

# Facilitating public access to learning

**Daniel Xerri** argues that we should help our learners develop holistically.

## From Athens ...

I recently had the opportunity to visit the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Centre (SNFCC) in Athens, Greece. This Renzo Piano designed building, which was completed in 2016 and donated to the Greek state the following year, houses the National Library of Greece (NLG) and the Greek National Opera (GNO). The building is located within one of the largest parks in Athens and it was designed as a sustainable cultural, educational and recreational complex. Described as ‘the largest cultural/ educational project ever undertaken in the country’ (SNFCC, n.d.), the building is worthy of being recognised as a global landmark as much for its world-class architecture as for its mission to make learning freely accessible to everyone.

Education and culture are the main pillars on which the vision for the construction of the SNFCC rests. The building is intended as ‘our common ground, a place for all people, where everyone has access to learning, the arts and events that stimulate, engage and inspire’ (SNFCC, n.d.). In fact, accessibility is deemed so important that besides having state-of-the-art facilities to accommodate the needs of all visitors, many of the activities at the SNFCC are free of charge. This is because it values the inclusion of all audiences irrespective of their socio-economic background (The Boston Consulting Group, 2016). Given the SNFCC’s commitment to inclusion and diversity, it was particularly apt that at the time of my visit the library was hosting a photography exhibition entitled ‘The Fowls, Portraits Athens 2017’. In his photos, the poet Kostas Zafeiropoulos captures the weathered and expressive

faces of Athenians living under adverse conditions, focusing primarily on their eyes as a means of revealing their anguish (SNFCC, 2018: 33).

**“As language teachers, we can play an influential role in encouraging students to develop an appreciation of the cultural and educational hubs in our respective communities, particularly if these places facilitate access to learning.”**

The SNFCC’s (2016) many activities include film screenings, sports and arts exhibitions at the park; public lectures and children’s workshops at the GNO; and book clubs and computer courses at the library. The latter is meant to act ‘as an educational and

social hub for the local and broader community’ (SNFCC, 2016: 2). The public can use the library for free, not only by borrowing books but also by using its premises for study purposes and personal education. Young people’s reading, creativity and artistic talent are fostered via a number of initiatives, including special concerts and workshops. The above activities exemplify how audience engagement is considered a prerequisite for the success of the SNFCC’s mission to provide all its visitors with access to culture and education.

## ... to Seattle

In drafting the SNFCC impact study, the consultants were inspired by the success of the Seattle Public Library, whose 11-storey, Rem Koolhaas designed Central Library opened in 2004. When I visited this building a few years ago, I was pleased to see how many people seemed to be engaged with the free facilities on offer. The building was a hive of activity and it was clear that everyone was welcome to access the library’s myriad services and spaces. A survey shows that 64% of Seattle residents who visited the old library reported using the Central Library more (Berk & Associates, 2005). Circulation increased by 23% in the first year of the new library’s operation while door traffic increased by 166%. In fact, in its first year, the building attracted more than double the average number of daily visitors to the old library, with approximately one-third of them being from outside Seattle. Access to reading material increased

because the new building was able to make three quarters of the library collection readily available.

Just like the SNFCC, the Central Library makes a range of amenities and equipment available to use for free. These include meeting and study rooms, Skype rooms, more than 300 computers, Wi-Fi, and adaptive equipment for people with visual impairment. In line with its commitment to public accessibility, the Central Library has an outreach strategy targeted at diverse communities. It also employs bilingual staff and offers ESOL and citizenship classes to its users. All of these features are testament to how the building seeks to be a space where people from all walks of life can seek personal edification.

### Accessible learning spaces

Architecture at both the SNFCC and the Central Library plays a fundamental role in making each building feel welcoming and in giving the public the impression that their contents and services are easily accessible. Open spaces and glass walls help both buildings to be recognised as community gathering places. At the Central Library, the Book Spiral provides visitors with direct access to books and other resources by not having to look for material in special collections. Part of the SNFCC's roof is designed like an aircraft's wing, a symbol for how knowledge allows people to fly high.

What cultural and educational places like the SNFCC and the Central Library have in common is that they make learning an inclusive activity by providing people with free access to knowledge and a range of useful services. While the only expenses incurred by users are usually in the form of taxes, transport costs, time spent on site, etc., the benefits to society in terms of education and quality of life are priceless. This is why a report on the economic benefits of the Central Library concluded that:

'There is inherent economic value in functional libraries as an information resource. Libraries

contribute to learning, literacy, business productivity, personal and professional development, and individual livelihood. Some of this value accrues to individuals who gain benefit from recreational use or access to library resources for professional development purposes.' (Berk & Associates, 2005: 32)

Similarly, a report by the American Library Association (ALA, 2009) shows that more than 222 million citizens agree that public libraries play a significant role in enabling everyone to succeed because they grant free access to information. Public libraries also help to improve a community's quality of life, even by supporting the literacy of non-English speakers through specially designed services and programmes (ALA, 2008). Public libraries are recognised as having a vital community building function by serving as a conduit to information and learning, encouraging social inclusion and equity, fostering civic engagement, bridging resources and community involvement, and promoting a community's economic vitality (Scott, 2011).

### Teachers' role

Cultural and educational places like the SNFCC and the Central Library fulfil a vital purpose in society, especially since granting people access to knowledge and personal enrichment allows a democracy to thrive. As language teachers, we can play an influential role in encouraging students to develop an appreciation of the cultural and educational hubs in our respective communities, particularly if these places facilitate access to learning. Formal education beyond a certain level can sometimes be an elitist endeavour that people from disadvantaged social backgrounds might find difficult to benefit from. Hence, it is important that from a very young age students are enabled to use such places for their autonomous and lifelong attempts at edification. Besides organising visits to these places, we could also involve our students in the various activities and events that they

hold on a regular basis. While there are probably plenty of language learning opportunities associated with such activities and events, we need to bear in mind that our duties as educators go beyond language teaching. Students' holistic development is the responsibility of each and every one of us. Furnishing students with the capacity to profit from the cultural and educational potential of places offering free access to knowledge and personal enrichment is one means by which we can fulfil that responsibility.

### References

- ALA (2008) *Serving non-English speakers in US public libraries*. Chicago, IL: ALA. [online] Available at: <https://bit.ly/2zwUrRz> (accessed 7 November 2018).
- ALA (2009) *The condition of US libraries: Public library trends, 2002–2009*. Chicago, IL: ALA. [online] Available at: <https://bit.ly/2JOHwPL> (accessed 7 November 2018).
- Berk & Associates (2005) *The Seattle Public Library Central Library: Economic Benefits Assessment*. Seattle, WA: Berk & Associates.
- Scott R (2011) The role of public libraries in community building. *Public Library Quarterly* **30** (3) 191–227.
- SNFCC (n.d.) Welcome to the SNFCC! [Flyer]. Athens: SNFCC.
- SNFCC (2016, February) *Updated impact study: Executive summary*. Athens: SNFCC. [online] Available at: <https://bit.ly/2SUSgAa> (accessed 7 November 2018).
- SNFCC (2018) *Calendar of events 10.2018*. Athens: SNFCC. [online] Available at: <https://bit.ly/2ShwYw3> (accessed 7 November 2018).
- The Boston Consulting Group (2016, February 22) *SNFCC impact study*. Athens: The Boston Consulting Group. [online] Available at: <https://bit.ly/2F3xTxS> (accessed 7 November 2018).



**Daniel Xerri** is a Lecturer in TESOL at the University of Malta. His most recent book is *Becoming Research Literate: Supporting Teacher Research in English Language Teaching* (<https://bit.ly/2P4YzTg>). [www.danielxerri.com](http://www.danielxerri.com)  
daniel.xerri@um.edu.mt