

Creating a space for autonomous learning and citizen involvement in collaboration with a public library

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the significance of public libraries as lifelong educational agencies through the analysis of citizen's autonomous learning activities developed in a public library.

Design/methodology/approach – A self-learning group was chosen and their history was traced. Self-published documents and narratives of the group were used to clarify the substantial content of autonomous learning activities related to a public library. First, an overview of the group activities is given through an analysis of the contents of group newsletters. Second, the narrative of the group members is examined as it appears in their publications. Finally, the results of these two procedures are integrated to holistically articulate the activities of the group as an autonomous learning history based in the public library.

Findings – The paper shows how the group created their learning space in collaboration with a public library and developed individual lifelong learning sharing their activities with local citizens. The paper concludes that the activities of the target group provide an excellent example of not only citizen's autonomous learning as a study group but also the ways in which civic activities nurture public debate and generate social capital in cooperation with the local public library.

Originality/value – The paper suggests specific citizen's autonomous and self-directed learning activities and clarifies the substantial results of their learning. The results of this research demonstrate that public libraries have unique potential dynamically satisfy individual lifelong learning and citizen involvement. The paper demonstrates how public libraries are intrinsically linked with lifelong learning and civic involvement.

Keywords: autonomous learning, citizen involvement, empowerment, Japan, lifelong learning, role of public libraries

Paper type: Research paper

Introduction

Public libraries in Japan currently have multiple functions that include support for searching, learning, business information, and various cultural activities. They are not limited to merely providing reading materials. Most people enjoy a wide variety of library services and regard public libraries as core cultural institutions in communities. Since the role of public libraries has expanded to include many cultural aspects, it is difficult to define their central function.

In this paper, the significance of public libraries as lifelong educational institutions, which is regarded as one of the central important functions of public libraries, is reexamined through the activities of a study circle centered on a public library. There are several types of citizen involvement with public libraries in Japan, and all of them are quite popular. The first is official involvement. Japanese Library Law stipulates that there must be a library council. This is the official means of participation in library management by citizens and the library council delivers its view about the library services to the chief librarian (Library Law, 2011). The council members include representatives of various public institutions such as public schools as well as academic experts and ordinary citizens. Although they are established inside libraries, the councils act as an ombudsperson, freely expressing their opinions about the library services. The second type includes advocacy groups engaging in library promotion or lobbying activities for libraries. Their major task is forming a bridge between libraries and citizens. "Library friends", which are common in the United States, are a classic example of this type. The third is volunteer groups directly engaging in library work such as children's services, organizing bookshelves, and acting as guides of library tours. This last category is the most common in Japanese public libraries. Around 70% of public libraries have introduced a registration system for volunteers (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology). In this study, the target group falls under the second category.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to shed academic light on grassroots autonomous

activities by local citizens developed in public libraries. As mentioned above, a diverse range of activities has been developed in public libraries by local citizens. In spite of the richness of these activities, there has been very little research dealing with citizen involvement with public libraries; in other words, this topic has not been valued from the academic point of view. However, these activities comprise the collective effort of citizen's autonomous learning. This paper focuses on the public library's role as an autonomous and independent cultural/learning activity space for citizens. The function of lifelong learning is particularly significant to public libraries and it is expressed through autonomously managed activities (Elmborg, 2016, p. 536). In this work, the substantial educational function of public libraries is examined in general, focusing on creating a place of autonomous learning and empowerment by local citizens in collaboration with a public library.

Yoshida discussed public libraries as mechanisms for boosting the empowerment and learning efforts of participants (Yoshida, 2013). Although that research provided a broad picture of independent learners in public libraries, it did not closely consider the actual content of the activities.

These autonomous learning activities conducted by local citizens are nurtured by public libraries. To clarify the substantial content of these activities, this study targets a specific group and traces their history as a self-learning group. The purpose of this paper is to use self-published documents to shed light on the way autonomous learning related to a public library mirrors the activities of the group. These details are analyzed on the micro level in this research.

Literature review

Public libraries are currently expanding beyond the traditional functions centered on the collection and offering of reading materials. Many researchers have identified and investigated the new roles and possibilities. For example, Pas examined the role of public libraries by comparing their "information logistics centre" and "cultural institution" functions (Pas, 2014, p. 274-275). Pas stressed qualitative research that deals with the "non-tangible benefits" of the public library and discussed libraries' "other functions than lending books" (Pas, 2014, p. 278).

Several researchers have examined the evolution of public libraries from collection place to meeting place. Among others, a research group led by Ragnar Audunson

developed a project called “Public Libraries – Arenas for Citizenship (PLACE)” for the purpose of analyzing this subject. PLACE is used to examine libraries as places that offer intercommunication between citizens with different cultural backgrounds (Aabø et al. 2010). Ulvik offered an example of the public library as a place for sharing the narratives of life experience, where women can tell their own personal histories and listen to the stories of others through participant observation (Ulvik, 2010). Meanwhile, Greenhalgh defines a public library as a unique place that stands in stark contrast to public education in terms of its self-teaching/self-learning premise and argues that libraries should support proactive learners (Greenhalgh et al., 1995, p. 103-108).

Public libraries also function as arenas of civic activity. There has been some research on the specific roles of public libraries in the development of communities and the creation of social capital through the social activities of citizens (Goulding, 2004; Johnson, 2012; Vårheim, 2011; Miller, 2014). Previous research has examined how libraries create social capital and concluded that they contribute by strengthening community cohesion and fostering a sense of trust. Sung et al. analyzed community engagement in public libraries using qualitative research (Sung, 2013). Through document analysis and semi-structured interviews with service providers and users, they investigated the characteristics of community engagement related to public libraries.

Lifelong learning and civic activities are both significant activities conducted in public libraries in the 21st century and public libraries are places that bring the two together. This research shows how libraries mediate and connect citizen activities and individual lifelong learning through an actual case study. Specifically, it demonstrates how public libraries are intrinsically linked with this connection function and show that it is the strength of public libraries.

Perspective of the research and research method

To organize the research objective and the author's own perspective, this paper introduced a library model called the “four space model” proposed by Jochumsen et al. (Jochumsen et al., 2012, p. 589). The four spaces in this model are inspiration space, learning space, meeting space, and performative space. This paper primarily focuses on meeting space and learning space, as they share the same goal of empowerment (Jochumsen et al., 2012, p. 589-593). This study shows the continuity of the two spaces

through specific activities conducted by the target group from the perspective of autonomous learning.

The investigation object of this research is a learning group and the newsletters they publish. This group, called “Yokohama Library Friend”(YLF), was established in 1995 in Yokohama, Japan with eight founding members who were interested in children's books and libraries. They have continued independent activities based in the public libraries.

The group has published a “Yokohama Library Friends Newsletter” from the very start and continues to do so regularly. This publication was chosen as an examination object in this paper. Since this newsletter is a faithful map of the activities of the group, it is possible to make clear the history of autonomous learning by tracing its contents.

Organizational activities and records

Documents that record social praxis have drawn attention in cultural research. Above all, the significance of primary sources is emphasized as an analysis tool to articulate the research subject. First-person writings (also known as ego documents) and institutional documents are particularly beneficial. First-person writings include diaries, letters, and other materials written in the first person. They are rich in information on particular cultural topics arising from everyday life. The most significant type of writing in this area is descriptions by non-elite people, as they provide a new perspective to cultural interpretation. In contrast to first-person writings, institutional documents are produced in the context of a specific organizational system. Pawley states that “Collections of institutional records [...] bridge the gap between social structure and individual agency and between macro (societal) and micro (individual) views (Pawley and Robbins, 2013, p. 5–6)” and argues the significance of institutional documents to historical research.

The newsletter used for the analysis here is an organizational document that falls somewhere between an institutional document and a private document. Among the various organizational documents related to libraries, this research treats a private publication produced by library users. There are many types of documents of library-related activities written and retained by the users themselves. Although these records are mines of information about how libraries are utilized by citizens, very few studies have focused on analyzing records produced by users. Since the newsletters

dealt with in this research have dual characteristics of first-person writings and institutional documents, it means that, while the personal opinions, ideas, and feelings of writers are projected into the newsletters, they retain an objective viewpoint as an organization at the same time. These kinds of documents are sometimes published in a limited way; typically they remain in-group. Even if that is the case, they still embody the concept of their activities. Pawley examined the documents produced in women's literary societies and suggested that "their activities blended reading and writing in an effort not only to shape their own development but also to influence public opinion"(Pawley, 2009, p. 83). The newsletters examined in this research also represent the public significance of the group activities as well as the projection of the developmental history of the group. Moreover, articles appearing in the newsletters are authentic records of the group and collective results of their autonomous learning.

Findings

My intention is to discuss the activities of YLF through the descriptions in their newsletter. The analysis covers 59 volumes representing 20 years' worth of issues from 1996 to 2015. Since each issue reports the progressive activities of YLF, it is possible to get an overall picture of their activities from the articles in the newsletters. After discussing the outline of the newsletter, this paper analyzes the contents from two angles: first, a description of the activities conducted by the group, and second, a description of the group itself using the narratives of the group members.

Outline of the group and the newsletter

YLF started with eight founding members in 1996 and quickly multiplied to 50. Now, 20 years later, the number of members averages around 40. The YLF newsletter was first published in 1996 and comes out three times per year. It runs from eight to twelve pages. This newsletter is delivered to members of YLF and related organizations to report their activities to members.

The writers of the newsletters are labeled on the basis of two perspectives: author position and involvement with activities of the group. In terms of the former viewpoint, writers are divided into (1) general citizens including students, (2) personnel engaged somehow in libraries including volunteers, and (3) professionals including librarians, civil-service workers, and researchers. In terms of the latter viewpoint, writers are

divided into (1) members of YLF as organizers of programs, (2) facilitators of activities conducted by YLF, and (3) participants involved in activities. In other words, almost all actors related to activities conducted by YLF were involved in the newsletter as writers.

Description of activities

The activities conducted by YLF fall under three categories: (1) autonomous activities, (2) management of the group, and (3) individual activities of members. Autonomous activities form the foundation of their activities and are central to each issue.

Autonomous activities

The 10th Anniversary issue of the YLF newsletter summarizes their autonomous projects over the past decade. Arranged in descending order, these include backstage tours of the local library (43 times), reading clubs (25 times), library tours (16 times), guidance for searching library materials (14 times), and anniversary and exchange events (10 times).

The backstage tour “Library Exploration” was the central activity of the group in its early days. Its purpose was to introduce the facilities and functions of the Yokohama City Central Library by having participants look around the facilities. This was also a great opportunity to recruit new members to the group. The other key early activity was “Seminars for Users”, which provided guidance and instruction for searching library materials using library facilities. Staff members of the library explained how to use the many services on offer, including reference services, services for children, special services for the visually and physically impaired, and materials related to the local area.

Since the original target of YLF as an autonomous learning circle was to form a bridge between libraries and users, members regarded these programs as core activities of the group. To achieve their goal, careful attention was paid to two points: one, offering programs that showed users the potential of library use, and two, offering programs that enhanced user understanding of the professional character of librarians (Newsletter, no. 18). Members soon realized that by and large it was the low-profile jobs that retain the library services, and when users found out that, they became sympathizers of public libraries (Newsletter, no. 31). At the same time, members tried

to convey the opinions of users to the library staff (Newsletter, no. 23). This interactive approach enabled the two kinds of programs to bridge the gap between library and users.

Anniversary events

An anniversary and exchange is an annual event to report the activities of the group. A symposium usually takes place in connection with the event. Previous themes of the symposium have been “Multiple cultures and libraries”, “Think about our local library”, and “Citizen involvement with the library”.

Library tours

A library tour is a project undertaken by members and non-members to broaden knowledge about library services. Such tours are not limited to public libraries: they also include academic libraries and museums, making them rich in variety.

Reading circles

Reading circles were another significant project and were held often over the first decade. While reading circles at libraries are quite common, the difference here is that participants had to choose books about libraries or library science for the reading circle. A wide variety of reading materials were selected, with content ranging from light to serious. Sometimes, a work on the subject of Library Law or a theoretical book on intellectual freedom was chosen as assigned reading for reading circles. Almost all texts featured some discussion of the relationship between public libraries and citizens and public libraries as a citizen's right. This series of reading circles functioned as theoretical grounds for their autonomous activities.

Coordinator

Group members often mediate between local libraries and visitors from overseas. They go on library tours along with guests and play the role of guide and interpreter.

In addition to these scheduled programs, in 2008 the members applied to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology for a Lifelong Learning Policy Bureau publicly offered grant and were successfully awarded it. The

requirements were a joint project between a public library and citizens and project continuity. They also started an “accelerated project on multicultural multilingual services for students in the Yokohama City Central Library”. The executive committee consisted of YLF members, librarians, and administrative officers of the Lifelong Learning Division. Principal projects were (1) an exhibition and book talk on “Learning about Asian countries through picture books”, (2) loaning out picture books on Asian countries to neighborhood primary schools, (3) a study tour called “Expedition to the Library” and a workshop called “Science Experiment at the Library”, and (4) various lectures.

Individual activities

Individual activities conducted by members also appeared in the newsletter. For example, members frequently participate in lecture meetings, conferences, and forums related to the theme of public libraries, and some members give presentations at academic conferences and attend panels organized by the local library as representatives of local citizens. After events of this kind, they write an article as an activity report sharing their own experiences with readers of the newsletter.

Discourses appearing in the newsletters

As previously mentioned, there are three different types of writers of newsletters: members of the group, facilitators, and participants. That means that one program can be described from various perspectives. Furthermore, writers come from a wide variety of ages and cultural backgrounds. As a result, newsletters are filled with rich information on their activities. In particular, member's remarks are highly suggestive, because of thoughtful and reflective thinking. They are the result of careful consideration of their autonomous activities organized by group members.

In the very first issue of the newsletter, a representative made the following remarks about the founding motive of the group.

How should we develop our local library as a citizens' foothold? What should we do for our local library in order to appreciate it as “our” library in the real sense of the term? We started YLF to provide an answer to these questions (Newsletter, no. 1).

As this comment shows, they were concerned with the significance of the existence of the library and its function as a learning space in the local community from the very beginning.

The same writer looked back on the history of the group on the occasion of its fifth anniversary:

When we started this group, there were many similar groups that identified themselves as “library friends”. However, almost all of those organizations were gatherings of social activists or the initiatives of government agencies. These were very different from our goal. That's why we aimed at an organization suited for our local cultural condition by referring to cases in the United States and small cases in Japan. Specifically, we held a series of “Seminars for Users”. These series were a long succession of trial and error, and we often asked librarians for help. We always kept the following two points in mind while planning: (1) seminars should be expanding the possibilities for library use, and (2) through seminars, participants should get a better understanding of the professionalism of librarians. We will look for what we should do for our local library to ensure that it remains a citizen-focused organization. From now on, we will explore new ways of maintaining established activities consistently (Newsletter, no. 18).

These words demonstrate that the group had their own style of activities from the start. They obviously separated their activities from those of passive volunteers already in existence.

The phrase “what we should do for our local library” was used in the statement at the time of the inauguration and has appeared repeatedly since then. That is the core idea underlying their activities and showed their recognition of the place as a space of performing activities. One long-term member described public libraries as follows:

I think that public libraries foster creativity and enhance existential value in every aspect. We are required to engage in self-motivated activities that maintain and nurture our local library (Newsletter, no. 18).

The following thought about public libraries was also expressed:

Since you need to think alone and decide on everything independently in a democracy, libraries are crucial for obtaining the materials and information required for making a decision. In other words, libraries are a kind of public institute that provides residents with various resources for knowing things. Therefore, in some ways libraries play the legitimate role of administrative services (Newsletter, no. 23).

These remarks show that members recognize the local library as an indispensable public institution and that they have nourished a sense of ownership and active engagement with it. Regarding librarians, one representative argues that

Libraries have a mission to provide users with an intellectual heritage. Therefore, librarians are required to become experts in the collection and offering of suitable materials in according with user needs. To achieve this in the long-term, diligent study and professional skill are required. [...] We want our librarians to have professional qualifications. In order to give local residents a better, more realistic understanding of the librarians, we hold library tours guided by librarians. [...] Our activities cannot be realized without cooperating with librarians. Although we cannot always anticipate how to establish cooperative ties with librarians in the future, we are asking for cooperation from now on with great expectation (Newsletter, no. 24).

The group regularly gives public library instruction to library users. The purpose of such work is not only to improve users' information skills but also to give them a better understanding of the substance of librarianship. One member explains this intent as follows:

The "Seminars for Users"[...] are an activity whereby users get to know the library and librarians directly through attending sessions on how to use the library. It is aimed at users becoming more aware of librarianship as a profession. That is exactly our goal (Newsletter, no. 31).

Another member wrote the following about a joint project with the local library:

I took part in the project on multicultural multilingual services for children in 2008. That was a full-scale project and we got a grant from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. Such an authentic project was a first for us. It was tough but we learned a lot of things through it. After the project I had a chance to give a presentation about this project at the conference of a national library association (Newsletter, no. 50).

The group has diversified their activities to become involved with external organizations. These processes of the group efforts are shared by all members through newsletter articles.

Discussion

The autonomous activities conducted by a study circle based around the local public library are discussed here from two standpoints: first, the results of the autonomous learning group's activities, and second, the social meaning of the activities.

Creating a space for autonomous learning and empowerment

The first and foremost achievement of this autonomous group is their creation of a public learning space. Here, not only citizens' learning as a study group in a public library but also at how they create their learning environment and how they get results are examined.

YLF carries out multiple activities. In accordance with the four space model discussed earlier, these are recognized as reciprocal activities across the third quadrant (meeting space) and the fourth quadrant (learning space). Indeed, YLF regularly offers local citizens the opportunity for social meetings centered around the local library, and building such occasions is part of their autonomous learning process. In other words, their activities have developed in dual spaces. Jochumsen et al. argue that empowerment is underpinned by the learning space and the meeting place (Jochumsen et al. p. 589). They continue their autonomous learning and create a learning space at the same time. These dual practices are recognized as a history of empowerment,

which is the envisioned goal of the third and fourth quadrants in the model. Activities conducted by YLF embody the process of empowerment suggested in Jochumsens' conceptual model.

The members of YLF considered the library a space for their empowerment, and they tried to share their consciousness with people around them. Since the history of their activities is completely recorded in newsletters, the accumulation of these records represents libraries as a space for bringing about autonomous learning. Here, it will be useful to examine the characteristics of the group to understand their activities, as illuminated by my analysis of the newsletters.

When compared with other autonomous learning groups, the size of this group is remarkable. The number of members was just eight at the start and quickly increased to 50 before settling into a more gradual rate of increase, currently maintaining steady at around 40. Five of the original core members from the beginning remain. They have never done any public relation activities to expand the organization. This shows that expansion of the group isn't their goal; rather, it seems they prefer to stay a small organization. This lightness in size is directly connected to the flexibility of the group. For this reason, they have been able to try many new projects, thus embodying the idea of resident participant with the local library.

A new model of citizen involvement with public libraries

The second achievement of autonomous learning group activities is the construction of a new concept of citizen involvement with public libraries.

In terms of the participation of local citizens in public libraries, the Japanese Library Law mentions just a library council as the formal channel. However, the participation has traditionally been quite active, originating with a grass-roots movement to establish and upgrade public libraries in the 1970s in Japan (Yoshida, 2013). However, in recent years, the trend has shifted toward volunteers directly engaging in library work to support professional librarians. It has thus descended to a subordinate position instead of an autonomous civic movement.

This weakening of citizen action is not only evident in the world of libraries but also in the more general citizen participation in Japan. It is a Japan-wide issue. Ogawa called it "Institutionalizing Volunteer" and describes the situation as follows:

At the practical level, the municipal government *invites* residents to become volunteers to provide specific social services in the local community such as in continuing education program planning in the community [...] I found that the volunteer activities organized under NPOs actually replace the government's provision of these services. The primary purpose of this NPO policy is cutting cost in public administration, a key agenda in globally dominant neoliberal politics (Ogawa 2004, p. 72–73).

Ogawa goes on to point out that the same situation occurs in volunteerism worldwide as part of progress “under a conservative neoliberal policy” (Ogawa 2004, p. 93). Citizen engagement with public administration as volunteers is strongly encouraged by administrative authorities. This stream has characterized citizen involvement with public libraries in Japan.

Under these circumstances, the activities of the YLF group preceded the new model of citizen involvement with public library services. Their activities were developed on the idea of the local public library as a public facility and the group has played the role of mediator between the library and local citizens through various library programs. In this respect, the group has built a sound coalition with the local library. However, they rigidly committed to their own idea of programs generated by group members. It is very different from “Institutionalizing Volunteer” in regard to independence of activities.

Almost all of their events are designed to boost understanding of the roles and function of the local library. While many other organizations related to libraries provide practical support by performing professional tasks that should really be done by librarians, this group has instead consistently focused on bridging the gap between the library and local citizens by clarifying what it actually is that libraries and librarians do. One member described the relationship with the library as follows:

We built a trust relationship with the local library. This gradually formed the basis for collaborative programs between the library and local citizens, and it continues to expand. I think this trend transcends the typical framework of general volunteer work in libraries. I hope active citizens' activities will continue to contribute to libraries (Newsletter, no. 50).

Members are aware that their group is not just a volunteer organization but also a self-directive one. Their philosophy is that their activities should establish a relationship of equals with the library authority. Members carefully work alongside the library and always try to assess the policy planning as non-participant observers. Their cooperation has been established on the basis of reciprocal independent efforts. At the beginning, there were arguments and conflicts related to the framework of values between the group and the library authority. Although this was essentially a collision of different cultures in the public arena, they shared the common goal of vitalizing public libraries as lifelong learning places, and they have addressed through dialogue issues that boost the library. The self-sustaining development of the group while maintaining the relationship with the public authority shows a new concept of citizen involvement with public libraries.

Creating social capital

The results of the group activities showed that public libraries as a self-learning tool enhance the empowerment of members who get together with a shared purpose. These results are beyond mere personal growth; YLF also generates a stable social capital through their activities.

Vårheim states that libraries create social capital by vitalizing community engagement in collaboration with voluntary organizations, offering informal meeting places and general services to residents (Vårheim, 2007, p. 421), and Goulding argued that public libraries are “identified as a force for increasing social capital as they provide shared space for a variety of different groups within the community” (Goulding, 2004, p. 4). Miller describes the enhancement effect of public libraries for creating the social capital of a wide variety of local organizations in a community as follows:

Giving groups and external organizations freedom to use library space for their own activities can give these groups the chance to enhance their own bonding social capital through a mutual interest, as well as increase social capital between the group and the library itself, via the mechanism of mutual trust (Miller, 2014, p. 324).

Miller also suggests that library users recognize the local library as “their own kind of culture in their own community” (Miller 2014, p. 321). Through various meetings, programs, and study sessions, the targeted group members have actively expanded their own learning networks using libraries as their basis. In light of this, we also need to evaluate these citizen's autonomous activities as a social benefit that creates social capital. Furthermore, it is particularly significant that they make their learning setting available to the public.

Cavanagh considers the social mode of public libraries from the viewpoint of “a social constructivist perspective” and examines the membership of public libraries from this perspective (Cavanagh, 2015, p. 407). Cavanagh concludes that “the political mode of public library organizing is rooted in citizenship, residency, and a historical tradition oriented as a grassroots community organization responding to its immediate public”(Cavanagh, 2015, p. 413). The group examined in this paper has roots in the social movement of the establishment of community libraries and follows the traditional spirit of “civic librarianship” (Cavanagh, 2015, p. 413).

In 2013, the Norwegian Public Library Law was revised to state that “Public libraries should be an independent meeting place and forum for public conversation and debate (Folkebibliotekene skal være en uavhengig møteplass og arena for offentlig samtale og debatt)”. (Kulturdepartementet, 2013).

Public libraries have become recognized as spaces for creating open discussion by local residents. This also means that public libraries have moved from static cultural institutes on an individual basis to dynamic organizations focusing on the creation of social capital. The study circle dealt with in this research is an excellent example of generating social capital and public debate in cooperation with the local public library.

Conclusion

The activities conducted by the targeted group in this paper are autonomously developed, maintaining independence from the library authority. They independently planned all activities and carried out projects in accordance with their plans, which they then described in detail in their newsletters. Basically, the newsletters are for announcements and activity reports, while at the same time, each article written by a member became a part of the history of their autonomous learning through their daily

activities. Reporting in the newsletters gave members the opportunity to externalize their efforts. As a result, the newsletters now function as a historical record of the empowerment of members. As previously mentioned, Jochumsen et al. proposed a holistic spatial model of public libraries with four spaces. Two of these spaces, learning space and meeting space, are similar in that both target empowerment (Jochumsen et al, p. 591-593). This paper focused on this similarity and was able to identify the embodiment of empowerment created by the targeted group through analysis of their publications.

Previous studies on public libraries have focused on how to explain the use of library facilities to citizens and on the information searching behaviors of users. However, there has been little research on the broader concept of users' autonomous lifelong learning activities despite their significance. Although these activities are key components in public libraries, they have been mentioned only in the abstract. These autonomous and self-directed activities are examined as a tangible presence in this paper. This study explored citizen's autonomous learning activities centered on a public library and clarified the substantial results of their learning. Their experiences suggest the possibilities of public libraries as places of self-directed learning. Wiegand emphasizes the significance of a "'bottom-up' 'library in the life of the user' perspective" (Wiegand, 2015, p. 349). Discourses expressed in newsletters are full of such bottom-up views.

Public libraries offer multiple possibilities to local citizens. Among them, lifelong learning and citizen's autonomous activities are significant. Public libraries enable the joint achievement of both kinds of activities. This paper investigated a case developed by a civic group in a public library who are engaged in two primary activities, one recognized as selfish behavior oriented toward self-realization and the other as selfless behavior aimed at upgrading library services. It is significant that the group members are not only active learners utilizing the library but also powerful supporters of the library. The relationship between the members and the library shows that public libraries have unique potential related to citizen involvement satisfying individual lifelong learning and citizen engagement with community. In other words, the uniqueness of libraries is connected to individual learning and social experiences.

The Japanese Library Law states that "libraries offer diversity of educational opportunities of informal learning activities" (Library Law, 2011). This statement

implies that public libraries provide spaces where citizens can share in the fruits of their informal learning. The group dealt with in this paper converts the philosophy of the law into tangible forms through their autonomous activities. Although the object of this study is set to a specific civic group, these results are not confined to matters of this study. Creating autonomous learning space, boosting empowerment and generating social capital are universal roles of public libraries as cultural agencies.

Limitations and further research

Because of the small sample size, it is not possible to generalize these results. However, this study does offer some insight into the possibilities of public libraries as places of lifelong learning. An examination focusing on individual members is needed to articulate the mechanism of lifelong learning based on public libraries. Semi-institutional documents were mainly analyzed in this paper, but first-person writings and data from oral history would of course be effective for a more detailed analysis of the activities of the group and the substance of the empowerment of the members. There are a lot of unregulated negotiating relationships going on between autonomous learning groups and public library authorities. To clarify these complex relationships will also be the focus of my future research. The conflicts, contradictions, and cooperation between actors are key in terms of clarifying the role of libraries as cultural agencies for citizens.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology in Japan (Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research No. 24500290).

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