NNELS Presentation Script for Saskatchewan Library Conference 2018

Presented May 3, 2018

Presenter: Kris Jorgensen, kris@nnels.ca

This presentation today is not an introduction for how to use NNELS, but if you would like to have that introduction, you can sign up for training beginning next month. Please give me your email address before you leave and I’ll make sure we let you know when we post our next training schedule.

We’re here to talk about what public libraries are doing well. Some of these things we mention will be very concrete, and some of them will be more abstract.

But before we dive in, I want to acknowledge that the pace of change in libraries and demand for your time and attention, increases every year. This acceleration can be very stressful and it can be hard to feel like we’re “keeping up”.

The items we are listing for you today are ones we think have the potential for the greatest benefit to communities. Maximum bang for your buck, if you will.

Because of life circumstances, people with disabilities are often — not necessarily, but often — marginalized in communities and underrepresented as library users.

We all have a desire to live a rich and meaningful life, and I’m sure everyone in this room could make a strong case for public libraries being a necessary part of such a life.

...

We’re going to start with the policy environment.

In 2017, the federal government held consultations across the country to invite people to give input on what a national Accessibility Act should look like.

We expect a draft of that Act to be introduced to the house in May or June — June 20th is the last day before the House breaks for summer holidays.

Then, there will be discussion and amendments, and there will probably be something to announce on December 3rd for International Day for Persons with Disabilities.

Those who make predictions are expecting an Act to pass sometime in 2019, before the next election.

This is word on the street, not a federal press release.

This Act will affect federal services such as telecommunications, transportation, and banking, but it’s important to note that a full two-thirds of the comments received had to do with provincial programs and services.

These comments were passed to provincial and territorial governments.

Provincially speaking, people (understandably) have many concerns about affordable and accessible housing as well as affordable and accessible education.

In addition to some laws being either federal or provincial, some laws have concurrent jurisdiction.

For example, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) has a set of laws and mechanisms that provinces can adopt if they choose not to create their own.

Healthcare is also shared jurisdiction.

With Manitoba, Nova Scotia, and Ontario already having their own accessibility legislation, there is a chance that there might also be a door open for concurrent legislation in this Act or with amendments to this Act in the future.

The trend is definitely in the direction of legislation in support of accessibility.

Accessibility and disability affect everyone.

We would propose that the ball is in the air and the sooner we all start moving the less we’ll have to sprint at the end to catch it.

This is a good time to pay broad attention to library accessibility.

...

This consciousness sets the stage for everything else.

The social reality for many people with disabilities is one of low unemployment and so a reliance on public library borrowing, and expensive and difficult-to-afford reading tools, which brings us to the second item on our list: lending reading tools to readers.

Some libraries have tools such as DAISY players or MP3 players that they can lend to readers, sometimes for months at a time, or even until a borrower no longer needs the machine.

Sometimes Lions Clubs or other service organizations can help to fund such machines.

Are DAISY players new to anyone here?

(If anyone puts their hand up, do a Google image search for a DAISY player and talk about whatever you know. They generally cost about $400 and up.)

This is a concrete, active thing libraries can do: lend reading tools to people who cannot afford them.

Which brings us to the Item Number Three. Does anyone know what a PATAQ is?

A PATAQ is a “Person into Accessibility, Technology, and Answering Questions”.

This isn’t an expert in accessibility or technology but this is someone who is **mandated** to look at all library activities through a social model of disability lens.

This means taking responsibility to do your best to make the library all it can be.

So, if the library is hosting an event, planning a new website, organizing a new program, hiring new staff, writing a new policy or reviewing an existing one, renovating a building… whatever the library is doing, make sure the work goes past the PATAQ so that there is an opportunity to make improvements to the plan to maximize opportunities for participation, and remove any obvious barriers to that participation.

...

Something we hear a lot is the phrase, “Nothing about us without us” — this idea of including people in the very decisions that will affect them.

This past weekend, at the Alliance for Equality of Blind Canadians Annual General Meeting, Michael Prince, a Professor of Social Policy at the University of Victoria told a story about Carla Qualtrough, who was the Minister for Sport and Disability and is now responsible for procurement, which is all government purchasing.

Apparently Carla Qualtrough is shifting that phrase “Nothing about us, without us,” and simplifying it to “Nothing without us”. This is a bold position for this minister to take. It’s also one we recommend: look at all library activities — not just accessible formats — and think how the include or exclude people who might be marginalized.

If you’re interested in this policy world, I encourage you to read Michael Prince; his book Absent Citizen was recommended to us by a number of blind people.

One important thing a PATAQ can do is make sure the library website has information about library accessibility.

…

Putting Accessibility Info on Websites

This information can help people plan first visits to a public library and encourage those visits but offering the information needed to make travel decisions.

Website accessibility information could include:

* + Building access options;
  + Washroom size, design, and features;
  + Service delivery options (e.g. home delivery? Mail delivery?);
  + If you offer sign language at library events, or rides to and from those events;
  + The accessible reading tools you lend to borrowers;
  + The name of your library’s PATAQ for people who have questions. Always include both an email address and a phone number.

Make sure this information is labelled clearly on the website.

People with disabilities have told us that the word “Accessibility” on a library website is like a beacon.

By making this information clear, and prioritizing it by making it easy to find, you’re telling your borrowers that they’re welcome.

...

The Collingwood Public Library in Ontario has done something very interesting: one of their staff members, Jennifer Murley, undertook a library accessibility audit and invited people with disabilities from that community to participate in the audit.

Jennifer and her team analyzed the physical accessibility of the library, as well as the accessibility of communications, collections, and programs — asking questions and identifying where they could make both short-term and long-term improvements.

Best of all, Collingwood welcomes other libraries to use their audit. If you’d like a copy of their template to modify for your own library, please give me your email address at the end and we’ll be happy to share what Collingwood has so graciously shared with us.

This brings us to the next item in our list, which is that sense of welcome.

Laura Yvonne Bulk, a BC-based researcher and occupational therapist talks about the importance of a sense of “belonging”.

She describes belonging as something that is co-created — we belong with, or to, some referent group.

For people with disabilities visiting libraries, a sense of belonging is OPPOSITE to the feeling, “Maybe I shouldn’t be doing this; maybe I don’t belong here.”

She says a sense of belonging can start with the question, “There are donuts on the table, do you want one?” but that on a macro level, as a person with a disability, she says that belonging means “systems that work so we don’t have to.”

She says creativity requires a sense of belonging, and that a starting point — the piece we want to leave you with today — is being “expected”.

What does this mean?

It means that when someone comes into a library with a disability, they’re met with casual non-surprise, rather than, “Oh! You’re different! I don’t know what to do with you…”

Props to your library if this welcome extends to employing people with disabilities and making them a part of your boards and committees.

This brings us to the final point we want to make here today: you are all part of a network of libraries.

You learn the most, and do the most good in your communities if you — as library staff, board members, educators, or interested volunteers — ask for help from experts rather than directing people to experts.

That means, when you’re faced with an accessible format puzzle and how to get a book onto a specific player for a reader, we ask that you call NNELS yourself instead of asking your patron to contact NNELS. We’re here to support public libraries raising their own bars.

As nodes in a network, libraries are burning their own collections of CDs to lend to patrons. Some tiny, rural libraries are giving readers virtual bookshelves of books on USB keys, and sharing information about how to do that with each other.

Some libraries are also recording audiobooks for the NNELS collection. For great examples, download ‘The Way I Feel' or ‘Supposing…’ or ‘Me and Mr. Mah’.

Recording a book makes a great library program, and we have recording kits complete with headset microphones, that will let you record a kids’ book in your own library.

If you’re interested in more information, I’d be happy to have our Public Services Librarian send that to you — again, just leave me your email address.

And with that, I’m going to turn it over to you for questions, and I’d love to hear what you’re doing in your libraries and what you’d like to share with everyone here today.