Asset Mapping at Halifax Public Libraries: A Tool for Beginning to Discover the Library's Role with the Immigrant Community in Halifax

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Abstract

As library systems across Canada begin to grapple with the implications community-led service planning has on program and service development, new tools are being developed to assist library staff. Asset mapping is one community entry tool which allows library staff to access community members (or organizational representatives) and gather in-depth information impacting services and program identification, development, and implementation – either across a library system or within a branch catchment. By using this tool, through face-to-face conversations with service providers, library staff find out about existing community assets (such as programs and services different organizations offer) and begin to develop relationships with community members receiving services. Asset mapping provides libraries with information to identify priority services that complement existing community resources. The information collected extends beyond a directory and is used to develop and deliver services relevant to the needs of community.

This paper, based on a presentation given at the 2011 Canadian Library Association conference, discusses asset mapping as a first step to actively engaging community. As a first step in the engagement process, it specifically focuses on the process of asset mapping organizations that provide services to immigrants. Asset mapping is a powerful tool which can be implemented by librarians with any group of interest in order to understand community identified information needs, determine existing community strengths and assets, and to help understand the library's role in developing service and program responses to these needs.

Keywords

community-led service planning; community entry; public libraries; immigrant; community engagement
As the province of Nova Scotia and Halifax Regional Municipality have implemented immigration plans, staff at Halifax Public Libraries have observed an increasing number of immigrants visiting local library branches. Library staff have begun to reflect on the potential influence increased visits of immigrants to branches will have on library services. As communities throughout the municipality become more ethnically diverse, it is important to discover immigrants' information needs and determine how best to respond to their use, and non-use, of library services.

This paper discusses asset mapping as a first step to actively engaging community. As a first step in the engagement process, it specifically focuses on the process of asset mapping organizations that provide services to immigrants. Asset mapping is a powerful tool which can be implemented by librarians with any group of interest in order to understand community identified information needs, determine existing community strengths and assets, and to help understand the library's role in developing service and program responses to these needs.

**Asset Mapping**

When entering a community it is easy to approach people and ask about their 'needs.' There are a number of drawbacks to using this approach, including wasting energy on identifying deficiencies, creating fragmented responses to needs, creating a sense of dependency – where people are viewed as consumers of services, and fostering a reliance upon outside agencies to respond to needs. Instead, asset mapping provides a mechanism which closely aligns with the 'strengths-based perspective' (Berkowitz and Wadud, 2011) and appreciative inquiry. By shifting the focus from community needs to identifying and utilizing existing community assets, the identified skills, abilities, talents and strengths (Central Coast Community Congress Working Party, 2003) can lead to community based mobilization, empowerment and sustainability.

While solely focusing on assets may sound good in theory, its application may be slightly different due to the realities of life many individuals face. These realities are primarily focused on immediate needs rather than assets. This is because individual life circumstance, social factors and the multi-dimensional causes of exclusion compound the difficulties that people experience daily. Need is often the central focus of individuals who are trying to live life from day to day; however, during asset mapping the content of conversations is rarely, if ever, solely dichotomous – meaning people talk only about assets or only about needs. In order to mitigate needs from creeping into the asset mapping process, questions and probes should be phrased to focus on assets.

Classic approaches to asset mapping have advocated engaging community at various levels, such as primary actors (individuals and informal community groups) or secondary actors (formal organizations or institutions) (Homan, 2009; McKnight and Kretzmann, 1993; Berkowitz and Wadud 2003). There are inherent benefits and limitations to engaging community at each of these different levels (Mayer, 2005). While individuals provide the real life context and lived experiences of people in a
community, there is a danger that the views of specific individuals may be taken as representative of a community. Informal community groups are the foundation of ethnic and cultural community; however, they may have little capacity, and in certain circumstances, they are so numerous that it can be difficult to identify which ones to approach. Finally, formal organizations may have broad mandates to serve a wide range of users from a community; however, they may also be viewed as speaking on behalf of a community but from the context of their organizational mandate. Ultimately, those implementing an asset mapping process must judge the best approach to implement within their organizational and community contexts (Central Coast Community Congress Working Party, 2003).

While there are numerous asset mapping articles that provide examples of implementation in different professions and other helpful hints and approaches (Dedrick et al., 1997; Guy, Fuller, and Pletsch, 2002; Schlossberg, 1998), the documented use of asset mapping by library systems has been quite limited (Cuban, 2007; Mc Leod, 2006; Working Together, 2008). Yet asset mapping can be a valuable tool for libraries – in part because it provides a mechanism whereby library staff can shift their role outside the library branch:

- **From** generators of internally-based library services and providers of information out to communities (*commonly referred to as outreach*)

- **To** recipients and explorers of existing community assets.

Asset-based approaches are context-specific to local communities and seek to build relationships between individuals, organizations and institutions (McKnight and Kretzmann, 1993). This makes asset mapping appropriate for use within library systems that are planning services using a community-led service planning process (Working Together, 2008). Asset mapping can help shift service planning from a primarily internal activity to one that includes and involves community members throughout the entire service planning process.

**Immigrants as Experts on Their Own Needs**

As a participant in the Working Together project (2004-2008), Halifax Public Libraries was involved in the development of the community-led service model. This service planning process involves the community in the identification, development, delivery and evaluation of programs and services (Williment, 2009; Working Together, 2008). By taking this approach, library staff acknowledge that community members are the experts at identifying their own needs. While library staff may enter a community with their own preconceived notions of community need, only after directly talking with the community will they discover a community's specific strengths and needs.

As library staff thought about potential changes to programs and services, we recognized that it could be very tempting to begin developing services based upon staff's perceptions of community need. However, in order to develop our immigrant service plan, we needed to ask ourselves the following questions:
• How do we know the needs of immigrant communities?
• How are we engaging immigrants?
• What types of relationships do we currently have with immigrants, and will those relationships ensure that library programs and services are both relevant and sustainable?

Answers to these questions are either based upon internal interactions with existing library users or library staff's perceptions. By actively talking with community members, library staff can modify their role from disseminators of information about library services, to facilitators and co-creators developing and linking library programs and services to actual community needs. Asset mapping allowed the library to move from developing programs and services internally and marketing them to the community – an outreach approach to library work (Working Together, 2008) – to discovering what the immigrant community wanted from the library.

As a first step in addressing these questions, we decided to talk to one group of experts, immigrant service providers, while also understanding that the second step in community-based needs identification would be based on relationships with individual immigrant community members\(^1\). We asked immigrant service providers about the programs and services they provide, their strengths and assets, their needs, and the role they envisioned the library playing within the immigrant community\(^2\). Additionally, we soon discovered that many of the service providers were themselves immigrants.

**Why Should a Library System Asset Map?**

A common approach to determining community need is to ask community members to identify what is wrong or what needs to be improved within the community. This approach is limited and often leads to the development of a long list of issues with few ideas generated for improvements. Asset mapping is the reverse; the information collected enables library staff to better understand the immigrant community's strengths and assets which can be built upon.

As a tool, asset mapping alters the focus of conversations library staff have with community members and organizations. Through outreach, library staff provide information about existing or proposed library related activities to the community. During the asset mapping process the library is not the central focus for the first meeting

\(^1\) As a second step in the relationship building process (moving beyond asset mapping and the scope of this paper), we have found that most service providers are willing to provide library staff direct access to immigrants connected to their organizations. These interactions and engagement opportunities will allow individual immigrant voices and needs to be heard by library staff.

\(^2\) For the purpose of this paper, service providers are the primary group which was asset mapped. Asset mapping can extend beyond organizations and can include individuals and other community-based resources. In addition, it extends beyond a review of 'tangible' assets, such as physical assets like buildings, and includes information about the social conditions, strengths, and needs of a particular group while also discovering program and service responses which have been created by small formal or informal organizations and community groups.
with a service provider. Instead, the information sharing changes; library staff go into the community to *ask questions, listen and learn from* members of the community. By doing this, people in the community are acknowledged as the experts on their own assets and information needs (Williment, 2010). This is a different and at times difficult approach, since it shifts the role of library staff from experts in information to experts in library services while acknowledging community members as experts of their own information needs.

This is a tool which allows library staff to enter a community, possibly for the first time, and begin building external relationships. It is a first step in the relationship building process. Over time, and as relationships develop, service providers may allow library staff direct access to the people for whom they provide services. The development of ongoing and sustained relationships is central to working effectively in a community.

**Why Does Halifax Public Libraries Asset Map?**

By knowing existing community-based strengths and resources, Halifax Public Libraries is in a better position to understand and capitalize on potential partnerships or to adjust resources to better meet community identified needs. This process provides the library with the opportunity to shift service planning:

**From** a primarily internal process where library staff create and deliver library programs based upon their perceptions of community needs. This internally-focused process can lead to programs and services which are under-utilized by the specific community for whom they were developed.

**To** a process in which the community identifies their own service needs and assets, and relationships develop between the community and the library which can lead to active community participation in library service development, delivery and evaluation (Williment, 2009; Working Together, 2008). By involving the community throughout the entire service planning process, services become more relevant, known and utilized by the targeted community.

At Halifax Public Libraries, asset mapping is viewed as a community entry tool, providing library staff with a means to access and gather in-depth information about other organizations. The primary purpose of asset mapping is to provide the library system with community-based information and feedback, which can then be used for internal library service review, development and prioritization.

Asset mapping is one part of one phase of a multi-phased service plan\(^3\). As part of this larger planning process, informal structures and individuals in the community have been involved in the planning process. Asset mapping provided one avenue, through

\(^3\) Since asset mapping is one part of a multi-phased plan, there are a number of direct impacts and outcomes which are occurring as a result of the overall service plan. Since this paper is reviewing the asset mapping process to make the approach available to library systems, we believe there is the potential for these larger outcomes and impacts (both systemic and on immigrant community members) to be reviewed in future publications.
formalized service providers, for gaining access to these individuals and informal structures.

**How Did Halifax Public Libraries Asset Map the Immigrant Community?**

By reviewing pre-existing directories, lists and current relationships with external organizations, Halifax Public Libraries was able to narrow down the number of immigrant organizations to map\(^4\). While small cultural organizations and societies could have been contacted, they were so numerous that we did not know with which specific community to begin building relationships. We discovered immigrant service providers were an essential community entry point; one organization alone provides services to approximately 25% of immigrants who annually enter the Halifax Regional Municipality. Therefore we started by contacting organizations that provided direct services to a broad range of immigrants. This allowed us to stay away from narrowing the definition of 'immigrant community' to a specific immigrant group based on its nationality, race, class or religious identity.

By approaching service providers, asset mapping became a tool for library staff to use to start building relationships with people who have direct and constant contact with immigrants in the local community. The intent of asset mapping is to get a broad understanding of immigrant service providers’ perceptions of community needs. The library acknowledges that building relationships with service providers is a *first step* towards building relationships directly with immigrants.

We found that it was important to determine the questions to ask before entering the community (see Appendix A). These questions can then be tailored to meet the individual characteristics of a community. For instance, when we first started talking with immigrant service providers, we discovered immigrant seniors were isolated; thus, it became important to ask questions about programs, services and connections with senior immigrants in the community.

This tool provided an opportunity to start informal and meaningful conversations with people who provide services to immigrants. By meeting with service providers face-to-face, library staff were able to experience what it is like to enter the location and begin developing stronger sustained relationships with service providers. Additionally, we found the process worked better when we changed our approach from asking service providers a list of questions – to *having a conversation*. Of course, it was important to refer to the questions at the end of the conversation to ensure all the points were covered.

\(^4\) It is both impossible and impractical to asset map an entire community. The asset mapping process needs to be 1) specific to the asset within each community and 2) targeted in both the questions asked and the individuals or organizations approached. Thus, it moves well beyond directory-based information.
What Were the Advantages of Asset Mapping the Immigrant Community in Halifax?

As indicated by McLeod (2006), asset mapping provides a number of benefits to libraries. Before entering the community, library staff could only speculate about the specific information needs of immigrants. We reviewed external literature and investigated programs and services developed by other public library systems to meet the literacy, English Language Learning and integration needs of immigrants in other communities (Cuban, 2007, Picco, 2008), but the literature did not fit the real life experiences or the context of immigrants living in Halifax.

By directly contacting immigrant service providers in Halifax, we learned about the local immigrant community's assets, needs and the context of their lives. For example, asset mapping allowed library staff to learn about:

- New contacts in the community. We met with people that we probably would not have met or contacted. We met with a total of fourteen different immigrant service providers, most of whom we had never previously met in person.

- Programs and services already available to immigrants. The data collected about the organizations are updated as we learn more about these organizations and the role the library can play in meeting the information needs of community members.

- Current use, perceptions, perceived roles and potential partnerships with the library (e.g., the need for translated communication materials, staff training, a desire for employment and volunteer opportunities and the need for social gathering spaces for integration activities).

- The lives of immigrants\(^5\) – their needs, their values and their challenges. Many immigrants do not use the library. From those who do, we discovered that their perceptions of what library services entail are perceptions they bring from their home countries. Knowing this helps to ensure that we discover and communicate how the library can be relevant to them and their lives.

- How asset mapping leads to empowering both library staff and the community. The more the library staff know about the community, the more comfortable they are working in it. The more established the relationship with a service provider becomes, the more likely it is that the library will be involved in community based discussions.

- The importance of becoming part of a network of connections within the immigrant community. Many of these new relationships are now well-developed and ongoing, and the Library is communicating regularly with service providers and immigrants.

\(^5\) This point needs to be qualified since much of this information was obtained from focus groups with individual immigrants. A local immigrant service provider who was asset mapped gave us direct access to these individuals.
These lessons and relationships could only have occurred by stepping outside the Library and actively talking with community members to discover their lived realities and information needs.

In addition, since we were accustomed to providing information about the Library to community members, we found asset mapping to be a humbling experience. It was also a bit humbling because we became aware of how our preconceptions of community assets and needs did not align with what we heard from the community, and we quickly recognized the importance of community involvement before developing programs and services. By having a conversation with service providers about their perceptions of community members' needs, it allowed us to discover a potential linkage between the library and other organizations, including:

- The assets of organizations providing services to a particular group,
- Potential partnerships, and
- The public's perception of the potential role the library can play in the community.

It was also a bit humbling because we became aware of how important it is to include the target community before developing programs and services. By reflecting on library staff perceptions before the process began, and the impact of what we heard from the community, we came to understand how essential it is to undertake an asset mapping process when creating a service plan.

**Impacts of Asset Mapping the Immigrant Community at Halifax Public Libraries**

There were a number of impacts and outcomes throughout this process. Stepping out of the library and into the community to ask questions, with the intent of learning about that community through asset mapping, provided a learning opportunity for staff. *Each time* we met with an immigrant service provider we learned something new that could potentially impact Library service development. Asset mapping provided a tool to:

- Build staff and organizational capacity,
- Provide Library staff with a new approach to their work (to the point that they are finding their work revitalized), and
- Receive feedback from the community that both validates and challenges current programs and services while also having input into creating future services which are more relevant and better serve immigrants' needs.

When collecting information about organizations and considering how this information would impact library services, it was important to consider how the information could be shared within Halifax Public Libraries. In response, Halifax Public Libraries is currently developing an internal asset mapping database. This database will allow information sharing between branches and service areas. For instance, if a branch manager meets with a service provider from a local long term care facility, members of the Halifax Public
Libraries Regional Services to Older Adults team can access the information collected to determine if other partnership opportunities exist.

**Helpful Hints**

As Halifax Public Libraries has discovered over the past five years, there are several issues to address before starting an asset mapping process, including:

- Ensuring that staff involved in an asset mapping process understand the purpose of asset mapping. This will ensure staff buy-in and help to clarify procedural applications of the tool. It is important to develop training materials and to review asset mapping from a community development perspective (Working Together, 2008). The development of procedures will ensure that the approach is consistently applied by library staff. In addition, it is important that job descriptions allow staff to go out of the branch to collect information.

- Clarifying whether asset mapping is the right tool for what you are trying to accomplish. Do you want to discover existing community assets, resources and needs and are you willing to align what you hear with library-based programs and services? If a library system is not willing to adjust services based on community feedback, asset mapping can set false expectations for the community.

- Determining how the information will be collected, stored, shared and analysed.

These are just a few of the issues which should be considered before beginning a similar process within any library system. By addressing these issues at the beginning of the process, implementation and follow-through are more likely to succeed.

**Conclusion**

Asset mapping is one of the first steps in a multi-phased service planning process used by Halifax Public Libraries when implementing community-led service plans. By acknowledging that the community is the expert on its own information needs, and initiating a process whereby library staff become aware of the community's assets and needs, Halifax Public Libraries is better positioned to create programs and services collaboratively with members of the immigrant community.

Halifax Public Libraries now has a better understanding of the immigrant community's perceptions of library services, its current use of the library and possible future directions for library service development. In addition to the information collected, the process provided an opportunity for relationships to be developed with service providers beyond the initial face-to-face interactions.

This is one example of the implementation of a tool which provides access to a targeted community. The approach can be expanded and used with various communities which currently use library services or are underserved. It can also be used by library service areas or by branches.
This information collecting and relationship building tool is just the first step towards working with community members. Asset mapping can help shift service planning from a primarily internal process to the inclusion of community members throughout the entire service planning process. By discovering and acknowledging community strengths, the Library will be better positioned to collaboratively develop programs and services which meet community identified needs. Only by engaging immigrant service providers who can begin identifying community needs and provide library staff with direct access to immigrant community members who can also identify their specific needs, will libraries ensure that inclusive public library services are created which meet the needs of our communities. This will be a large step forward towards creating truly inclusive public libraries.

Works Cited


<www.accessola2.com/superconference2006/thurs/419/mapping.doc>


<http://journal.lib.uoguelph.ca/index.php/perj/article/viewFile/545/1477>

Appendix A – Basic Asset Mapping Form

Date:

Organization Name:

Address:

Founding Date:

Organization History:

Hours of Operation:

Contact Person:

Phone:

Fax #:

E-mail / Web page:

Organization Purpose:

Programs and Services:

Types of Users:

Do they serve a target group of older adults (Seniors) and how are they serving this group:

Number of Users:

Staff [Number of Positions]:

In Library Use Only

Challenges:

Funding:

Current Use of the Library:

Perceptions of the Library:

What could the library be doing for your organization or clients?:

Potential Partnerships:

Is the asset information available for organizations asset mapped to use? ☑ Yes ☐ No

○ If no, clarify information not available _____________________________

Notes:

Impact on Branches / Impact on services