

Lifelong Learning: A Landmark for Personal Development and New Opportunities for Modernization of a University Library

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Abstract

The article is devoted to the role of the university library in supporting and developing lifelong education for different segments of society. The practical experience of the information-resource center American Corner and Maker Space Astana, located in the Eurasian National University Library, shows the importance of supporting personal growth and skill development of users. Considering the functioning “American Corner and Maker Space Astana” as one of the modern phenomena of social development, the authors of the article suggest looking at its experience in organizing all of its activities. This article will analyze activities, the survey results of users, the results of observations, as well as the success stories that have influenced the personal growth and success of its visitors (teachers, students and other categories of users).

An eccentricity of the research lies in the proposed experience and consideration of topic itself. The lifelong education concept is not yet so widely accepted in the post-Soviet region. Our society has just started to realize the importance of a lifelong education for personal growth and the sustainable development of a society as a whole. American Corner creates conditions for a productive and prosperous lifestyle by offering equal access to information and educational resources. The described experience will be beneficial for the modernization of this university library as well as for other university libraries in the country.

Keywords: lifelong education, university library, maker space zone, open access, information, Kazakhstan.

Introduction

Among the principles of the sustainable development of the society proclaimed by the United Nations, the principle of continuous education of citizens takes

a special place. This goal is connected with the solution of the most important challenge of mankind: underutilization of resources, experience, and energy. For now, lifelong learning serves as a tool to actualize the accumulated knowledge of the world; it allows people to fulfill themselves effectively. Global experience shows that to assure personal meaning, to respond the most diverse requests of people in all stages of their lives, to solve issues rooted in ontology, education must be based on the principle of continuity. As one of the authors of an article on lifelong learning said: "At the time when manufacturing technologies, social and economic relations of society keep changing quickly, a person's potential and a person's ability to be a genuine subject of cognitive, social, professional and innovative activities has an eternal value. Therefore, a person should be viewed not as a labor unit and instrument of social development, but as the goal of such development. Consequently, adult education is the complex of intellectual abilities of specialist, opportunities to competently and responsibly implement his professional and public functions. It allows him to produce new ideas and ways for self-development" (Verbitsky, 2016, translation provided by authors).

The idea of lifelong education originated in the 1980s when the whole world community was focusing on solving issues of developing countries, especially in the field of education. If to be precise, there is a fact in a history: this theory was put forward by Alexander Kapp, German historian of pedagogy and was named "Andragogy" (Pedagogical dictionary of terminology). At that time, everything was conceived for the first time. However, the concept of lifelong education is not widely accepted in the post-Soviet region. Nevertheless, researchers of this topic note in their publications that in developed countries "lifelong education" is no longer the ideal benchmark for building a system as a whole, but a commonly accepted rule. (Ilacavichus, 2014). Our society is just realizing its importance and its role in personal development and as a factor of sustainable development of society. In recent decades, attention to lifelong education is constantly increasing due to the rise of both needs and opportunities for the multiple (continuous) professional development, retraining and even changing the profession of working people, new challenges of adults' education in connection with increased cultural demands, as well as awareness of the need for training and knowledge as a part of the new healthy lifestyle. As a result, new courses are launched, not only for adult working citizens but also for the elderly.

In the documents that determine the strategy for the development of education in Kazakhstan, the idea of continuing education is a backbone. In order to achieve great goals, all of us must change our worldview in accordance with modern realities. World processes move quickly, and we must be ready for anything. We need to reform our own consciousness and educate a new generation of Kazakhstanis according to the ideas reflected in the article of the president of Republic of Kazakhstan "Looking ahead: modernization of public consciousness." (Nazarbayev, 2018).

In this research, we consider a contribution of the library and library staff in the development of lifelong education in Kazakh society by using a case of the diplomatic project of the State Government of the U.S., “American Corner in Kazakhstan”. Studying the experience of implementing this project over 15 years, we would like to note the important mission of Kazakhstan libraries in improving the situation in this field because most of American Corners are based on public libraries, users of which are from different layers of society. Our observations provide evidence of the positive impact of being located in libraries. The libraries with American Corners have more advantages. This innovativeness helps to solve issues in such important areas as the organization of library space and service, development of the book collection, and the enhancement of professional competence among staff.

The project of “American Corners in Kazakhstan”: New Ideas and New Capabilities

The United States of America was the first country to recognize the independence of Kazakhstan. In the last 26 years, these two countries have established a solid and multifaceted cooperation, which includes a dynamic exchange of knowledge and ideas. One of the important fields of cooperation between the two sides is culture and education. The American Corner is a vivid example of a successful educational cooperation, which will be 15 years old in 2018. The first corner in Kazakhstan was opened in 2003 in Oskemen, the regional center of East Kazakhstan. So far, eleven American Corners in the country provide an American style public library. They offer library and information services for everyone and have become a foundation for cultural and educational programs. Modern American Corner is a progressive platform for effective public-diplomatic cooperation with a target audience. They offer a friendly and inspiring atmosphere, qualified staff and modern technologies necessary to develop the potential of each visitor. (American Corners in Kazakhstan: 10 years of successful cooperation and partnership, 2013)

American Corner in the University library: opportunities, experience, and success stories

An American Corner was opened in the university library for the first time in 2015. In a solemn atmosphere, with the participation of the U. S. Mission Ambassador in Kazakhstan, Kazakhstan Minister of Culture, Rector of the University and the broader scientific community, the American Corner was opened as a part of the Scientific Library of the Eurasian National University. Before approving this decision, we considered for a long time some specifics of the university libraries, in particular, the fact that it is not open for third-party users. We wanted to be useful and in greater demand not only by the university community but also for the residents of Astana. Therefore, taking into account an age limit of sixteen and older, the American Corner opened its doors to everyone. This is the first step of

the university library to become useful and interesting for the local community. Today, American Corner is equipped with modern facilities and up-to-date information resources. For more than two and half years its activity center has become a comfortable and attractive space for educational, cultural and leisure services. We see this in the statistics showing the increased number of visitors who have discovered other services of the library.

Opening the American Corner was another great opportunity for the university to support the educational process and multilingual education, in particular, to improve English proficiency. Most visitors appreciate access to the world authoritative databases with global volumes of scientific articles and monographs, newspapers and magazines, American Corner provides. According to our observations, this is always in demand, both among eminent researchers and young scholars. Now ElibraryUSA provides access to four scientific databases: Academic OneFile, JSTOR, ProQuest dissertations and theses, Research in Context, as well as additional resources PressReader (world newspapers) and Flipster (the base of American magazines). These resources are available only through computers of the center: however, they expand the information capabilities of the university library. Statistical analysis of the requests and feedback from users of these electronic resources allow us to assert a constant growth of young researchers' demand and interest in the platform. Visitors accommodate their educational, research and cultural interests, get acquainted with the point of view of American scientists in various fields of knowledge and find friends and like-minded people. In addition, the American Corner has become an excellent platform for exchanging views, conducting discussions, gaining new and useful knowledge and skills for communication, and allowing for the personal growth of each visitor. So far, the corner is equipped with modern machinery and technology and has more than 1000 books. The center also provides its visitors with the possibility of intellectual development through games, robotics and constructors, 3D technology and other innovative practical exercises. In the Maker Space lab, there are 3D printers, milling machines, drones, robotics, Lego, Raspberry Pi 3, Arduino, wind and heat generators, and so on. Our reliable partner – the Chevron Company, made this possible.

American Corner activities are being built for several different uses. Among them we would like to note the most prioritized ones as promoting interest in English and improving the level of proficiency, increasing IT competencies and communicative abilities, developing the creative and intellectual potential of its users, and promoting the technical creativity and dissemination of new scientific knowledge. We propose to consider the American Corner experience with specific examples of these uses.

English and improving its level of proficiency among our users is one of the beneficial things we work on. Today English is considered to be the most widespread language. Indeed, English is spoken practically in all countries of the world. This

language has even become compulsory in our country. We always receive requests from people of different ages, different social statuses, and different professions to learn the language. One of the opportunities the American Corner provides for learning and improving English is the American English Live webinars offered by the Regional English Language Office (RELO) in Astana under the auspices of the Office of English Language Programs in Washington, D. C. This is a single virtual platform for teachers of English, where they share their experience and the knowledge they learned about their teaching activities. The course consists of six sessions. After its completion, participants receive a certificate by RELO, and, most importantly, learn modern methods of teaching English. In our experience, such online courses are not only interesting for English teachers and linguists, but also those teachers who teach in English, as well as students who are studying to be teachers. Of course, many people think that there is a big difference between English teachers and subject teachers. Nevertheless, experts all over the world have come to the conclusion that the teaching methodology is relevant for everyone, and this can be used absolutely for any class. During the American Corner's tenure, we have witnessed many success stories of self-development. In this regard, we want to tell one story of personal growth.

The main heroine of this story is Azhar Kaptagayeva, an alumna of the Future Leaders Exchange program. She had graduated from 11th grade and was preparing to apply for university abroad. In her spare time, she started coming to the American Corner and conducting English language courses as a volunteer. She founded a "Discover United States" club, where she shared information and personal experiences about each state of the U.S. Azhar says: "After a year of exchange in the U.S., I really missed American culture, a place where I could find resources in English and practice the language. Fortunately, the American Corner has become for me the right place, the "little piece of the United States in my motherland". Thanks to the wonderful and absolutely free materials in English, cool activities and friendly staff, I managed to keep in touch not only with the foreign world but also had an opportunity to realize my own projects and to share with people the experience and knowledge I acquired in the States. Also, the SAT preparation and TOEFL tutorials provided by the Corner library helped me successfully pass these exams taking me a step closer to my cherished dream of States education." (Translation provided by authors)

We may also say that the Maker Space activities are a good example of promoting technical creativity and the dissemination of new scientific knowledge. This is a space where makers come together. It is perhaps the most attractive zone for people interested in robotics, programming, and so on. In the Maker Space zone, we are actively promoting a Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) movement in Astana. The first steps have already been taken. Thanks to Chevron, which is the main sponsor of Maker Space as a project, we have a budget for the organization of useful and relevant courses and workshops each year.

Thereby, the company is contributing to the development of Kazakhstani society. Yes, it may seem awkward for many Kazakh libraries, that there is a tech-lab like “Steve Job’s garage” among the library shelves. However, it is like a breath of fresh air to students. In universities, there is still such a tendency that laboratories are under close supervision of the top management, and little is allowed to students. However, we must understand that everything in any technical laboratory must serve for the development of the younger generation. Who knows, maybe one of them will become a Nobel laureate in the future!? For three years, we have gained good momentum in this area. There is already a team of visitors who are regulars. One of them is Nurbolat Sansyzbay, a 21 years old senior of the Physics and Technology School, Eurasian National University. He majors in “radio engineering, electronics, and telecommunications”. He came to the American Corner for the first time two and half years ago. As soon as he found out about the Maker Space zone, Nurbolat immediately enrolled in the robotics course. During the interview we had, he mentioned: “I have always been excited by robots, programming, and artificial intelligence. The first year I actively attended classes I became good friends with other American Corner visitors who had the same interests as mine. Gradually, we started volunteering; I did not know that this was such a useful job. We began to share all the knowledge we had with beginners and, you know, it even helps to consolidate your own knowledge. No wonder, all the same, say that when you explain to someone, you even understand the essence of things better. That’s how I started volunteering and conducting classes, workshops in robotics. With other volunteers, we began to participate in different city festivals and outreach programs, where we met various interesting makers. This is cool. By the way, I like programming, programming languages are my element. With the support of the American Corner coordinators, I led a whole course on Java programming language from September to December 2017. It was a colossal experience for me. Prepare for classes and motivate the guys to finish the course and show them that programming can be not only a hobby but their livelihood is a lot harder than it seems. Fourteen participants out of eighteen completed the course. I believe it was a very good result of my work. At the end of the course, we conducted a mini-hackathon on the basis of Maker Space, where participants wrote a program for a simple 2D game in three hours. After my volunteering and teaching experience, I was invited to teach local robotics courses, and I can be sure that I will definitely find the job of my dreams. Now I am writing my thesis and creating a community of IOS developers within Maker Space. In Astana, there are not enough places to support makers. I want us to promote this movement and develop STEM culture in Kazakhstan. Not only do I advance in the ladder development: for example, my friend Yerkebulan, a sophomore, as well as I, teaches and accumulates experience, and Erkin has recently won one million KZT for the implementation of one project. I’m very grateful to Chevron that they invest in the development of Kazakhstan’s youth and American Corner and Maker Space Astana for being in my life” (Translation provided by authors).

Day by day, the number of Maker Space patrons is growing. We often hear from them expressions such as “What would we do without Maker Space!”, “If it would be available 24/7!” It is not every day that organizations hear such wonderful feedback. Those people who are now quietly creating a community of makers, two years ago came to us for the first time as just visitors. Their eyes were like fireballs fearfully blazing and yearning for new knowledge. Then we launched the robotics courses for the first time. It was very difficult to get the right people: since we did not know the place, where the makers are usually congregating. Since then, we are moving to develop young people’s creativity and to convey the main principles of the STEM movement. We are proud of the current outcome of Maker Space and inspired to continue it further.

Our experience shows that the American Corner initiatives contribute to personal development, as well as the emergence of new ideas and their dissemination among the local community. The development of a STEM-culture is an entirely new direction in our society. It is always appealing, especially when it is aimed at one specific audience. The panel discussion on “Women and Careers in the Field of STEM: Challenges and Opportunities” we held in April last year is proof for that. Participants of this event had a chance to learn about the TechWomen program, which is designed to inspire, connect and support the next generation of women leaders in STEM by providing access and opportunities for career advancement, to fulfill their dreams and become role models for women and girls of their society. The meeting was held within the framework of 25 years of cooperation between the United States and Kazakhstan in the field of innovation. Speakers during the meeting were women leaders in the STEM field who now work in such IT companies as Apple, Mozilla, Symantec, and Yahoo, as a result of their participation in the TechWomen program. Each of them told about their successful career and about the difficulties they had to overcome. The delegates shared their knowledge and experience with young girls from Kazakhstan to create and strengthen ties, expand the women’s community in technical areas and attract girls to these specialties. We want to highlight that this was the first visit of the TechWomen delegation to central Asia. We hope that this visit will positively influence the creation of effective cooperation throughout the region and will strengthen the work between people and countries in the field of scientific innovation. Over the past few years, TechWomen delegations visited Jordan, Morocco, Rwanda, South Africa and Tunisia. This project provides opportunities to improve the living standards and prospects of women and girls around the world to realize their potential in the high-tech industry.

Continuing to advance the STEM field in our society, in anticipation of EXPO 2017 and in the framework of International Earth Day observance, the American Corner and Maker Space Astana organized the city festival “ASTANA STEM FEST”. Festival organizers were inspired to popularize fundamental knowledge among Kazakhstani youth and schoolchildren, by demonstrating the dynamic

development of science and technology. We saw that it is very important for science to become convenient, understandable and useful in the daily life so that it may give stimulus for people to choose it as a professional goal or turn it into a wonderful hobby during the weekends. During the festival, the American Corner had an opportunity to introduce the Maker Space zone to the public and invite everyone interested in robotics and programming to participate in its events. Several technical workshops like “3D modeling and work with 3D printers”, Arduino and Sparkfun as a base of robotics”, “Raspberry Pi 2” were offered. This event served as a brainstorming session for future activities of the Maker Space zone. Fest participants were encouraged to share their ideas and suggestions. Taking into account the interest and the relevance of the services of the Maker Space zone, we intend to expand, with the support of partners, the technical base of the zone in the future. This space allows us to attract more people from different age groups, to realize new projects and this makes our work interesting and valuable.

The development of communication skills and mentoring future leaders is one of the key purposes of the American Corner’s activities. One of the best examples is the Toastmasters Club, which started functioning from the opening of the center. This is a crucial window of opportunity to develop talent and reveal a potential of youth. Herehere professional toastmasters share their experience in conducting discussions or public speaking and become a mentor for newcomers. Each day it gathers hundreds of people together.

If the Toastmasters Club helps in the self-development of young people, then a Beginner for Elderly People club functions for the elderly (60–70 years old). Retired people gather at the American Corner twice a week to learn English, improve their computer skills, help each other solve problems, spend their leisure time, find interlocutors and, of course, to share their lifelong experiences with a new generation. This “Elderly’s club” has a large educational value to the young visitors of the center, who help them with great pleasure to master the Internet using online services, and search for necessary information, thereby improving the quality of the elders’ life. Above all, the event brings up the youth’s respectful and caring attitude to an older generation.

Summing up our experiences in different directions, we want to note that each American Corner may have its own specificity; however, our main objective is to organize a cognitive place for leisure and a platform for further training and growth of each visitor’s motivation. Therefore, it is always possible to attend workshops and master classes for a certain target group. The American Corner activities are aimed at professional training in soft skills: leadership quality, communication, speaking skills, business management skills, new technologies, and so on. Most of the activities are held in English, which indirectly raises the level of ability in the language. Events are usually arranged by the American Corner team of volunteers.

We try to support and motivate them in every possible way so that at the same time we are helping to develop the volunteer movement in our society.

Results of the American Corner Users Study

To be efficient it is always necessary to have a constant feedback on our resources and services. We do oral surveys, questionnaires, interviews, local studies of focus groups, and observations. To learn how the American Corner contributes to lifelong education and personal growth, we launched an online survey of our patrons. Ninety respondents in different age groups (25–60 years old) and social status (students, young professionals, and retired people) participated in this study. Among the most interesting and useful events are our discussion clubs (72.5%), Maker Space courses (45.5%), Toastmasters Club (27.3%), workshops on personal growth (27.3%). To the question “what specific examples of personal growth have you gained through American Corner activities?” we received answers like “Discussion clubs and movies in English significantly helped to improve my level and new acquaintances and interesting topics were a bonus”, “wonderful atmosphere and excellent staff are the cause of constant desire to come here on a daily base”, “Corner motivates us to learn. And, of course, the rich library helps us to expand our intellectual horizon and gain new knowledge”, “While learning circuits, I visited American Corner and was impressed by the equipment presented at the Maker Space zone (Arduino sets), which allowed to practice theoretical materials. Now I work in the field of electronics and circuits directly with those sets of Arduino”, “I have been visiting American Corner for only months because I am always worried about upgrading my vocabulary. And I hope that my English level will be improved”, “Classes for elderly and the transparency of this group give me more freedom to learn English. I have already learned many rules, improved my pronunciation, and enriched my vocabulary. I even found active retired volunteers for the implementation of social projects”. These answers inspire us to run more active and diverse events!

Recommendations

The world is moving on, and methods of learning and teaching become obsolete. Every year libraries spend a huge amount of money to buy books. However, those books and methods, perhaps will not be useful after two years. Therefore, libraries should switch to electronic databases and additionally use updated resources like American English. As we mentioned before this is a resource center organized by the office of English language programs in Washington D.C. There are a lot of American English resources for teachers in open access: interactive and game materials, texts of songs, information about the culture of the U.S., electronic version of Forum magazine, webinars with American specialists of English. <https://americanenglish.state.gov/> and so on.

To share methods of teaching and studying various subjects areas including English is one of the trends of Western education. It is well known that professors of many leading universities in the world like Stanford, Harvard, MIT, and Johns Hopkins provide their courses in open access through Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC). We kindly recommend taking a look at the following links: www.coursera.org, www.edx.org, www.futurelearn.com, www.skillshare.com, and www.udacity.com.

Every day we face one fact, when most of the students (especially freshmen) do not have any skills in writing scientific papers, do not have effective methods of searching necessary information. High Schools often do not teach to do research. We recommend seeing it as an opportunity, not a challenge. So, from the author's' point of view, university libraries together with university scientists can conduct workshops on science, principles of science, and teach search strategies to on a regular basis.

Almost all universities in the world have students submit essays on each topic of discipline or field of study. They are similar to our scientific papers. That is to say, if a student reads 3–4 books on the same subject for 10 days, then he/she will be able to express their own perception, and summarize his/her point of view because after reading different sources the student develops his subjective view, which he believes in and may prove. In terms of this, university libraries may design workshops on writing research papers thereby contributing to the struggle against plagiarism.

Now, every university library has access to the electronic databases, actively promoted in the university community. As long as each of them has some uniqueness and own specifics both in content and interface there is a huge responsibility for librarians: to conduct justification and explain the work with those databases to the freshmen, to professors with Soviet education. In its own experience, American Corner does not usually work with large groups of people, when explaining how to work with databases. Why is that? Because it has higher effectiveness to explain to one person inside and out than do it in a group. You may ask why. The answer is obvious: a person who totally understands the whole content can easily explain it to others, and with geometric progression, the number of people who knows databases will go up. However, we have to understand that it is a long process: in one day, we cannot move mountains, but if you build one format of conducting workshops, it can be supplemented and repeated further.

When we get any kind of service, each of us has a principle "How you are met, such impression you will remain." Let us tell you a story of one of our visitors, "when I was a freshman, I came to the reading hall of the library. Immediately, I approached the librarian with a request, she probably sat without mood and scolded me that I had not provided the full information about the book I needed. At that time I didn't know that students needed to provide the exact address of

the book and I naturally had a negative attitude towards this department and personally to that librarian. For four years of my bachelor degree and two years of masters I didn't even get close to the department, much less to this librarian". Another example: "There were few textbooks connected with my major in the library of my university, but, fortunately, there were two qualified librarians in one of the departments. I remember them very well. Every time I was coming with any request I always tried to approach one of them because even if there wouldn't be a particular book I had requested they could suggest alternatives. They were always prompt and could explain anything, if necessary, and I had never seen aggression on their part. So, those two examples give us an opportunity to draw the following conclusion: the wall of library success depends on the laid "bricks", so librarians is a key factor of library prosperity! If the librarians don't serve at the highest level, the wall will collapse quickly. In this connection, we give a couple of recommendations: 1) Only qualified librarian should meet visitors, who will familiarize them with the basic rules of using resources and services of the library, will explain everything about library, and will direct people to the necessary department; 2) staff of the library should always improve the quality of service they provide: generally accepted norms of communication, personal etiquette, principles of service management and so on. In our opinion, these recommendations should be emphasized because their observance is a pledge of the authority and positive image of the library and librarian as a whole.

It is necessary to develop a volunteer movement. Unfortunately, in our society, this movement is not as successful as in foreign countries. American Corner experience shows that if a correct way has been found, then we will find both find assistants and help people to reveal themselves, develop their abilities, and show their demand to society. Thus, we educate socially active people, who are engaged in their lifelong education.

We would like to say a few words about an organization of library space, which should be available both for individual and group work. Again, from our experience, it should be organized in a way that users may spend their time in the library, by themselves and do not depend on the work of a librarian. The main principle is the open access to the resources, to computers, comfortable furniture and ... full cordiality and willingness of the librarian to help each visitor regardless of mood or other circumstances. Instead of harsh librarians, we encourage offering the visitor a self-service system where you can independently order and pass a book, find a secluded place to read a book or watch a movie and work with groupmates on a joint project. Librarians need to move away from old habits and show the features of a modern educational and cultural leisure center (in the format of "coworking centers").

It is always necessary to study the user's opinion. Feedback helps to improve the provision of resources and services and identify bottlenecks. We regularly launch a survey of our visitors in order to identify the quality of our services, the activities

we run; we ask respondents to write about the shortcomings of the organization. The feedback from our users allows us to keep up the pulse: from their answers, we learn about the claimed resources and services, make adjustments to the schedule of our events, the arrangement of the American Corner space and so on. Perhaps, our recommendations are superfluous, and not so edifying to others, but this is our experience, our observations. We hope that our recommendations will be helpful in the process of modernization of university libraries and will contribute to the breakaway of stereotypes about the library and librarian in our society.

In conclusion, we would like to note that American Corner's work gives an opportunity for students and teachers of the university and for the local community to develop skills in STEM fields and gain new knowledge, motivates to get new majors and serves as an active and productive pastime. Fresh out of school, students have to develop a habit to improve acquired knowledge, to make their lives more intense and interesting. Generally, American Corner, located in the university library, provides many opportunities for the development of the library itself: book collections are being replenished, materials and technical base are being strengthened, new user groups are being attracted, the library is becoming more popular and well-known in the local community, there is a positive impact on the development of staff in terms of English language and technical proficiency. The library of the university becomes not only a center of knowledge and information but also a place that helps and promotes lifelong education.

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