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User profiles: from a qualitative case study approach to providing a better service

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An analysis of space social relations, constructed in a public library setting among readers, staff and management, and an analysis of space design and of space usage was conducted as a preliminary stage to a single case library study.

Our purpose was to understand how social relations were built within this setting, how space was produced and reproduced (Lefebvre, 2000 [1974]), how different readers appropriated this space and what meanings did they associate to their practices.

A qualitative methodology (Becker, 1996; Donmoyer, 2000; Patton, 1990; Seale, 2004) was selected so that results might reflect a holistic approach (space and people interacting) and both real uses and their context taken into account (social groups and inequalities, power relations, cultural policies, cultural practices) in the production of the final conclusions.

For an in-depth, intensive approach, Michael Burawoy's (1998) extended case methodology was applied, relying on his basic epistemological tenets of complexity and reflexivity and his four regulatory principles of scientific knowledge production: *intervention* (the intersubjectivity between scientist and people under study); *process* (entering their lived world); *structuration* (relating local processes to external forces); *theory reconstruction* (building on existing theory with a critical stance, while acknowledging ideology's role in theory production). This methodology's pragmatic commitment, of designing a research model which may fit the research objectives and be adequate to its purposes, revealed to be very insightful and fruitful.

A public library, Almeida Garrett in Porto, was selected for its particular features regarding building architecture, urban insertion (Tonkiss, 2005), and services usage for an ongoing extended research. Ethnographic and in-depth interviewing methods were applied, along side with document analysis. A diversified convenience sample was employed, including users of different ages, sexes, social and ethnical origins and visual and mobility capacities.

At this stage, several user profiles, which are here presented, were designed from some preliminary results. These profiles are believed to be of practical relevance in the development and tailoring of library services in a moment when libraries purposes are being questioned and redesigned (Coalter, 2001; Harris, 1998; Kerslake & Kinnel, 1998; Levy, 2000; Scrogham, 2006).

Keywords: user profiles; single case study; ethnographic method; qualitative methodology; public libraries; Portugal

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