



NORRBOTTENS
LÄNSBIBLIOTEK

Barnens Polarbibliotek and authentic interactivity on a library site for children ages 8 – 12 years

The website [Barnens Polarbibliotek](#) (“Childrens’ Polar Library”) was introduced 1997 by the County Library of Norrbotten. It makes the County Library of Norrbotten one of the pioneers in Sweden in terms of libraries on the Internet for children. But Barnens Polarbibliotek is not a site that offers traditional library services; one can for example not make reservations for books or other media. Instead, Barnens Polarbibliotek is a resource for activities such as reading and writing and it is a place where children can make themselves heard.

The editorial staff presently consists of one editor (Regine Nordström), one person responsible for design and technical architecture (Bengt Frank), two sub editors (Eva Lidström and Jimmy Gärdemalm) from the County Library of Norrbotten and librarians from three of the 14 county libraries (Agneta Krohn Strömshed, Kristina Ström and Liz ten Hoeve). The sub editors all work part time with the interaction and communication with the users. The librarians take care of questions about literature and other media. The editor staff work with texts, short stories, poems and web books, sent in to the web site by the users. Manager and publisher is the chief librarian Detlef Barkanowitz.

All the material made by the users and published on the website is edited by the staff. Barnens Polarbibliotek is therefore a safe site for the children. By editing all material we protect the integrity so the users not harm themselves or other persons. Editing material is also essential for supporting reading and writing. The work by the editors make the published material find its best form and present it like the writers intend to do it but not always have the skills to achieve on their own.

The interaction has increased during the years but even in the beginning, users could be published on the site and write their own stories. During a long period of years there where also a lot of different kind of project connected to the site. Those projects were primary oriented to local authors, local literature and new ways of cooperation between libraries in the Barents region. To reach users, the County Library of Norrbotten primarily communicated through schools.

Experiences from these years led to changes, in some ways significant changes, of the content and focus in the website during the middle of the last decade. Barnens Polarbibliotek increasingly became a site where users’ interest hade significant impact on the development of the content. The best example of this is the web book (“Webb-bok”).

Interactivity – interaction and authentic interactivity

The process of developing the interactivity started in 2005 when it became possible for the users to communicate with the editor, write poems, short stories, write book reviews. It was also made possible to ask a librarian about books and other media. Barnens Polarbibliotek is a website where the children can make themselves heard. To make this happen in a respectful manner the term interaction is essential.

In Swedish *interactivity* usually denotes the interaction between a computer and a human being. However, the interactivity a website can offer differs a lot. For example playing a game or using an educational website which is built upon a definite chain of stages set in advance, is fundamentally different from a site where users interaction lead to changes of the content. In the first example the website is exactly the same for a new user. In my second example both texts, pictures or comments can be made by the users and impact the content. The site therefore changes continuously and a new user meets a partly new site. This is what I would call *authentic interactivity*, an interaction that have impact on the result and as in an ordinary conversation, the result depend on the participants. Other examples of *authentic interactivity* on the Internet are online Games and communities like Face book or when a company invites the user to participate in the development of a new game or a service. All *authentic interactivity* is dependent of the users and demands staff resources to solve technical problems, communicate with users and meet other needs.

Barnens Polarbibliotek offers both types of interactivity since there are both games like memory and puzzles and the *authentic interactivity*. The latter is especially found in the material published on the site but even in the development of some special activities like the web book. The users' comments of the existing content and their ideas and suggestions about the site also have impact on the website. New activities are usually tested in form of questionnaires on the site or by observation of a test group. Together with the feedback from users this have made a basis for making decisions about which activities should be further developed and which should be excluded.

Therefore Barnens Polarbibliotek today continuously increases its selection of activities based on the *authentic interactivity*: presently there are two different ways of making web books, users can submit short stories, poems, book tips, ask questions for the librarians and make drawings. The result is usually published and becomes part of the content on the site. With participation also follows a possibility to join Boklotteriet, a lottery where the County Library of Norrbotten every month gives away ten traditional books mainly written by established authors from the region.

The development of the web book (“Webb-bok”)

The web book is a good example of how the content is developed based on users' input.

In 2005, Barnens Polarbibliotek underwent a major change. One of which was the introduction of Regine Reporter. She represents a personalized voice on the site and is an alter ego for the editor. “Reporter” because one of the tasks for the editor in this

new version of Barnens Polarbibliotek was to write articles about the region for the website.

The first one named [Polarpolare](#) (Polar Buddies) was on geography and then especially Norrbotten, our region. (Today this article is named *I landskapet*, In the Landscape.) One part of the article was named [Grodan i skogen](#) (The frog in the forest). The background story is that Regine Reporter is making a forest excursion, picking blueberries where she finds a small plastic frog. The presentation on the website of this part consists of a slideshow, or a “picture book” in a mixture of texts and photos. This little frog named Grodan became a friend of Regine Reporter and more slideshows where Grodan are the main character was made.

The editorial staff found this way of writing very joyful and wanted to offer the user a similar possibility. An activity called *Sagor om grodan* (Tales about the frog) was presented for the users. The user can choose between about 20 different photos out of which 5 or less are chooses. An accompanying story is the written and submitted. During the first six months of 2008, 76 stories in form of slideshows were submitted by the young users.

It was of course a success and a new way Barnens Polarbibliotek to stimulate writing among children. This also meant a lot of new work for the staff which made all the slideshows “by hand”. This was mainly due to the range of texts. Since we wanted the authentic interactivity it was decided to develop this activity further.

The process to simplify the administration comprised new technical solutions, and the development started in October 2008 when [Djursagor](#) (Animal tales) were introduced. In *Djursagor* the user can choose between three sets of 20 photos. Each set has its own main character in the form of an animal. The user can choose up to five pictures and write maximum 240 signs for each picture.

The presentation was also renewed. It was influenced by traditional paper books. It has the form of a square, it has covers, a title page where you also can read the authors name. Navigation in the presentation is done by manual browsing. The manuscript was still processed by the editor and the administration was made by hand.

This version of the web book also became popular. Between the October 15 and December 31, 2008 when the activity was new 56 tales were made. Between January 1 and February 12, 2009, a period of 1,5 months, 75 tales reached Barnens Polarbibliotek. During 2009 the editorial staff managed 357 *Djursagor*. That year totally 575 texts including short stories and poems were published.

This apparent interest naturally has affected the development of Barnens Polarbibliotek. We hade to find a more effective form of editing *Djursagor* and develop other activities which could include both texts and pictures. Since the interaction and editing is necessary for maintaining the high level of feed back, the technical platform needed to be upgraded ones more. With what is usually called a Content Management System (CMS), where more editors can manage the interaction with the authors, edit the texts and also set up the web books, the

activities on Barnens Polarbibliotek will be an offer for more children and material made by more users can be published.

The activity *Djursagor* was closed on June 30, 2010, and the developing process started. This time the editors also wanted to test an idea where the children illustrated their texts with drawings. This activity simply called "[Webb-bok](#)" (Web book) was tested during spring 2011 and the users also have had the possibility to answer a minor survey. Until the beginning of July 32 tales were made, out of which 22 have been published.

The new CMS which is planned to be running January 1, 2012 will make it possible to offer more activities including authentic interactivity to more users than today.

Conclusions

Through the interactivity and experience of the editorial process, the users, children in the age span of about 6 to 14, have developed their knowledge of writing stories, making a book, using text and pictures, and naturally also using their language. The site is however not finished, and the potential of Internet and cooperation between Barnens Polarbibliotek and county libraries in Norrbotten has still not reached its limit.

Until today the site has achieved:

- Barnens Polarbibliotek is a place where both reading and writing are stimulated in another way than in school. Receiving feedback from the editors at Barnens Polarbibliotek is different than having an essay written in school corrected. The children also have to think differently of the receivers' perspective: here there are ordinary readers whereas in school the only receiver is often the teacher.
- The published stories are often from the northern region in Sweden which can be seen by the users' choice of both themes and wordings. There are for example several hunting stories which are quite rare in ordinary children's books.
- The users are confirmed as competent writers and meet artistic challenge in the interaction with the editorial staff.
- Reading is stimulated. The site is nearly totally silent and therefore users have to read most of both content and instructions.
- The books given to the winners in Boklotteriet are likely to be read. Often enough, book tips of these books are sent back to the site and in that way the County Library of Norrbotten also can open eyes for stories written by authors and stories from the region.

We have learned that:

- The authentic interactivity appeals to girls more than to boys. About 80 percent of the material is made by girls.
- Users are stimulated by artistic challenge like make drawings within a theme, choosing pictures within a limited amount, have to use a limited amount of words and so on. Less materials are achieved from activities where users write or make drawings freely.
- Making own drawings to the text is perceived as difficult but enjoyable.
- The main reason behind the positive results where many users obviously find the site both interesting and worth coming back to is the high level of authentic interactivity.

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