for activating weak public spheres:

It is the meandering and unpredictable talk that the political can be generated, that the links between the personal and the political can be established. The looseness, open-endedness of everyday talk, its creativity, potential for empathy and affective elements are indispensable for the vitality of democratic politics ... ‘messy conversation’ is part of the larger terrain of civil society, but as it begins to take on political connotations, as it becomes in some sense civic, it activates the public sphere (the weak, non-decision-making one).

Accordingly, conversation-based programmes create forums in which immigrants and members of the majority can engage in informal conversation, as well as with power-holders of various kinds, which will be discussed in more detail. The programmes’ ability to facilitate interaction between immigrants and members of the majority can be seen as fostering bridging social capital and, thereby, increasing porousness and communication between the publics.

Possibilities for and challenges in bringing immigrant voices into the public sphere

Do we need things like conversation-based programming to foster communication between publics in today’s world that is characterized by a plethora of media and information technologies? Are interconnected publics not already a reality in our multi-ethnic societies? A simple yes or no answer to these questions is not possible as the fostering of intergroup relations and the connecting of social networks is ultimately a continuous process. Rather, a more fruitful question might be what the possibilities and potential barriers are to communication between publics in immigrant-receiving countries. As will become apparent, the list of factors that can potentially influence the communication between publics and the formation of a comprehensive public sphere are numerous.

Immigrants have many options for making their voices heard and influencing the formation of public opinion, such as participating in demonstrations, contacting politicians directly, participating in civic groups, engaging in public discourse via the media and voting. However, while these things are all possible, research has shown that immigrants’ active participation in the democratic process and overall political integration is highly contingent upon social interaction, especially with members of the majority.

Irene Bloemraad (2006) in her book *Becoming a Citizen: Incorporating Immigrants and Refugees in the United States and Canada* declares that political integration is essentially a social process and that ‘mobilization occurs most readily through personal contact and social interaction ... through personal ties and organizations rather than through impersonal appeals or spontaneous engagement’ (p. 65). She asserts that a critical first step for advancing immigrants’ political integration is the acquisition of information about citizenship, voting, the political system, norms of protest, current issues and a variety of other topics. Importantly, Bloemraad notes that information relevant to immigrants political integration is typically disseminated through informal social networks (p. 83) – a preferred information source for immigrants (Caidi et al., 2010).

Relating this back to the discussion of the public sphere, the need for personal contact and the acquisition of information through informal social networks underscores the need for bridging social capital.

Yet, an obvious concern is that the fostering of bridging social capital may be hindered if there is a lack of a common language, which may limit communication between publics. This is specifically an issue for immigrant groups whose members do not already speak the language of the country upon arrival. However, linguistic barriers can generally be overcome within a relatively short period through language learning, translation or both. In this sense, it is a short-lived or practical issue and, with a little time and effort, intergroup communication can proceed. The obvious solution for this is to ensure that recent immigrants have access to language learning resources and opportunities to practise speaking with members of the majority as well as translations of official communications.

Research also puts into question how effective the media are in facilitating communication between the spheres and, as a result, their ability to foster a comprehensive public sphere. Studies on ethnic media, which are media produced by immigrant communities or communities partially comprised of immigrants and other ethnic minorities, show that the media do not always facilitate intergroup communication (Bleich et al., 2015). For example, Shuyo Kong’s (2013) study on the Chinese media in the Vancouver metro area, Canada, concludes that the media provide a transnational supplement to the mainstream public sphere, however, she asserts that greater communication and interaction between the Chinese and mainstream media is crucial for fostering ‘quality relations between publics’.

Another study by Budarick and Han (2015) on African media producers in Melbourne, Australia reports that African-Australian broadcasters and media producers made attempts to communicate directly with members of the majority media in response to articles showing negative or one-sided portrayals of African-Australians. The study

suggests that these efforts made by African-Australian broadcasters had limited impact. Moreover, the study notes the financial challenges that ethnic media often face in covering their operational costs. This may further limit the various medias' efforts to facilitate discourse, represent their respective audiences, and establish communicative channels with the mainstream media.

The issues and challenges described in these media studies are not necessarily indicative of the challenges faced by all ethnic media. However, they draw attention to some of the issues that can arise and hinder the formation of a comprehensive public sphere. Importantly, the studies show that the media may not be sufficient for facilitating an inclusive public discourse and may even reinforce social divides by misrepresenting or omitting the voices of subaltern groups, thus negatively affecting the communication between the groups.

Lastly, immigrants who are not citizens lack voting rights, which further limits their ability to make their voices heard and to influence formal decision-making processes. Citizenship, in the formal sense, is understood as being when a 'person who is fully a member of a modern state and as such has all possible legal rights, including the right to vote, hold political office and claim public benefits' (Schiller, 2005: 53). However, many newly arrived immigrants have yet to acquire citizenship. Some may eventually obtain citizenship while others will never do so due to structural or personal reasons.

On one hand, citizenship can be seen as empowering for those holding citizen-status, as they are able to participate directly in democratic self-governance. On the other hand, citizenship can lead to the domination of one group (citizens) over another (non-citizens) as one group has full right to participate in democratic processes and one group does not, thus creating an insider-outsider dichotomy within a body politic (Isin, 2009), a body politic being 'a group of individuals organized under a single governmental authority' (Merriam-Webster). Lack of citizenship may result in some immigrants never having the ability to influence public opinion formation through formal channels though they are part of a body politic.

To be clear, this is not a distinction between immigrants authorized or unauthorized to be in a country (also referred to as documented or undocumented immigrants). Many immigrants who have entered a country through regular, authorized channels do not ultimately obtain citizenship. This may be due to uncertainty as to their length of stay in the country or requirements to relinquish citizenship in their country of origin, or a variety of other reasons.

Non-citizens can constitute a large group of people. As of 1 January 2016 the total number of immigrants in Norway was 848,207 and, of those immigrants, only 322,835 (38%) were Norwegian citizens whereas 525,372 (62%) were not Norwegian citizens (Dalgard, 1 April 2016, personal communication).² Looking across the Atlantic

ocean, the foreign-born population in the United States – historically an immigrant-receiving nation – as of 2015 was 41,717,420; however, only 19,448,227 (47%) of the foreign-born population were citizens, which means that a total of 22,269,193 (53%)³ people were non-citizens (United States Census Bureau, 2015). As these numbers show, the majority of immigrants in both countries are non-citizens and, thereby, excluded from participation in formal decision-making processes, at least at the national level. Furthermore, and of increasing concern for many countries, the percentage of non-citizen immigrants will increase in the next few years due to the recent influx of asylum seekers.⁴

Lack of interaction with the majority, language barriers, limited or biased representation in the media, lack of voting rights, or a combination of these factors may reduce the communication between immigrants and the majority and, ultimately, hinder the formation of a comprehensive public sphere. These issues, though discussed separately, are interrelated; they all point to the need for and importance of bridging social capital.

Therefore, the answer to the question, do we need things like conversation-based programming to foster communication between publics, is yes. Interconnected publics between which communication flows freely have not been fully realized. Moreover, immigrant-receiving societies will be faced with the continual emergence of new publics in need of establishing communication with the other preexisting publics, which, in turn, will require ongoing opportunities for the various publics to meet and interact.

Conversation-based programming fosters porousness and communication between publics: Research findings

As stated previously, the study on the language cafe at Malmö City Library found that the programme supports language learning, the expansion of social networks, as well as, information exchange relevant to economic and social integration, yet showed limited evidence for information exchange relevant to political integration. The current case-based study at Oslo and Akershus University College on language cafes and integration also investigates if there is evidence of language learning, expansion of social networks and information exchange relevant to the various dimensions of integration. These outcomes were also investigated in order to determine if they are occurring in other cafes operating in other contexts or specific to the language café in Malmö. Additionally, using the theoretical lens of the public sphere, the study explores the programmes' ability to facilitate communication between the publics in ways that support political integration, thus extending the previous study. The following is

an overview of the study's methods, profiles of the participants and volunteers and findings.

Methodology

The research design chosen for the study is case-based research (CBR). The current study includes three cases of language cafes at Norwegian public libraries located in the cities of Oslo, Moss and Horten. CBR was chosen for this study because it allows researchers to study a single or a few case studies in depth and to draw upon a range of methods in order to capture and analyze a variety of data, thus enabling them to search for patterns and relationships previously unknown (Perri and Bellamy, 2012: 103–104).

Profile of cases

The first language cafe is located in Oslo, the capital of Norway. The library selected for the study is the Tøyen branch of the Deichman library system. The branch is located in the Gamle Oslo neighbourhood of the city, of which 20,305 (39.5%) residents are immigrants or Norwegian-born children with immigrant parents (Ordemann, 2016, personal communication). The second language cafe is located in Moss, a town approximately 45 minutes to the southeast of Oslo. The total population is 32,182, of which the immigrant and Norwegian-born children with immigrant parents is 6409 (20%) (Ordemann, 2016, personal communication). The third language cafe is located in Horten, a town approximately 1 hour 40 minutes to the southwest of Oslo. The total population is 27,178, of which the immigrant and Norwegian-born children with immigrant parents number 4065 (15%) (Ordemann, 2016, personal communication).

Data collection

The first phase of data collection was comprised of participant observation. This method was used in order to gain a general understanding of the programmes and the types of conversations that take place between the participants (immigrants) and the Norwegian volunteers. Note taking was done immediately following the cafes. This was done because the researcher and programme organizers believed that note-taking during the programme would have caused some of the participants to feel uncomfortable.

The focus of the field notes was on the themes and topics discussed during the programme conversations. Each cafe has a preselected topic or theme for discussion. These themes are generally discussed briefly by the group and then more in depth in smaller groups of around five to seven people. The smaller groups can also choose to discuss other themes or topics if the interest arises. As a result, programme conversations are usually multi-thematic and

their informality is akin to the previously given description of Dahlgren's concept of 'messy conversation'. Both the preselected themes and volunteer or participant initiated themes were documented in the field notes.

The topics and themes discussed are important as they give us an understanding of the communication between the participants and volunteers. Are the conversations primarily about Norwegian topics or are there diverse topics being discussed? Conversations only about Norwegian topics would suggest that programme conversations do not facilitate the exchange of ideas and information, whereas conversation about diverse topics would suggest that programme conversations do facilitate the exchange of ideas and information. NVivo was used to analyse the field notes.

The second phase of data collection was comprised of questionnaires; a questionnaire for the participants (Appendix A) and a questionnaire for the volunteers (in Norwegian). The aim of the questionnaires was to elicit how the participants and volunteers' have experienced the programme conversations. The questions were based on the theoretical underpinnings of the study and were a mixture of dichotomous and interval (Likert scaling) response options. The questionnaires had one optional unstructured, open-ended question, which the programme participants could answer in their preferred language.

The decision to administer a questionnaire rather than conducting in-depth interviews was due to language. Many of the participants do not speak English or Norwegian proficiently enough to be interviewed in either of those languages. Therefore, interviews would have required the use of translators. The concern with using translators was that some participants might have declined to be interviewed or altered their answers because they would not have been anonymous, as the translator and researcher would have known their identity. The questionnaire provided a way for the researcher to ask the same questions while ensuring the respondents remained completely anonymous.

The questionnaires were translated into Norwegian, English, Somali and Arabic. Participants were able to use their mobile devices for translation and work together to fill out the questionnaire if they so wished. The researcher was also available to answer questions. As noted before, participants were able to respond to the one open-ended question in their preferred language.

It should be stressed that the main aim of the study is to gain an in-depth understanding of the social processes happening within the language cafes rather than generalizable results. Hence, this study uses the questionnaires in a qualitative manner, as a means to elicit the views and experiences of all the participants. This is very important as the participants come from very diverse backgrounds, as will be discussed, and therefore may experience the programmes differently.

Sixty-four questionnaires were filled out by programme participants: 21 in Oslo, 30 in Moss and 13 in Horten. All participants in attendance at each of the language cafes agreed to fill out the survey, with the exception of four people at the Moss cafe. Thirty-one questionnaires were filled out by volunteers: 7 in Oslo, 14 in Moss, and 10 in Horten. All volunteers in attendance at each of the language cafes agreed to fill out the survey. SPSS was used to analyse the results of surveys.

Profile of participants and volunteers

The participants come from very diverse backgrounds and have come to Norway for a variety of reasons. A little less than half the participants are female and a little over half are male. The majority of the participants are in their late twenties or thirties and about a third are in their forties or early fifties.

In Oslo, the majority of participants come from European countries and have come to Norway for work. In Moss, the majority come from African countries and have come to Norway as asylum seekers or refugees. In Horten, there is a greater mixture of people coming from European, African and Asian countries and more varied reasons for coming to Norway. The average length of time participants have lived in Norway is two and a half years; however, participants reported having lived in Norway anywhere from as little as two weeks up to 30 years.

Participants' level of education varies from only having completed only a portion of their primary schooling to having completed graduate degrees. However, the majority have either finished secondary school or some form of higher education (vocational school, university, etc.). The majority of participants in Moss and Horten are not employed, whereas, the majority of participants in Oslo are employed. This may partly be due to the times the cafes are held. The Moss and Horten cafes are held during the day whereas the cafe in Oslo is held in the evening after normal working hours.

Around half of the participants are required to attend the programmes and around half attend voluntarily. The Norwegian Government offers immigrants language classes and requires refugees to attend a two-year introductory programme, which includes language classes and coursework about Norwegian society. Many of the participants who attend the Government's introductory or language programmes are required to attend the language cafes. The inclusion of participants who are required to attend helps counter a possible positive bias. This is because immigrants who might not normally attend the programmes are included and not just the highly motivated, more outgoing immigrants.

The vast majority of volunteers at the Horten and Moss cafes are women, over the age of 56, and retired. However, around half of the volunteers at the Oslo cafe are men and

almost all of volunteers are under the age of 56 and employed. Across the three language cafes, the vast majority of volunteers have attended some college or received a university degree. Two of the volunteers are immigrants who have achieved a high level of fluency in the language.

The profiles of the participants and volunteers are important because they show that there is a diversity of people attending the language cafes in respect to their cultural backgrounds, ages, educational backgrounds, etc. This diversity is of particular importance when considering the programmes' ability to foster bridging social capital and increased communication between publics.

Findings

The vast majority of participants reported that they think attending the language cafe has improved their language skills somewhat or a lot. These results corroborate the previously cited research indicating that this type of programming helps participants improve their language skills. One participant commented: 'It is a great friendly place to practise and learn with no problems if there are mistakes'. This reaffirms that this type of programming can help overcome language barriers that may limit communication between immigrants and the majority.

In addition to language learning, participants and volunteers have also engaged in discussions regarding policy issues related to language learning:

We spoke a bit about language learning and the first-generation language learning. The need to encourage mother-tongue language learning was discussed, but also the need to ensure that children with mother tongues other than Norwegian learn enough Norwegian to be successful at school. One of the volunteers, who had taught children with mother tongues other than Norwegian, noted that it is very difficult for students if they are unable to understand the teachers when they start school, and therefore the students can fall behind their Norwegian-speaking counterparts. She emphasized that the non-Norwegian speaking students do not start learning their other subjects until they learn Norwegian. She stressed the difficulties that teachers face because they do not have the time to stop and give the students the proper attention. The need for children with mother tongues other than Norwegian to attend preschool in order to master Norwegian before school start was discussed. Participants pointed out how important it is to teach children their mother tongue so that they can speak with their families living abroad.

Mother-tongue language support for school age children has been a controversial policy issue in Norway. The national curriculum published in 1987 stressed the importance of 'functional bilingualism', which was an additive approach to learning Norwegian in addition to supporting children's first languages. In the early 1990s, the teaching of mother tongues in Oslo schools was increasingly

perceived as a hindrance to the acquisition of Norwegian. By as early as 1994, mother-tongue instruction was almost non-existent. However, a few years later in 1999, mother-tongue instruction was stipulated as a right for those who spoke a minority language as their first language. Interestingly, the amount of language support that students were entitled to was based on their proficiency in Norwegian. Lastly, in 2007 support for mother-tongue instruction was only permitted for students who lacked sufficient proficiency in Norwegian to survive in the mainstream classroom (Carson et al., 2015: 5–6).

As a topic of discussion, the balance of mother-tongue and Norwegian language learning bridges the personal and the political, the lived experiences and language instruction policies. These types of conversations allow for immigrants and members of the majority to gain a greater understanding of the related issues and to obtain insight as to how these issues affect peoples' lives and the society as a whole.

The findings also corroborate previous studies indicating that the language cafes expand participants' and volunteers' social networks. Around half of the participants indicated that they have no or few opportunities to speak with Norwegians outside of the language cafe. Almost half of volunteers said that they had little or no contact with immigrants before attending the language cafe and a little over one-third of the volunteers reported having no or few opportunities to speak with immigrants outside of the language cafe. Again, this shows that the cafes are bringing people together who might not have had contact otherwise, which can be seen as the fostering of bridging social capital and, subsequently, the creation of multi-public social networks.

However, the number of participants who reported having no or few opportunities to speak with Norwegians outside of the language cafes varied greatly between the cafes. Oslo has the largest population of immigrants out of the three towns and the language cafe in Oslo has the greatest number of participants who reported having no or few opportunities to speak with Norwegians. Horten has the smallest population of immigrants and the least number of participants who reported having no or few opportunities to speak with Norwegians.

Similar to the participants, the number of volunteers who reported having no or few opportunities to speak with immigrants outside of the language cafes varied greatly between the cafes. However, it was inverse of what the participants reported with only about one-fifth of the volunteers in Oslo and Moss indicating that they have no or few opportunities to speak with immigrants, whereas, over two-thirds of volunteers in Horten indicated that they had no or few opportunities to speak with immigrants outside of the language cafe. These findings suggest that the size of the town or the number of immigrants in a town, or both can influence the contact between groups. Libraries considering implementing this type of programming may

want to consider these matters when organizing their programmes and training volunteers.

Reflecting on the theoretical underpinnings of the study, the bringing of immigrants and Norwegians together can be seen as facilitating interaction between weak publics as members of various social and cultural groups come together in an informal social setting. The findings also show that the programmes connect weak and strong publics. It was observed that programme organizers often invite local politicians (e.g. town mayor), government employees (e.g. police, fire department, etc.) and religious representatives (e.g. priests) to speak at the cafes about their work and participate in the programmes' informal discussions. Moreover, the language cafes in Oslo and Moss organized tours to the Norwegian Parliament during which programme participants had the opportunity to speak informally about issues of personal importance with regional representatives.

As with the previously cited research, the programme conversations foster information sharing. This short excerpt from the field notes is an example of how the conversation can promote information sharing related to political integration:

One of the main topics (initiated by one of the volunteers) in which everyone participated was in regard to the three-year law, which states that newcomers to Norway must live in Norway for three years before they can vote in local elections. The volunteer noted that this means that newcomers have to have an address in Norway for three years. It was also noted that this time period does not include the period of time that participants are living at the asylum reception center, which can be lengthy. One participant mentioned that she had lived Norway for six years, but three of them had been at the asylum centre. She is just now becoming eligible to vote. The volunteer also talked about a voter's card that is sent to people in the mail when they are eligible to vote. This is automatic and, as she said, made it easy so that no one had to remember to register for it.

Participants who took part in this conversation were comprised of asylum seekers who were still living at the asylum reception centres and other immigrants who had been in Norway for less than three years. It appeared that this information was new for some of them; thus, the conversation can be considered to have successfully fostered information sharing relevant to their political integration.

Accordingly, almost half of the volunteers indicated that they learned about international issues and around one-fifth of programme participants reported that they have learned about political or civic issues at the local or national level. These results suggest there is a degree of information exchange taking place that is relevant to immigrants' political integration. However, the degree of information exchange appears low given that only around one-fifth of the participants indicated that they have learned about

political or civic issues. This finding is similar to that of the previously cited study in Malmö (Johnston, 2016a).

Looking more closely at the variations in the response rate between the language cafes here in Norway provides some insight. About one-third of participants in Oslo, two-thirds in Moss, and less than one-tenth in Horten indicated that they have learned about political or civic issues. The variation in these results are likely a result of how the language cafes are organized. An analysis of the field notes shows that Horten selected fewer political or civic-related topics for discussion, which may have resulted in fewer participants at their language cafe reporting that they have learned about political or civic issues. In contrast, the organizers of the language cafe in Moss regularly selected topics related to political and civic issues, more so than the other two language cafes.

Accordingly, the language cafe in the previous study at Malmö City Library did not have preselected topics or themes for discussion. All conversation topics were initiated by participants or volunteers. This may have resulted in the programme showing less support for the exchange of information relevant to political integration (Johnston, 2016a). These findings suggest that the selection of conversation topics can promote information exchange relevant to immigrants' political integration.

The flexible structure and informal nature of the conversations appears to be an important factor in the exchange of information. A participant commented:

I have benefited a lot from the language cafe because many topics we learn there, no one is and will educate us about them. We get to learn and ask things we would not ask a Norwegian on the street.

In a similar vein, another participant said:

Volunteers are prepared and help us get a lot of new information that is not found in books.

A volunteer said:

I have gained insight into other people's lives and mindsets.

These comments suggest that the informality of the conversations supports information sharing about topics or particular aspects of topics that may not be discussed elsewhere.

Importantly, the vast majority of participants indicated that they think the participants and volunteers are able to debate or disagree in a respectful manner, which is crucial for sensitive or controversial topics to be addressed. For example, the following conversation that was documented in the field notes addressed topics that are controversial, relating to both the personal lives of the participants and wider political discussions regarding marriage:

Discussion took place about the various customs related to arranged marriages, multiple wives (polygamy), divorce, and age of marriage. It was clear that one of the Norwegian volunteers felt these to be major women's rights issues – the right to choose a husband and not have to worry about him taking on additional wives. A Somali man, who stated he was not against polygamy, spoke a bit about the practice in Somalia and its unofficial practice in Norway. He noted that Norwegian government does not allow it, which can be problematic for the additional wives and their children as they are not granted the same rights to be in Norway or protected by the law in the same way as the first (official) wife and her children. Offering a slightly different perspective, a Somali woman said that she does not agree with polygamy because the wives do not always get along, which can lead to major problems in the family.

This conversation can be seen as what Dahlgren described as a 'messy conversation' in which links between the personal and political can be made. It is a perfect example of the 'meandering and unpredictable talk' from which the political can be generated. Not only does the conversation address the various issues related to the topic of polygamy, but it also addresses the issue of families who do not fit the Norwegian norms of family and how that can adversely affect those families. These points are where the conversation begins to take on political connotations.

Importantly, conversations also appear to influence how people think about and perceive various topics and issues. Well over the majority of participants and volunteers reported that there are issues that they feel more strongly about now than they did before attending the language cafe. One participant noted:

I have learnt to express myself and learnt to tolerate other people's opinions.

These results suggest that the programmes foster mutual interpenetration and can possibly support opinion formation across publics.

Discussion

Language barriers, limited or biased representation in the media, lack of voting rights and lack of interaction with the majority may limit or prevent immigrants' voices from entering the public sphere and, in turn, keep it from becoming truly comprehensive. These hindrances put into question Habermas' assertion that the boundaries between the publics are porous and the degree to which the technologies of communication actually facilitate the process of opinion formation across publics.

In light of these hindrances, how can conversation-based programming foster the communication needed for bringing immigrant voices into the public sphere and thereby, facilitate political integration? This article shows four ways

in which conversation-based programming can support the formation of a comprehensive public sphere: the fostering of linguistic competence, expansion of social networks, promotion of information exchange relevant for civic participation, and facilitation of ‘messy conversation’.

First, conversation-based programming supports participants’ language learning, which is generally the main aim or one of the main aims of this type of programming. A common language facilitates the communication necessary for bringing immigrant voices into the public discourse and, in turn, for formation of a comprehensive public sphere. Importantly, the programmes offer participants an opportunity to speak with native speakers (members of the majority), which is something that many of the participants are not finding elsewhere.

Second, conversation-based programming fosters the expansion of social, multi-public networks – bridging social capital. Participants come from very diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds with varying levels of previous interaction with Norwegians. Likewise, for the Norwegians, many of the programme volunteers have not had previous contact with immigrants or have few opportunities to interact with immigrants outside of the cafes, or both. Therefore, the programmes can be seen to offer, for some, a unique opportunity for meeting and conversing, which is necessary for fostering communication and greater porousness between the two and for the formation of a comprehensive public sphere.

Third, the selection of discussion topics on matters such as voting, the political system, norms of protest and current issues are all ways in which conversation-based programming can support, and possibly put into motion, the process of political integration by promoting information exchange on these topics. This is not so say that programmes that choose to discuss other topics are any better or worse; they may support participants’ integration in other, equally important ways.

Fourth, the informal nature of the conversations allows attendees to direct the conversations in ways that fit their needs and interests, thus facilitating what Dahlgren referred to as ‘messy conversation’. Volunteers and immigrants can interact with one another and engage in the informal, open-ended everyday talk, thus facilitating conversations that allow for links between the personal and political to be established.

These results show that language cafes can support immigrants’ political integration through providing them with opportunities to meet and engage with members of the majority. However, three critical points need to be given consideration regarding the results of these studies. The first is the length of time that participants have attended the programme. The benefits individuals report to have obtained from attending the above-mentioned programmes will vary depending on whether they have attended the respective programmes twice or continuously over the course of two years.

The second is in regard to how long the participants have been in the country and their previous familiarity with the language and culture. The length of time the questionnaire participants reported having been in the country ranged from two weeks to 30 years. Reasonably, a person who has been in Norway for 15 years might find the programmes less informative than someone who just arrived within the last couple of months. However, it must be taken into consideration that people who have lived a relatively isolated life or have primarily socialized with people of their own ethnic group may have very little knowledge of the society, irrespective of how long they have been in the country.

The third is what the volunteers and participants bring to the interactions. This may include their previous experiences, knowledge of their own society and the topics discussed. If a particular volunteer or participant knows little about politics, but a lot about the arts and culture then conversations with them about the former will likely be less fruitful than conversations about the latter.

Based on the language cafes in this study, the programmes appear to create forums in which immigrants and members of the majority can meet and interact in ways that foster a greater degree of porousness and communication between them, which is necessary for the formation of a comprehensive public sphere. The programming presents an opportunity for attendees to connect the personal with the political and to bring together strong and weak publics, which is necessary for successful mediation between the formal and informal tracks. While the programming cannot eliminate the inequalities created by citizenship, it can support immigrants’ political participation in other ways and may even lead some participants to think about citizenship.

Conclusion

Conversation-based programming in public libraries shows great potential for supporting immigrants’ political integration and bringing their voices into the public sphere by fostering linguistic competence, expanding social networks, promoting information exchange, and providing space for ‘messy conversation’. By serving as independent meeting places and arenas for public discussion and debate, as mandated in the Norwegian Library Act, public libraries have the potential to play a key role in supporting immigrants’ political integration and, ultimately, strengthening democratic processes.

Notes

1. Fraser defines an equalitarian multicultural society as a multicultural society that is nonstratified; a society without structural divisions based on class, racial or gender divisions of labour (Fraser, 2010: 137–138).
2. This number includes non-citizen immigrants – people who were born in another country and migrated to Norway – and

children born in Norway to non-Norwegian, immigrant parents. Norwegian Nationality Law is based on the principle of *jus sanguinis*, according to which, citizenship is inherited from one's parents, and dual citizenship is not permitted (Justis- og beredskapsdepartementet, 2005). Children born to immigrant parents in Norway will not automatically obtain Norwegian citizenship, but rather the citizenship of their parents. Unless the Norwegian-born children of immigrants chose to naturalize when they reach the age of majority, they will be non-citizens though they might live their entire lives in Norway. As with other non-citizens, they will be limited in their ability to take part in formal decision-making processes such as voting.

3. This number includes foreign-born non-citizens of all ages, as does the previous number for Norwegian non-citizens. US Nationality law is based on *jus soli*, according to which any person born in the country becomes a citizen. Dual citizenship is permitted (Bureau of Consular Affairs, 2016). Therefore, children of immigrants who are born in the US automatically obtain citizenship regardless of their parents' nationality.
4. This refers to the recent influx of asylum seekers in the latter half of 2015 from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. Asylum applications lodged in Norway by Citizenship and Month (Norwegian Directorate of Immigration, 2015): <http://www.udi.no/en/statistics-and-analysis/statistics/asylsoknader-etter-statsborgerskap-og-maned-2015/>

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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Appendix A

Thank you for filling out this survey! It is 27 questions long and should take around 20 minutes to complete. The aim is to generate knowledge that can help improve language cafes. All answers are confidential. Your participation is voluntary and you can quit the survey at any time. Any identifying information will not be included in the final report.

Thank you! Jamie Johnston, PhD Candidate, Oslo University College, Email: jamie.johnston@hioa.no Phone 45223458

1. What is your gender?

Male

Female

2. How old are you?

25 or under

26-40

41-55

56 or older

3. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

Some primary school

Primary school

Secondary school

Vocational/technical school

Some college

Bachelor's degree

Master's degree

Doctoral degree or professional degree (MD, JD, etc.)

Other (Please specify) _____

4. Why did you come to Norway? (Mark all that apply)

Work

Family reunification

Spouse / Partner

Education

Asylum/Refugee

Other (Please specify) _____

5. Where do you come from?

Europe

North America

Latin America

Asia

Africa

Oceania

6. How long have you lived in Norway? _____

7. What do you do?

Working

Unemployed

Retired/Pensioner

Permanently Disabled

Homemaker / Stay at home parent

Student

Participant in Introductory Programming (NAV)

Interim period at an asylum reception center

Other (Please specify) _____

8. Are you required to attend the language cafe (as part of the introductory programming)?Yes No

Other (Please specify) _____

9. How long have you attended the language cafe (approx.)? _____**10. Do you attend Norwegian language courses?**Yes No

Other (Please specify) _____

Regarding language learning at the language cafe:	Not at all/None	A little/Few	Somewhat /Some	A lot	Not sure
11. Do you think that attending the language cafe has improved your language skills?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12. Do you have other opportunities outside of the language cafe to have discussions (in Norwegian) with Norwegians?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

13. Have you found the conversations at the language cafe to be informative regarding the following topics: (Mark all that apply)Work or jobs Education Political or civic (e.g. local or national issues) International issues Recreational opportunities (hobbies, sports, cultural activities, travel advice, etc.) Norwegian culture and traditions Other cultures and traditions Housing (e.g. finding, renting, furnishing, etc.) Health/Health Care

Other (Please specify) _____

Regarding the programme conversations:	Not at all/None	A little/Few	Somewhat /Some	A lot	Not sure
14. Do you think that the Norwegian volunteers value your opinion on the topics and issues discussed?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
15. Have you developed new understandings or perspectives on the topics and issues discussed?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
16. Do you think the participants and volunteers are able to debate or disagree in a respectful manner?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
17. Are there issues that you feel more strongly about now than you did before attending the language café?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
18. Have you gained new perspectives or understandings of your own culture and society from the discussions at the language cafe?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Regarding feelings of trust at the language cafe:	Not at all/None	A little /Few	Somewhat /Some	A lot	Not sure
19. In general, do you think that most people in Oslo/Moss/Horten can be trusted	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
20. In general, do you trust the Norwegian volunteers at the language cafe?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
21. In general, do you believe the Norwegian volunteers trust you?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Regarding the social aspects of the language cafe:	Not at all/None	A little/Few	Somewhat /Some	A lot	Not sure
22. Do you feel that attending the language cafe has been a positive social experience?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
23. Do you feel a greater sense of being part of the Norwegian community from attending the language cafe?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
24. Do you feel more comfortable talking with people of different cultural backgrounds than your own from attending the language cafe?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
25. Have you made any friends or acquaintances at the language cafe?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
26. Overall, do you believe that you have benefited from attending the language cafe?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

27. Why do you believe that you have benefited or not benefited from attending the language cafe (optional)?
