Using statistics for quality management in the library

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Abstract: In the light of the ever changing and developing technology in the libraries, library managers across the sector and all over the world need to utilize all possible means of ensuring that the quality of services remains optimal. This paper shows some of the uses of different evaluation tools in an academic library. The paper will describe the practical use of surveys, larger and smaller, questionnaires, focus groups and stake holder meetings, all of which will yield different kinds of data. As part of quality management, the practical uses of this data will be explored.

Introduction:

Library managers all over the world need to utilize all possible means to ensure that service quality always is the best it can be. In this paper I will, very concretely and very practical, show some of my own experiences with different kinds of statistics, surveys and other kinds of systematic feed back from the library users, and how I have utilized this for a better library.

Let me first say a few words about my library. I work at the University of Bergen Library, on the Western coast of Norway. Here, I am leader of the Social Science, Arts and Humanities Library, which is located in two different newly refurbished Library buildings at the campus. We serve somewhere around 6.000 students and 1.000 academic staff from the faculty of humanities and faculty of social sciences. 40staff are working in this part of the library.

Theories on quality

As a theoretical background, I would like to start with K.A. Røvik, and his important work on how different organizations employ adaptations of different programs for ensuring quality in their organizations. In his research Røvik finds that different waves or tides of reform also highlight different aspects or tools at different times. Reform tools tend to follow a cyclical pattern, coming into and going out of fashion. A management concept is not only a toolkit for identifying and correcting organizational failures and improving organisational efficiency, but it is also a symbol that can give legitimacy and credibility to organisations (Røvik 1998, Pors 2008)

In fact, several of these ideas have become so popular that they can be found nearly everywhere and in all kinds of organizations. Røvik (2002) labels such ideas organizational super-standards, of which Management by Objectives and Total Quality Management are currently two of the most popular. Quality management reforms involve a shift in focus away from procedures and input and towards products, performance, and quality of output, customer satisfaction, and employee empowerment.

Røvik works especially with organizations within the public sector of Norway and Scandinavia. From the library point of view we must look to professor Niels Ole Pors and his ground breaking work, with professor Carl Gustav Johannsen, on Danish libraries and managers. We can see that this is the same in libraries. Pors finds that there appears to be two main reasons for introducing management tools. One is to meet external requirements, the other is symbolic, to market the library as modern and in the forefront. (Pors 2008)

LIS researchers have looked to marketing and other research to focus attention on expectations and an alternative view of quality, one representing the user's or customer's perspective on the services used. Those researchers who have examined quality from that perspective concur with their peers in marketing that "only customers judge quality; all other judgments are essentially irrelevant."(Zeithaml et al 1990) They emphasized, "service-quality perceptions stem from how well a provider performs vis-a`-vis customers' expectations about how the provider should perform." (ibid) As a result, the research has tended to define service quality in terms of meeting or exceeding customer expectations, (Reeves & Bednar 1994) or, more precisely, as the difference- or gap-between customer perceptions and expectations of service.

Within the LIS-field Peter Hernon and John R. Whitman has argued that it is possible to examine expectations from two coequal and probably interrelated concepts, service quality and satisfaction. Service quality deals with those expectations that the library chooses to meet, and satisfaction is more of an emotional and subjective reaction to a time-limited event or the cumulative experiences that a customer has with a service provider. .(Hernon and Whitman 2000)

Different perspectives on quality

Many of the problems of defining and recognising quality arise because the concept can be approached from many different perspectives. Already in 1984, Gavin suggested that at least five views can be identified in the literature and in practice:

• the transcendental view: quality can be recognised, but cannot be defined;

• the customer view: quality as fitness for the customer's purposes or conformance to the customer's requirements;

• the manufacturer view: quality as conformance to specification;

• the product view: quality is related to inherent characteristics of the product;

• the value-based view: quality is dependent on what a customer is willing to pay for it. (Garvin, 1984 in Griffiths 2008)

In the early 2000s, Griffiths and Brophy adapted Gavin's "Quality Attributes" further and produced a set of ten attributes that they find useful for assessing the quality, usability and impact of services and resources. These attributes are: Performance, Conformance, Features, Reliability, Durability, Currency, Serviceability, Aesthetics, Perceived Quality, and Usability. (Griffiths 2008)

These are some examples, and more can be found in the literature. The different questions and perspectives will require different approaches, maybe to be asked from different people, who will give different weight to the questions and to the library. And we, the practitioners and leaders, will also have different wishes, and different needs.

In my work, as a library leader, I want to a use a select number of methods in order to get specific feed back from the users of the library.

Statistics
First, I will keep an eye on the main statistics: The number of visitors, the number of loans in total, the number of loans from our primary groups, downloads of central electronic journals and databases. As long as they are stable or even rising (at least not falling dramatically and unexplainable) I will be content and not worry. If they start falling, I will have to investigate quickly what is happening. What are the factors that can explain this decline? Another new library for some of our users? Reduced opening times? More electronic books? Reduced acquisitions?

Questionnaires
For times of change I have found that questionnaires asking about the service to the patrons will be useful. The questionnaire should not be too large and not have too many questions. At the same time, some few openings for open answers are always valuable. It should contain enough of the relevant background questions to be valid, but not so many that the patrons find themselves un-anonymous. And the total number of questions and questionnaires ought to be low enough for you to be able to handle inside the library.

Example: A small survey
When we opened our new Arts and humanities library in August 2005, we went from a 1961 type of very closed library to an open and modern 2005 library, complete with RFID and self service machines for loan and return. We were very proud (we still are, in fact). Still, we were not certain that this was as good as it could be, so in the fall of 2005 and early spring of 2006 we did a small user survey for the people coming into the library. We asked about what they had been doing in the library, what they wanted us to prioritize in the near future, and how satisfied they were. We also had some questions with possibility for open answers (What are you satisfied with, what can we do better, and how, etc) that also gave us some very important feed back.

I will just give you a few examples of the comments we got, and what we did with those comments:

- The students all loved the new, roomy and airy library. Their major suggestion for improvement was that we must make more working/reading places for the students. The professors all loved the new, airy and roomy library. Their major suggestion for improvement was more books, especially from the closed stacks. So what did we do? Of course if we were to fill the library with new study places and more shelves with books on them, we might as well forget about the nice, roomy and airy library. So we put up a few more shelves and we made an effort to take the most asked-for books out of the closed stacks, while

at the same time putting some of our less used books from open into closed stacks. We put up some more proper working tables for students instead of the "relaxing" low tables we earlier had had in an area, and also along some walls where there had not been study places before.

- We got comments that it was noisy in the library from about 5 % of the questionnaires. We also got comments that it was nice to be able to talk in the library from 5 %. So what did we do? We made smaller signs saying "please be considerate, people are trying to concentrate", we made special zones where patrons could use their mobiles, and we trained the librarians to talk more quietly. At the same time, we told patrons that "this is not a reading room; this is not a quiet library".

A final comment: This survey was done within the library, on paper, by handing out questionnaires to patrons, and the librarians coming back to pick them up after a little while. It was supposed to tell the library about how to improve the quality of the services, by asking for comments from the patrons already in the library; and it did.

Example: A large survey
In the spring of 2009, University of Bergen Library along with several other institutions of Higher Education joined in a LibQual survey. This is a totally different kind of survey, a web-survey where the questions are already set, and where all in the university, not only library patrons, were asked about service and satisfaction with the library. I will not go into the technicalities and details of this survey, but only about some of the results and our subsequent actions.

The Social Science and Arts and Humanities library both got very high marks for personal service from the librarians, actually, one could almost say "too high", going above and beyond all that can be expected of us. The area most clearly marked out for improvement was the web based resources, which were considered difficult to find and use. So since then, we have made a special project to make better web pages for patrons (I am glossing over a lot of hard work and fights with other University departments here) and also to be especially pedagogic when it comes to showing new students about our electronic resources. We have made a point of going to the departments and showing them subject specific electronic resources.

A final comment: The data from LibQual is handled in the US, and we lost the feeling of ownership to the data and the process.

Example: Focus groups
So when the results from the questionnaires are in, and you still need more information on one special point, it can be very useful to have set discussions with a certain focus group.

One focus group that we use a lot is the seminar leaders for the first-term students. They are important for us when it comes to the content of our teaching for this group of student. So late in every spring term we have a meeting with the seminar leaders that are going to work the following fall term. We show them what we are planning to teach the new students, tell them what the last batch of students told us in their feed back to the teaching, and get suggestions and comments.

In the course for the first-term students we teach about library resources that will be of importance for their first essay-exam, and about ethical and correct use of information in academic life. One improvement that grew out of the seminar leaders' focus group was that they now, for some of the teaching, will do an exercise first, and we will explain the theory afterwards. We will ask them to evaluate some web pages in groups of two or three, and then after show them the list of criteria for evaluating web pages as sources of scholarly information. Together we will then discuss what are good and not so good criteria to use, and give examples.

In addition to improving the library's teaching, the focus group with seminar leaders also provides us with a forum for aligning our teaching and the seminar leaders teaching for the same group of students. This is important to ensure we only "double" the teaching we want to "double".

Example: Stake holders meetings
Our most loved users and patrons in a university library are of course students and academic staff. Once we have identified what group of patrons are the most important and most highly prioritized, we must try to get in touch with them to ask for their comments and suggestions regarding better quality. It is nice if those meetings can be with a representative body, or in a larger setting, and also if one can manage to have them regularly.

We started with meeting the deans and faculty administrative leadership for both the faculties. Then we invited ourselves to the Departments, at times when they had already gathered most of the scholars. As for the students, we invite the Student Union Representative to the two faculties regularly for a chat.

From these contacts we pick up some points to do with the quality. One is a suggestion that we enable scholars to have books sent between the branch libraries, also the ones that are very to each other. We are currently looking into that. Another, from the students, concern the way some students will occupy the working places with stuff even when they are at lectures.

We have good relations with our major stakeholders and are eager to listen to their suggestions for better quality in the library.

Conclusion
The usefulness of a large and differentiated tool-box for finding the views of important stakeholders and patrons can not be underestimated. Most of us, as library leaders, know very well how to deliver a good quality service, but by engaging even closer with the patrons, we may be able to gain those insights and little new ideas that lift our library services from good to great.

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