

The library school: empowering the sustainable innovation capacity of new librarians

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THE LIBRARY SCHOOL: EMPOWERING THE SUSTAINABLE INNOVATION CAPACITY OF NEW LIBRARIANS.

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Abstract:

Technological and societal changes structurally affect the main roles of public libraries. Addressing the changing context and defining the future roles of the public library requires specific capabilities of new librarians. Aside from specific library competences, the capability to lead strategic innovation towards the new functions of the public library is crucial. These observations led the Netherlands public library association (VOB) to start the LibrarySchool initiative.

The LibrarySchool is an innovative academic education programme that is not intended as an initial study programme, but as an authentic continuous professional learning programme for public library professionals. The paper outlines how the LibrarySchool – powered by the Open University in The Netherlands – envisages to train its students to become competent innovators not only for their own organization but for the whole public library sector. The LibrarySchool has adopted an innovative learning approach which combines workplace learning, networked learning and distance learning with intensive inspirational face-to-face sessions. The curriculum is built around four main themes that deal with the current challenges for public libraries: changes in (1) society, (2) culture, (3) organisation and (4) professional learning in the digital era. Each theme is integrated into the main learning stream of collectively developing new librarianship.

Keywords: public librarian, Library School, library professionals, networked learning, sustainable innovation, professional knowledge, workplace learning.

Introduction

We start this paper by sketching how in recent years the changing societal, cultural and technological context in which public libraries operate has led to new insights about the role and place of the public library in the Netherlands. The public library needs to create context and meaning as added value, instead of just acquiring, structuring and ordering information (materials) and making them available to the public. In the second paragraph we address how these insights into the new societal role of the library led to a radically new perspective on the role of the public librarian. The librarian needs to become a pro-active (co-)creator of

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meaning, instead of a reactive guide or gateway to information. The third paragraph explains how this in turn has led to an awareness that a radical shift was needed in the education and continuous professionalization of modern librarians, who need to be equipped with the knowledge, skills and attitude to cope with continuous change and innovation.

The fourth paragraph describes the co-creative process of designing and developing the LibrarySchool, followed by the current outline of the school, with a focus on the pioneering learning approach to be used in the LibrarySchool and the current contours of the curriculum. Finally, we present some preliminary conclusions and future directions.

Disruptive changes for public libraries in the “age of innovation”

Public libraries today operate in a drastically new context^{1,2}. Knowledge intensity, a rapid pace of technological innovation and global economic dynamics characterize today’s (industrialized) societies. Due to technological shifts the dominant role of books as sources of information and knowledge is eroding, and the exchange and communication of knowledge via a variety of multimedia formats - including e-books - is emerging. This digital revolution has an immense impact on the public library as a place of knowledge centred around a collection of books and information materials. Library users’ behaviour is changing, the diversity in society is increasing and trends are emerging in rapid succession. The entire context in which public libraries operate is changing dramatically. Constant renewal and re-invention has become part of the DNA of the current digital era. Radical changes across all aspects of life occur in what Prahalad & Krishnan³ have coined the “age of innovation”.

In that light, questions are being raised as to the current and future purpose of public libraries in the information age. In response to these questions it has been argued that public libraries indeed do have a purpose in the digital age⁴, but that they will have to drastically reconsider their role as a public service and respond adequately to new questions and needs arising in society. Stakeholders argue that public libraries should not reactively develop strategies for the *probable future*, but should pro-actively take an innovative perspective, starting from a *chosen future*⁵. It is argued that the new role of the public library is to seek to enlist the economic, cultural and social participation of citizens in this digital society.

To participate in the public space of the 21st century society one needs to be an informed individual, continuously acquiring news skills, and so on^{6,7,8,9}. However, the new task of the public library is not limited to assisting society in acquiring the necessary “digital literacy” skills, but also to create context and meaning for and with its users in a society that

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offers an abundance of information and knowledge^{1,5}. It is argued that a paradigm shift is needed in the public library sector. The public library needs to become much more than a place that acquires stores, structures and orders information (materials) and then makes them accessible to the public. The library's original function as information broker and transaction place of books shifts and public libraries increasingly become "creative community hubs", social interaction spaces and, places of participation, of co-creation and learning. The public library will need to constantly be on the look-out for societal changes and requirements and then reinvent itself to fit those requirements in close partnerships with other public and cultural institutions¹.

The public librarian in the "age of innovation": new job profile, new competences

The fundamental shift in the position and role of the public library in society brings with it a paradigm shift in the job profile of the people working in public libraries. In the pre-digital age, the tasks of a (public) librarian were fairly well-defined and – on the whole – rather static. The need for updating skills and knowledge was rather limited, because the main functions within a library were also rather static. Public libraries were often organised according to an industrial paradigm with clear separation of tasks in a logistical chain of processes, often reducing the librarian's job to a series of technical actions. Traditionally, five main tasks were part of a librarian's job profile: (1) making information available, (2) keeping the materials collection up-to-date, (3) arranging and storing information, (4) assisting users in finding information, and (5) exchanging information with other libraries. All these tasks were situated in a context of relatively high stability, centred on the main task: making an up-to-date collection of information materials (in a physical form) available to the public.

In the digital age, the very core of the librarian's work is changing, due to the exploding amount¹⁰ of information available in digital form on the Internet and the increasing sophistication of search engines and recommendation systems. The new job profile of the public librarian looks rather different than it did 20 years ago. The new librarian is (a) an expert in using sophisticated online search engines, but is also (b) able to make new linkages, is (c) critical about the quality of information (sources), and enters into (d) innovative relationships with the public in search of new meanings that fit with the public's needs^{1,11}.

In the course of two decades the job description of a public librarian has moved from information technician to knowledge worker with a focus on innovative co-creation of meaning. The new public librarian operates

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on the crossroads of society, culture and technology within a public library in close collaboration with an increasingly complex network of peers, stakeholders and partners. Within the force field of culture, society and technology, this new librarian is constantly on the lookout for the added value and excellence the library can offer, always acting on the basis of the core values and identity of public library work.

As a consequence of the digital age, integration of new knowledge, use of new technology and collaborative creativity are crucial tasks for librarians who are “re-inventing” the public library. Learning, creativity and knowledge sharing are crucial competences for knowledge workers in general, but even more so for public librarians. With the pervasion of technology in the fabric of everyday life and work in combination with ever-increasing complexity, professional work becomes extremely knowledge intensive and technology dependent. In order to achieve inventive problem solving and the development of new concepts, products and services, professionals need to work together^{12,13}.

The new librarian combines a collaborative attitude, social awareness, creativity and cultural knowledge with management skills, knowledge of digital developments and the ability to enter into alliances. The librarian of the future is able to innovate the discipline based on content. Not single-handedly, but together with colleagues, other libraries and social partners. This requires talent as well as a large measure of professionalism and expertise. In summary, the modern public library needs empowered library professionals with the competences to deal with their current and future roles as library knowledge workers and inventors¹⁴.

Educating and professionalising the 21st century public librarian: new approaches needed

In the pre-digital age, the initial education of librarians involved teaching them all the technical knowledge and skills of an information technician (such as correctly cataloguing and referencing books and materials) as well as the people skills needed to professionally deal with the public. Post-initial professionalization involved updating these core skills, and would typically consist of training sessions about new cataloguing guidelines, new computer systems, or a refresher course in dealing with the public or answering the phone.

The shift in the job of a public librarian calls for new learning approaches, both in initial education and in continuous professional learning. Initial education in schools, colleges and universities offers a starting qualification but is no longer enough for the altering demands of

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professional practice. To collectively deliver the performance expected of them, knowledge workers continuously need to update their knowledge and skills. To prevent “trying to do today’s job with yesterday’s tools and yesterday’s concepts” (McLuhan) and cope with the changing requirements of their work, professionals constantly have to update their knowledge and skills^{9,15}. As a result not only the capability to update skills is crucial, but also the capacity to create new solutions, to think outside the box.

The job description in the previous section contains quite a list of requirements and competences, and it can be argued that no single initial education can deliver individuals who meet all these requirements. Any initial higher education curriculum will only be a starting point that partially covers the knowledge, skills and competences needed. As with all professions, one can only truly become a skilled public librarian after having worked in a public library for a number of years. The importance of authentic continuous professional learning in the workplace should therefore not be underestimated. Surprisingly, only very little is known about actual continuous professional learning practices¹⁶.

One might even argue that the initial educational degree of new recruits is only of secondary importance, as long as they have acquired some of the crucial competences required of a public librarian, most importantly a positive attitude towards continuous learning and collaboration. In fact, in recent years the Dutch libraries have witnessed an influx of professionals with heterogeneous backgrounds from outside the traditional library-related curricula. From an innovation perspective, this diversity of backgrounds, approaches, knowledge and skills has great potential, as it increases creativity and new perspectives.

Work-based professional learning serves two distinct purposes: initially, the main purpose of on-the-job training is to impart the identity and core values of public library work to novices (induction); in time continuous professional learning often leads to increased specialisation. The growing complexity and dynamics of the public library’s societal, cultural and technological context calls for increased specialisation of library professionals. Increased specialisation in turn calls for increased collaborative work and collaborative learning across disciplines, organisations and sectors. The importance of collaboration in professional learning is another aspect that cannot be underestimated, as illustrated by the emergence of professional learning networks for librarians such as <http://www.library20.org/> or <http://bibliotheek20.ning.com/> The Library-School’s learning approach takes all these characteristics into account.

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Co-creative design of the Library School.

The concept of a LibrarySchool aimed at empowerment of these new librarians emerged in the course of 2008-2009. The aim to achieve a breakthrough in librarian professionalization is one thing. The realization of academic competence building of public library professionals while working in practice is yet another. As argued above, it was clear from the beginning that all “students” are working library professionals who take questions and projects from their working life as starting points for learning and research in the LibrarySchool.

Once the initial concept of the new LibrarySchool met with the approval of the various stakeholders in the public library sector, the question emerged how to translate these ambitions and objectives into a concrete learning design, into a virtual learning environment for distributed learning across space and time, etcetera. Because of these questions the VOB contacted the Open University’s Centre for Learning, Sciences and Technology (CELSTEC) at an early stage in the design and development of the LibrarySchool to collaborate with their educational researchers and advanced learning technologies experts. From the start it was also clear that designing the LibrarySchool was not solely the business of experts: librarians, domain experts, and educationalists. From the very beginning it was deemed crucial to involve future LibrarySchool students and find out what will make their learning “tick”. This principle of collaborative design or co-creativity^{13,17} was felt to be of extreme importance.

For the design of the LibrarySchool twelve quartermasters (front-runners) were selected. They were asked to collaboratively explore the “Why, what, and how” aspects of learning in the LibrarySchool together with the experts and stakeholders during the period from September 2009 until September 2010. This group of twelve frontrunners consisted of two male and ten female public library professionals with ages ranging between 22 and 52. Some worked at a public library, others at regional public library service organizations. Some were consultant, others operational managers and yet others specialist in new media use for youngsters. The frontrunners took part in idea generation on themes like the prime objectives of the Library School, requirements to integrate strategic learning activities with operational work in the library, etc. They had very different study backgrounds varying from “traditional” library education, to studies in arts, humanities, private business and management. The confrontation of their perspectives with those of renowned library and learning design experts led to a new approach to individual and organizational learning.

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The involvement of the frontrunners started with an intensive walking/working week in Italy – the so-called Cammino – which aimed at community and trust building, brainstorming and idea generation. After this week, experts and frontrunners met regularly for two-day sessions to continue work on designing the LibrarySchool design work, discuss on propositions together with designers, experts and stakeholders from the library community.

To keep in touch and enable continuous work on ideas a prototypical version of the hybrid professional networked learning environment¹⁸ was launched – cf. Figure 1. It was meant for virtual collaboration of all those involved in between the face-to-face meetings. At the same time, it functioned as a prototype for the networked learning environment of the actual LibrarySchool.

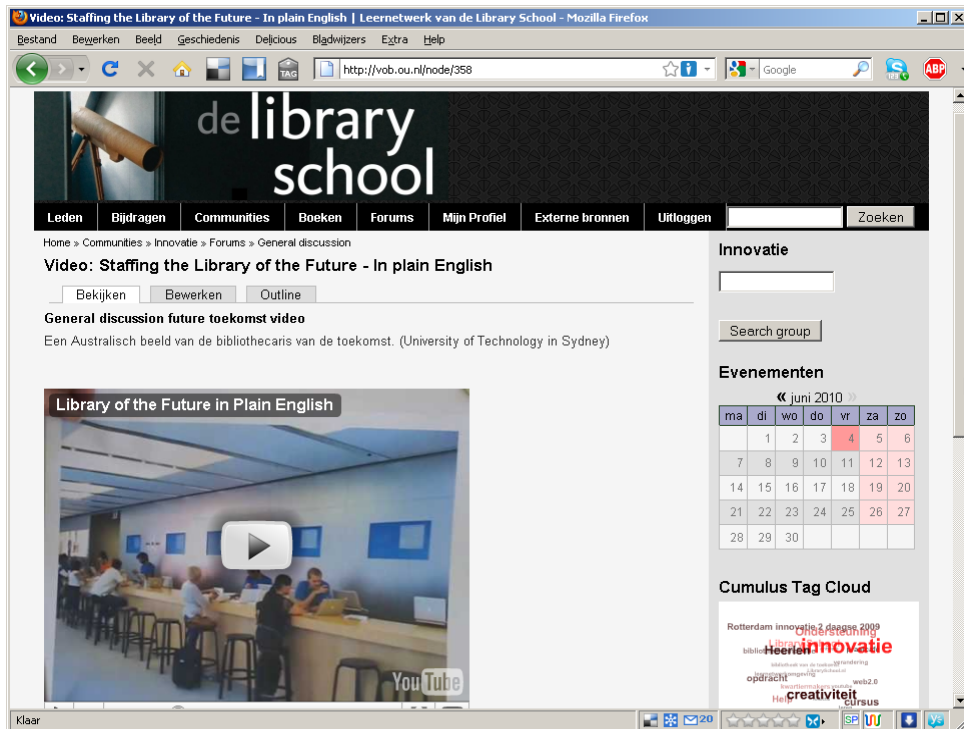


Figure 1: Screenshot of the prototype learning network environment of the LibrarySchool

Current outline of the LibrarySchool

The LibrarySchool is intended for library professionals who have completed higher professional or university education and who (are

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expected to) play an innovative or managerial role in a public library in due time. A wide range of preliminary educational programmes qualify. The LibrarySchool appreciates the variety in student backgrounds, because due to their different knowledge and source of inspiration students approach issues from different perspectives, which triggers learning and creativity.

In 2010, the “Stichting LibrarySchool” was founded as a non-for-profit organisation by a number of partners of the Netherlands public library association (VOB), several regional library support centres and some of the larger Dutch public libraries. In partnership with the Open University of The Netherlands and more specifically with its Centre for Learning Sciences and Technologies (CELSTEC), the LibrarySchool offers dedicated (academic-level) authentic continuous professional learning for public librarians.

The School offers a number of part-time study programmes, ranging from a series of master classes over a one-year induction programme up to an MBA or academic masters degree. During the programme, the students combine study with work in the sense that they are expected to develop or implement an innovation project in their own library during the course of their study. Entry conditions for the school include the explicit support of students’ management, and access to / support from two or three study buddies within their organisation. This should allow for authentic continuous professional learning¹⁶.

The curriculum (described in more detail below) is centred around intensive one-year programmes of part-time study, during which students are expected to spend on average two days a week on their learning activities. The School’s objective is to enroll approximately 30 to 40 highly motivated students per year in the so-called induction year. About 25-30% of these students are expected to move on to the specialisation year (year 2), and the mastery year (year 3). At the end of three years, the students will have fulfilled between 70%-100% of the academic requirements for obtaining their intended degree, depending on their starting qualifications.

The LibrarySchool degrees are customised equivalents of accredited master-level degrees offered by the Open University. The students will be able to work towards four different degrees, depending on their previous qualifications and the focus and scope of their study. An MBA-degree – with a practical organisational focus – is available for students with a previous higher education degree (professional or academic). The other three degrees require an academic bachelor degree as entry level. The options for academic master degrees are: MSc in management, an MA in

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general culture or an MSc in education. The resulting degree will be determined by the student's previous qualification, and the focus of his thesis.

Next to the intensive curriculum, the LibrarySchool will organise shorter professionalization activities, such as a series of masterclasses, excursions, or specialised workshops, but the LibrarySchool will also participate in (online) discussions, workshops, colloquia or conferences about the future of the public library, innovation, and all the other topics that are dealt with by the students and staff.

A final major component of the LibrarySchool activities is research, organised as a virtual research department with faculty members from different institutions. The LibrarySchool research will focus on (1) each of the main themes (library & society, library & culture, organising for change, professional learning in the digital era), and (2) the interdisciplinary focus needed to obtain sustainable innovation (collective development towards "new" librarianship).

Pioneering learning approach of the LibrarySchool

The LibrarySchool learning approach blends learning, working and innovating. In order to establish an immediate link with library practice, students are expected to contribute to innovative projects in their own organisation. The experiences from these projects will be shared, evaluated, reflected upon and shared. Thus the School envisages to contribute concurrently to (a) professionalization of the individual, (b) enhancement of the innovative capacity of the student's organisation and (c) of the sector as a whole.

The students' learning is not only intertwined with their daily work and innovative project, but also takes place in the social context of (a) their immediate work environment, (b) the LibrarySchool learning community, (c) the wider communities of librarians, but also (d) the whole of today's web 2.0 context^{19,20,21}. In these social communities, students, colleagues and peers share knowledge and gain new insights to take library innovation forward. External knowledge from these social professional communities is brought into the LibrarySchool through social bookmarking and content sharing, but the insights and learning results from within the LibrarySchool are also shared with the outside world through an active participation in existing online social communities²¹.

The learning mode in the library school is a blend of face-to-face meetings, online activities and individual distance learning using

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textbooks and other learning sources. The face-to-face sessions are two-monthly intensive LibrarySchool weeks, consisting of plenary presentation and discussion sessions, small group discussions and brainstorming sessions, individual and group reflections. The LibrarySchool weeks act as the anchor points in the programme, because they are the starting and ending points of the themes, they are used to round up the previous theme and reflect on it, and then introduce the next theme. The LibrarySchool weeks are also the social meeting points for all members and stakeholders in the school. The first half of each week is dedicated to the first-year students, the second half to the 'senior' students, and the two groups jointly attend the masterclasses in the middle of each week. These masterclasses are open to colleagues and other stakeholders, which makes them into a two-monthly podium or platform for the LibrarySchool.

In between the face-to-face weeks, students are working on their study tasks by individually studying learning materials, doing formative tests or working on their assignments. They use the networked learning platform or their personal learning environments to share their insights and reflections with their study buddies, but also organise or attend (virtual) study groups or attend virtual classroom or coaching sessions with the LibrarySchool faculty. Towards the end of a two-month period, they submit their assignments and get online feedback, both from their peers, work colleagues and tutors and faculty. Students are finally expected to actively engage in discussions, presentations and workshops in their library and to apply some of the new knowledge to their local innovation project. This prevents the situation where the learning remains limited to a single individual or a group of motivated students within the school.

The Library School curriculum.

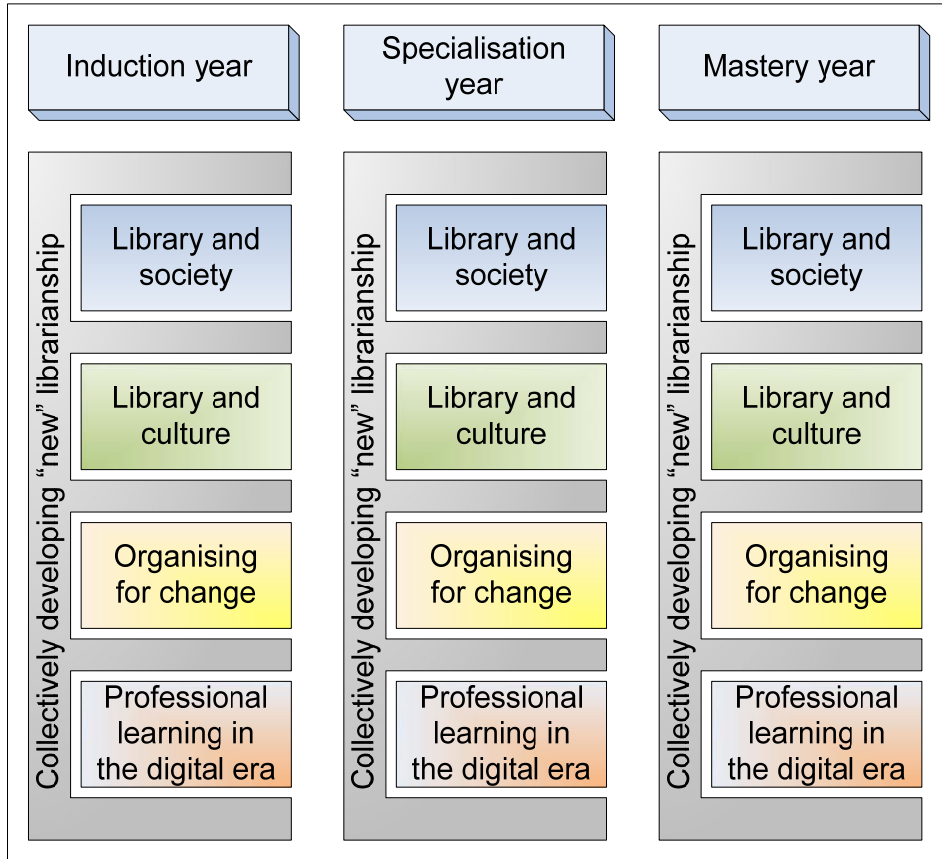


Figure 2: Diagram illustrating the structure of the LibrarySchool Curriculum.

The LibrarySchool curriculum – illustrated in Figure 2 – strikes a subtle balance between authentic continuous professional learning and a formal academic curriculum. The design team, in close collaboration with the group of frontrunners have designed a curriculum with a rhythm and pace of three consecutive years, in which the different topics are dealt with in increasing degree of complexity. Each year is an entity in itself and has a similar structure consisting of the main learning stream and the four themes that need to be dealt with in order to equip and empower the “new” librarian. The induction year offers learning at academic bachelor level, and is intended to set the stage, as it were. Years 2 and 3 are at academic masters’ level and are intended for those participants that want to specialise and pursue a degree in the LibrarySchool. It is expected that about 25%-30% of the participants will want to pursue a degree. Depending on the previous qualification of the participants, they may need to study an additional year to finish their MBA or Master’s degree.

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The main learning stream - illustrated in Figure 2 by the vertical structure in each year – deals with collectively developing “new” librarianship. This learning stream focuses on the collective learning process of the LibrarySchool student group within and together with their environment, through individual and collective reflection on the actual themes and topics. It addresses the crucial interdisciplinarity of the modern library professional, but also the potential and actual application of the learning results in the working situation. The stream is centred around 2-monthly face-to-face meetings and masterclasses, in which a wider audience is ‘drawn in’ to the learning process. The main learning stream provides the anchor points that connect the main themes together.

Each theme – illustrated by the rectangular blocks in Figure 2 – is dealt with during a two-month period, and centres around individual and group study tasks that connect the study materials of an accredited distance learning course with the student’s own working experience and current project. Those study tasks are individually assessed, but also fed back to the whole group during the face-to-face learning stream sessions, and presented during masterclasses. The following four themes have been identified as crucial for the librarian of the future.

The “Library and society” theme deals with the public role of the library and its historic, current and future function within society. Public libraries have traditionally played an emancipatory role, enlisting the economic, cultural, social and intellectual participation of citizens in society, and this theme deals with this type of fundamental issues.

The “Library and culture” theme covers the role of the public library as a cultural institution within a radically changing cultural context. This theme deals with such topics as the trends in cultural expression, the role of culture in the digital society, and the changing nature of collection building within public libraries.

“Organising for change” deals with the organisational, managerial and psycho-social aspects of operating in a highly dynamic organisational environment. Topics covered include strategic innovation, organisational management of change, creativity and collaboration; but also aspects of inter-organisational and sustainable innovation.

The theme “professional learning in the digital era” deals with issues of individual and organisational learning in a digitally networked society. Topics covered include knowledge creation and sharing in a technology-rich society, community-based creation of meaning, methods for collaborative creativity, and network-supported trend spotting.

A final aspect of the curriculum is that the LibrarySchool will each year appoint a curator to address a topical theme, a red thread for the duration of that year. The curator will select invited speakers for the two-

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monthly master classes, and confront them with his or her own perspective on the main challenges facing the public library sector. The curator and invited speakers will also reflect and react upon the students' contributions during the face-to-face meetings and masterclasses.

Conclusions.

In this paper we described how the position and role of the public library is radically changing. These changes urge public libraries to redefine their future roles. The public librarian as pro-active co-creator of meaning – connecting people to information sources, to social meeting and sensemaking experiences – requires the development of new knowledge skills. The LibrarySchool initiative aims to develop a professional learning experience that empowers librarians to become driving forces in positioning the library and effectively realizing its potential for 21st century citizens.

The collaborative design process with domain experts, stakeholders and prospective students of the LibrarySchool led to its first outlines. A LibrarySchool that supports academic competence development of library professionals in combination with their work in the library. A flexible programme supporting organizational and individual learning. A LibrarySchool enabling various professionalization routes. From short track basic professionalization, through participation in a full year, up to qualifications at master's level (MA/MSc/MBA). All across its curriculum learning is intertwined with professional work practice, and new insights are related to the invention of “new librarianship”. Thus academic knowledge and competence development will empower the librarian, enabling the professional to act consistently starting from a vision on the new librarian's role and identity. Based on this, the “new” librarian will design roads to the future and make innovation happen in the libraries.

At the time of writing, we can see that the collaborative co-creative process between all stakeholders has so far led to a sound outline for the LibrarySchool, to a new learning-community-based approach to professionalization and innovation across the public library sector. At the same time we can observe that the community of frontrunners and experts were crucial to find common ground and sketch the outlines of the LibrarySchool. LibrarySchool frontrunners function as community of librarians across the country. The way the LibrarySchool was developed also resulted in commitment and a strong belief in both the initiative and its new learning format as promising and viable.

Challenges and experiences in the period to come – once the school has effectively started – will have to teach us how the ideas work in practice,

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followed by continuous learning and co-creative actions to optimize the learning experience of the LibrarySchool participants.

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