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Use of Library Space and Technology in Supporting Newcomers and Skilled Immigrants

Laura Galea
Western University, lgalea2@uwo.ca

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Use of Library Space and Technology in Supporting Newcomers and Skilled Immigrants
Librarianship and Evolving Technologies Final Project
Laura Galea

Libraries can and should be a central hub of information access and literacy, and settlement support for newcomers and skilled immigrants as they arrive in their new home country. Introducing these individuals to the library shortly after arrival and providing them with a digital access point can help them bridge gaps in language and settlement as they move through the settlement stages. This paper seeks to provide a snapshot of the country's statistics and more specifically municipal statistics and how they are supported through a glimpse at how some Ontario libraries are actively trying to provide newcomers and skilled immigrants with robust access to educational resources regarding language, citizenship, employment and settlement services online.

According to Statistics Canada (October 26 2022), as of 2021, “more than 8.3 million or almost one- quarter of the population, were or had ever been, a landed immigrant or permanent resident in Canada.” This report also states that 34.5% of Canadian immigrants who were selected for immigration under the economic category were skilled workers. Looking at statistics of the population who have achieved secondary or higher education, immigrants “made up nearly half of the growth in the share of Canadians with a bachelor's degree or higher (Statistics Canada, October 22 2022). Statistics Canada (November 2022) also reports that “Canada continues to rank first in the G7 for the share of working-age people (aged 25 to 64) with a college or university credential at 57.5 percent.” Libraries become a key access point from which newcomers can benefit from intellectually and socially as they strive for successful integration.

Abdi et al. state that upon arrival to their new country, newcomers are often overwhelmed with the cultural, societal, economic, political and, at times technological, differences from their

home country. They may not be fully aware of where to find important citizenship and settlement resources or documentation to start the process of making a life in their new home country. The Town of Halton Hills wanted to bridge this gap for newcomers by making their public library the hub for newcomers upon arrival. The library would be where newcomers will be given community information through the Halton Community Services Directory, brochures on community settlement partners who are dedicated to supporting newcomers as they seek new knowledge in language and Canadian citizenship, and hone their resumes to match the interest of Canadian employers. The goal should always be to help a newcomer find employment in their field of experience and interest, however, as Abdi et al. (2019) indicate “despite high education and skill levels, skilled immigrants still experience obstacles to effective socioeconomic integration into mainstream society” (p.894). The library tries to encourage engagement in our spaces by providing settlement services through local settlement partners, providing newcomers support in understanding library technologies and offering them access to public libraries for their everyday searching, work or study needs.

Research by both Abdi et al. and Shepherd et al. indicate that libraries are a great source of social interaction, learning and leisure for newcomers. Libraries must consider how we can continue to support their movement through the settlement stages by providing them with supports they can access in-person and online. It is important to understand the settlement stages and how they are not linear. An individual may move through the stages more than once as they become more comfortable in their new community. This makes it crucial for libraries to be a supportive space for them as they find their place in their new country, knowing that should they need a resource or support in obtaining access to materials in their home language, the library is there to support them. Shepherd et al. describe the settlement stages in the following way

“ the first stage is transitioning, a process that usually begins prior to their arrival. During this stage newcomers deal with immediate issues such as finding temporary accommodations. They are often dependent on relatives, friends or settlement workers during this period “(Shepherd et al., 2018, 585).

Our goal then, as a library, is to connect them to our resources and, hopefully, through events like conversation circles, provide them with opportunities for social connection where they can meet other patrons who are going through the same processes. Abdi et al, Shepherd et al., and many other researchers focused on the newcomer experience, indicate that social capital is as important for newcomers as learning a new language and gaining employment. By feeling welcome, accepted and supported in their new home country, newcomers and skilled immigrants can enter the second stage.

“...Settling in, newcomers undergo the slow process of becoming participative members of society. They move to more permanent accommodations, seek better job opportunities, improve their language proficiency and apply for permanent residence status.” (Shepherd et al, 2018, p.585)

Shepherd et al. (2018) indicate that it is during this stage where newcomers may find that their credentials from their home country may not be applicable to their new home country (p. 585). In this case, new skills may be necessary to obtain. The library and its settlement partners can assist in helping them find continuing education opportunities or provide them with tools such as LinkedIn Learning. Once this is achieved, newcomers and skilled immigrants will find themselves ready to enter the third stage which is when they will feel more comfortable finding

information independently, which Shepherd et al. consider to be a critical step in ensuring successful integration (Shepherd et al, 2018, p.585).

Most libraries can support newcomer's needs through the use of the library's public computers, printers, scanners and photocopiers and can help them in fulfilling everyday needs like signing up for phone plans, making a bank account, and providing access to settlement and employment services. For example, the Toronto Public Library and Hamilton Public Library provide robust offerings that ensure a newcomer's successful integration into their new home country. The author includes Halton Hills Public Library as a case study of a library who is currently excelling at offering access to everyday technologies, in-person settlement services, library tours and information packages and is expanding into offering support through a digital community services directory, and a potential online or hybrid model of a LinkedIn Learning tutorial. HHPL in particular can be a great example for smaller or more rural libraries who want to improve their settlement offerings. Providing these services is essential to a municipality's growth and in establishing meaningful relationships with newcomers. Taking the time to offer at least some of these services maintain the library's relationship with newcomers and encourages continued engagement regardless of access point.

Toronto Public Library

Statistics Canada reports in 2021 show that Toronto consisted of the largest number of immigrants overall with 46.6 percent of their population being immigrants (Statistics Canada, October 26 2022). Outside of Toronto 58.6% of immigrants chose to land in Markham, 58.2% in Richmond Hill, 53.2% in Mississauga, and 52.9% in Brampton (Statistics Canada, October 26 2022). It is of no surprise then, that Toronto Public Library has dedicated their time and

monetary efforts towards ensuring that these populations feel supported and are able to access settlement tools and services remotely. TPL has created a New To Canada blog which keeps newcomers informed of newcomer services at the library and has created a widget that allows them to translate the library's website to their home language. They also offer a database and online tools to help them study for language and citizenship tests such as links to Learning Express Library, Mango languages, an online Oxford English dictionary, IELTS training and online resources for checking and teaching grammar. These essential resources assure newcomers and skilled immigrants that the library is there to support them through their journey regardless of how they choose to utilize the library..

Hamilton Public Library

Hamilton is a city where employment has grown more than its population, as it is Ontario's third largest urban economy and is seen largely as a manufacturing centre, experiencing growth in sectors such as information and culture, transportation and accommodation and food services (Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada, 2020, p.1-2). Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (2020) also reports Hamilton as being known for employment in iron and steel mills, vehicle and railroad manufacturing, among other sectors (p.2) This becomes an ideal place for newcomers on work visas or options for skilled immigrants in these sectors. In 2019, Hamilton had the lowest attraction rate per 10,000 population at a rate of 58 and as of 2016, most of their immigrants were not of working age with 30% of their immigrants in the workforce being over 55 years old. (Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada, 2020, p.4). This report states Hamilton's goal is to attract more immigrants to work in Hamilton in the future. The city has aided in supporting and encouraging newcomer demographics through the Hamilton Public Library. Their library is an excellent example of

providing settlement services to newcomer families by dedicating a portion of their efforts to the creation and execution of the Newcomer Learning Centre.

The Newcomer Learning Centre provides newcomers or skilled immigrants with access to in person support at their desk Monday to Friday and select Saturdays as well a number of services, such as English tutoring which has the option of being online, or entirely online programs such as Conversation Circles and sessions teaching English to seniors. On the centre's webpage they provide links for English language assessment and settlement services as well as links to French settlement services. The Hamilton Public Library also has an online directory called Redbook. Through the directory, newcomers can learn more about local immigration, refugee and citizenship resources, as well as other resources within Hamilton.

Halton Hills Public Library

In their 2020-2025 report, the Halton Newcomer Strategy (n.d.) reported that newcomers represented about 30% of the Halton region's population (p.9). The Halton Region consists of Burlington, Milton, Oakville, and Halton Hills which is made up of Georgetown and Acton. The region found that typically skilled immigrants are successful at obtaining jobs that fall within their previous experience and education. A 2018 report by the Haton Region showed that immigrants were selected for immigration under the economy category under designations such as skilled workers and business immigrants (p.3). Halton Hills in general has low statistics compared to other cities within the region. The Halton Region (2018) found that only 2.8% of newcomers chose to live in Halton and of the region's population of skilled immigrants, 46.7% chose to live in Halton Hills, still the lowest compared to other cities in the region (p. 3) While Halton Hills' statistics are low, an argument can be made that if we provide excellent settlement

services for all newcomers, skilled immigrants and refugees, they will consider landing in the Town if not choosing to stay long term. As a result, the Halton Hills Public Library has established strong partnerships with local settlement services, HMC Connections and Centre for Skills.

Currently, HHPL offers more newcomer services in-person than they do online. However, as partners returned to the library after the pandemic, some offered their programs online including settlement services, proving that this could be an option for newcomers either through the partners themselves or potentially with the library in the future. All patrons have access to LinkedIn Learning through their library card. The library has discussed providing a language tool on their website. However this is not currently within the library's budget and has likely been tabled as a possible future project for consideration. In the meantime, the library strives to continue to provide the best in-person services through their partner programming with HMC Connections and Centre for Skills. HHPL also provides access to relevant newcomer and settlement services as well as information about general regional resources through the Halton Community Services Directory which can be accessed through the directory's website or by using the digital information pods that are now located at the Georgetown branch. The infopods allow the user to change the language to their preferred language.

Discussion and Conclusion

It should be the goal of all libraries to provide multiple access points to settlement services and educational resources for newcomers and skilled immigrants to ensure successful integration. However, budgets can cause constraints on libraries that makes the pursuit of offering some digital resources, such as ebooks in different languages or on ESL studies, or the ability to offer a widget of different languages to translate a website to, unobtainable.

Partnerships with settlement services can help in bridging gaps in access to information for smaller libraries. These libraries can also refer to resources such as TPL's website, local community service directories, or seek materials they can borrow if their libraries have reciprocal borrowing or can pursue materials from different library's physical collections through interlibrary loan. Perhaps with more advocacy about the importance of seeing the library as a hub of education and information more money can be considered to support digital and translation efforts to make the library a more robust and accessible resource for newcomers and skilled immigrants.

By looking at three examples of Ontario libraries that have dedicated themselves to providing newcomers and skilled immigrants with a digital access point, there is the opportunity to see how doing so can strengthen or maintain relationships between the library and the newcomer or skilled immigrant. Providing newcomers and skilled immigrants with multiple access points ensures that they have support throughout the settlement stages. These groups rely on the library as a space where they can read, learn and grow. The library is a unique opportunity for some newcomers as their home country may not have had a library or one that provided them with independent access to their library's collection or a positive library experience, overall. Researchers have indicated that libraries are an important starting place for newcomers, this important connection between the library and the individual will only increase if we can provide them with digital access. Successful integration can lead to a newcomer choosing to stay in the city or town they landed in, which is beneficial to both the individual and the library. It must be our goal to promote the library as a safe space that encourages intellectual growth, social engagement, and personal fulfillment regardless of access point.

Reflection

Newcomer services is one of my key areas of focus working in community engagement at the Halton Hills Public Library. While the 2018 statistics for immigration in Halton Hills is low, I regularly see how important it is for us to be providing robust services for newcomers, especially as we continue to welcome more refugees and our newcomer and skilled immigrant population grows. I had originally thought of making this project a “how to” document showing library staff how to add technology from our creativity centre into the newcomer library tour. However, with time, I realized that the library has a lot of documentation on how to use our technologies, we have a LinkedIn tutorial that we are striving to make digitally accessible, and provide in-person tutorials, and we have a number of library tour scripts for staff to consult. I felt adding another document to our collection would be overwhelming and unnecessary. I had come across some of this topic in Dr. Nafiz Shuva’s course, Public Library Services for Newcomers and Immigrants. From my understanding, there is not enough research on skilled immigrants and their use of library technologies and spaces to support their settlement and employment efforts. I felt that this report/case study gives us a snapshot of statistics for librarians to work from and provides examples of libraries that are currently excelling at supporting newcomers. I included HHPL as an example because comparing the size of our library to a library like TPL, I feel that HHPL could be an example to more rural libraries that may not be experiencing large numbers of newcomers choosing to live in their community.

I found that the biggest challenge of this paper was writing it. I struggled with how to frame it and on the day of writing had a hard time getting all of my thoughts on paper. I think a lot of it had to do with end of term cram that I think affects everyone at some point as we are all on the verge of burnout. Eventually something clicked and everything got back to its usual flow

despite having to write the most fragmented and disorganized first draft in order to get there.

Another struggle I found was determining how my paper was different from other papers. What I think sets my paper apart somewhat from the academic papers I used, was that I was providing a snapshot of what current libraries are doing to support newcomers and skilled immigrants by providing them with another way for them to access settlement and educational services or resources. This paper in a sense is a case study or response to the need for more research on the topic and provides current examples of how some of Ontario's libraries are genuinely trying to expand their offerings to be more inclusive, accessible and representative of current demographics or the need for improved demographics.

As I stated in the paper, money will likely be the biggest problem libraries will have in providing digital services and educational access for newcomers and skilled immigrants. For example, I have learned that it would cost a library Not all libraries will have an endeavour such as this within their budget and I discuss some alternatives in the paper. Another limitation that I did not address is that a library may lack the technical support to be able to make such an access point possible and they may not have the means to fund hiring an outside source to complete the task for them.

If I had more space in the paper I could have allowed for more research on other libraries that I may have forgotten about or excluded that could have been sufficient examples, I could have provided more statistics and sources to support my argument and I could have provided more definitions around terms like newcomers and skilled immigrants to aid the reader. I'm interested to hear if there were parts of this paper I could have cut down in order to include that. In efforts to keep the paper close to the page limit, I kept the introduction brief and perhaps I could have added more to it. Overall, I think the paper came together well and I think it provides

another take on how libraries can improve information literacy and engagement in the library which I think ties in well with topics explored in week 12 “Citizen, Patron, Content Creator, Democratization of the Internet”, specifically the sections where you discussed the importance of community librarianship and expanded our conceptualization of citizenship and technology.

Resources

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