Strategies for Engaging in International Librarianship: Misconceptions and Opportunities

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Abstract

Higher education institutions are increasingly formalizing internationalization priorities into their strategic plans. As a result library and information science (LIS) programs are beginning to encourage the inclusion of more international perspectives in student experiences. One means of doing so is by drawing upon international librarianship (IL), an LIS field of study since the 1950s. However, IL is a relatively small field that is not understood well. In order for IL to be studied, practiced, and funded in ways that are appropriate to its potential, this essay revisits the concept of IL, discusses some of its misconceptions, and advocates for more intentional, reciprocal, and reflective applications. It is also argued that IL praxis should be coupled with critical theorist (or critical librarian) values, in order to achieve the most balanced relationships.

Keywords

international librarianship, critical librarianship

About Author

Melanie Sellar began cultivating her teaching practice as the Community Outreach and then later eLearning Librarian at the University of California, Irvine. She then moved on to architect the next iteration of the information literacy program at Marymount California University in her role as the Education Services Librarian. Most recently Melanie has been further deepening her teaching praxis and pedagogical foundations in her work as Senior Instructional Designer at Loyola Marymount University's School of Education where she develops online learning experiences and professional development programs for education faculty and graduate students. In 2005 as an MLIS graduate student at the University of Western Ontario (Canada), Melanie founded the non-profit organization Librarians Without Borders (LWB); she has served as its Co-Executive Director nearly continuously from that time. This LWB work led Melanie to the opportunity to teach international librarianship at the San Jose State University iSchool, where she has been an adjunct faculty member since 2015. In addition to her MLIS, Melanie has a BA in Linguistics from McMaster University and an MA in Linguistics from the University of Ottawa.

Our profession of librarianship can be practiced on three geographic scales: local, national, and international. With little effort we can conceive of what it means to apply our praxis locally to the communities in which we work directly, and by volunteering with our many national associations and organizations we understand what it means to engage in broader regional librarianship. When it comes to delineating international librarianship (IL), however, misconceptions abound.

According to Peter Lor (2009), perhaps the most pre-eminent scholar in the field, the concept of "international librarianship" first appeared under that name in the 1950s. The period of the 1950s-1980s brought a flurry of publishing owing partly to growing intergovernmental and interorganizational cooperation and to interest in examining the legacy of colonialism on global libraries. Nevertheless, IL still occupied relatively little real estate in our North American scholarship and professional conversations. How well it was understood and defined seemed only to matter to a small group of fervent scholars, allowing misconceptions to persist to the present day.

Times, of course, have changed. With our increasingly integrated world, internationalization (of curriculum, students, and faculty) is now an imperative in nearly every North American higher education institution's strategic plan. As a result, our library and information science programs are beginning to respond to that institutional priority by either formally encoding internationalization in program learning outcomes or by informally encouraging faculty to include such perspectives in student experiences. Our academic libraries are also responding to this priority by encouraging faculty-librarians to internationalize their scholarship and service.

Given this renewed focused on the international scale of our profession, it seems prudent to consider what is meant by "international librarianship" so that it might be studied, practiced, and funded in ways that are appropriate to its potential. This essay will first review three popular conceptions of IL and then present a more intentional, reciprocal, and reflective application, which we should aim to instill in our practice.

At first glance the term "international librarianship" seems an immense concept, possibly subsuming every kind of library activity and conversation under it, rendering the concept essentially inoperable. We can see international connections to and orientations for almost any work that we do; for example, participating on a listserv that includes colleagues from other countries, collecting works published abroad, or releasing library instructional materials into our institutional repositories under Creative Commons licenses. While this "international-immersion" approach is a perfectly reasonable step in cultivating a global orientation, it does not include activities that are intentional or ambitious enough, however, to constitute robust IL.

Conversely, a narrow implementation of IL draws upon the deeply helping nature of our profession and situates it almost as a charitable project. We have all likely received appeals to assist with schools or libraries abroad that are "in need," and being a profession inherently socially-justice minded and philanthropic, we naturally want to help. The result is an inpouring of goods, services, and funds into a target region. There is a one-direction orientation to this kind of work—typically the Western librarian to the recipient community—which can run the risk of keeping the community at a distance and promoting exoticism, without the donor librarian experiencing reciprocal learning or innovation in cooperation with the partner community.

While the charity-project can be "...a good starting point to think about what we can do as librarians" (Saleh, 2010), it can be insufficient, even harmful, if not implemented thoughtfully with community leadership shepherding the work. Our profession is not immune to misguided efforts infused with one-sided ideologies and priorities, even if unconsciously done so. We need only to look back at efforts to build libraries in post-colonial Africa to find such evidence.

For example, Amadi (1981) wrote in *African Libraries: Western Tradition and Colonial Brainwashing* on the negative effects of the colonial influence on African libraries, particularly with its privileging of print culture over oral culture and the imposition of the Western model without regard for the communities themselves:

> We conceptualize information problems in terms of a place, building, room or rooms set apart for the keeping and use of a collection of books and other materials, or a collection of books and other literacy material kept for reading, study, and consultation. In other words, we define what the library is or ought to become, rather than what the informational needs are and how they ought to be met. In the case of African libraries and educational development, the assumption tends to be that the very history and essence of Africa itself began with only the so-called "discovery" and subsequent settlements by Europeans.(p. 51)

Swank's (1963) "Six Items for Export: International Values in American Librarianship" speaks to Western librarians' sense of superiority at the time. He asks, "What is [the American] cultural product that merits emulation?" (p. 711) and also encourages the reader to "[not] overlook the contributions of British librarianship in Africa, or French librarianship in Latin America, or Australian librarianship in Indonesia" (p. 712). While he acknowledges that "we are beginning to understand that there also exists an Eastern heritage from which Western librarianship may benefit" (p. 712), Swank quite vigorously argued that there is much of the American library model that should be exported internationally given the advanced state of its library systems and profession.

What is nearly absent in this influential article is recognition of the cultural assets of global communities. They are talked mainly in terms of deficits. Fifty years later we now have important movements like critical librarianship (CL) growing to help us recognize privilege, redress power inequities, and give voice to our global partners. CL, as this essay will argue, should be a theoretical lens brought to any IL work.

Even now in 2016 when we receive international requests for "help," we need to intentionally slow down our processes, ensure that we engage thoughtfully and meaningfully with the partner communities, and challenge our own assumptions. While it is popular, for example, to include international projects in LIS courses where a student group "solves" or "makes recommendations" for a community abroad, this can unintentionally perpetuate stereotypes and power structures because time constraints of the semester require accelerated learning about or engagement with that community. These kinds of projects must be couched very carefully. To that end, consciously embracing a critical theorist mindset when implementing IL in our scholarship, service, and curriculum is an important habit to form.

A third approach to IL is the description of libraries and librarianship in one or more countries other than our own. Our professional literature has many examples of this kind of scholarship: these works may be "[...] geographical (that is, about a country or region) or topical (for example, about cooperation, buildings and so on) in nature" (Jackson, 2003). For example, a study may describe the state of rural public libraries in a given African country or present and briefly discuss the results of a survey on job satisfaction given to academic colleagues in an Asian higher-education library system.

Like the international-immersion and charity-project approaches, this "other-study" orientation seems a reasonable way to practice IL when one is first embarking in activities at this geographic scale. Unlike the other two approaches, other-study has the potential to lend itself to greater insights. That being said, most articles published in this orientation tend to be strong on description but weak on deeper analysis and theorizing. While we may come away with a better sense of the state-of-the-art of some library condition in some country, we may not necessarily come away with a better idea of why things may be a particular way and the implications for the advancement of our profession. For example, deeper analysis might yield insights into political, economic, and social factors that promote or inhibit a healthy environment for global libraries.

Where does this popular orientation of IL as studying the "other" come from? Peter Lor (2008) has interestingly argued that American English often treats the word 'international' to mean 'from another country,' whereas in British English this would be called 'foreign.' Therefore "[w]hat is not American, is

'international.'" Indeed, in this author's experience teaching international librarianship, most students enter the course assuming the focus will be studying "other (i.e. foreign) libraries." As one student reflected in a course discussion forum: "Up until now I assumed that international librarianship automatically involved libraries outside the US. I think that assumption was based on my American interpretation of the word international meaning not American (an assumption I'm working to correct)."

Thus far this essay has introduced international-immersion, charity-project, and other-study as three approaches to IL, but has also argued that while all three may be acceptable entry into the IL field, they do not realize its full potential. A more substantive implementation follows, and the author also includes a call to incorporate critical librarianship into this kind of work.

More than 40 years ago, Parker (1974) put forth this definition of international librarianship, one that has currency to this day among IL scholars:

> International librarianship consists of **activities** carried out among or between governmental or non-governmental institutions, organizations, groups or individuals of **two or more nations**, to **promote, establish, develop, maintain and evaluate** library, documentation and allied services, and **librarianship and the library profession** generally, in any part of the world. (p. 221)

This definition establishes IL as a field of activity characterized by a reciprocal, cooperative relationship between two international actors around some common goal in order to advance librarianship.

Those actors should, in the author's judgment, be librarian-bodies or have significant librarian representation. Given that the pathways for becoming a librarian vary globally—an MLIS graduate degree is not the norm—one must be flexible and understand a librarian to be any person committed to the profession and intentionally engaging with its practices.

When one compares a typical other-study article against this definition, one can see the absence of some critical aspects of this Parker (1974) definition. First, the idea of reciprocity between two international partners is missing, as usually the "other-study" involves one researcher describing the library conditions somewhere else, perhaps without a local collaborator in the country under study. Secondly, this kind of work lacks action: there is no collaborative goal being undertaken nor are there any clear contributions to the advancement of our profession.

Lor (2008) provided useful examples of activities and publications that best fall within this definition. Building upon his structure, the author offers the following activities and publications as exemplars embodying critical aspects of the above definition:

- Various national library associations develop joint guidelines on information literacy instruction.
- The Progressive African Library and Information Activists' Group is founded to give voice to Pan-African librarians in localizing an African library model.
- An Asian Studies Librarian represents the Asian, African, and Middle Eastern Section of the Association of College and Research Libraries in the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions.
- Two public libraries in different nations collaborate together in a sister-library program for professional exchange and learning opportunities.

These kinds of activities may also yield publications that are insightful, evaluative, and theoretical. The following articles serve as excellent examples of IL publishing. There is international reciprocity and collaboration evident, as well as introspection and theorizing in order to advance the librarianship profession:

Miller, J. (2014). A comparative study of public libraries in Edinburgh and Copenhagen and their potential for social capital creation. *Libri: International Journal Of Libraries & Information Services, 64*, 316-326. doi:10.1515/libri-2014-0025

Lending and borrowing across borders: issues and challenges with international resource sharing. (2009). *Reference & User Services Quarterly, 49*, 54-63.

The author encourages her international librarianship students to think of the IL field like a target. Some activities are prototypically IL, possessing all of the ideal attributes. Then there are other activities that possess perhaps some or few of the attributes, and thus they fall somewhere on the outskirts of the target. Finally, there are others whose inclusion under the IL umbrella may be quite debatable.

For example, a question that frequently presents itself is whether non-governmental organization (NGO) work in libraries constitutes IL. Consider Better World Books (BWB): it collects books from North American libraries, sells them online, and then allocates a portion of the profits to partner libraries in the developing world. The significance of its financial contributions to international libraries is without dispute. But is it international librarianship?

The author would argue that while BWB contributes to international libraries, those kind of activities do not constitute international librarianship. To begin there is no true collaboration around a common goal, but moreover, this work does not engage with the practices of librarianship nor contribute to its advancement. NGOs can certainly do IL work—Riecken Community Libraries and Librarians Without Borders are good examples—so long as they embody those critical IL characteristics.

The Parker (1974) definition lays out the core attributes of substantive IL work but leaves it to the practitioner to overlay theoretical perspectives of their choosing. That is, what ideas or values will influence the kind of activities one engages in and how one goes about doing them?

To that end, critical theorist perspectives are useful to learn about and to consciously apply in IL work. Because IL is centered upon cooperative relationships involving diverse partners, there are bound to be inequities in those relations. Without identification and examination of those inequities and sources of privilege, we risk doing (continued) cultural harm and deriving generalizations and practices that are flawed, non-inclusive, and biased.

In the author's international librarianship course at San José State University iSchool, students complete readings about and engage in discussions centered upon critical theories. Before moving forward in the course, students are asked to crowdsource a class manifesto (that is, a declaration of beliefs, motives, and intentions) that should be adopted for their international librarianship work in the course.

Margarethe McCall, for example, offered this powerful, insightful contribution to the Fall 2015 course manifesto:

> We will read our assigned readings with an open and reflective mind and a critical practice focused on how biases related to such variables as race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality might have impacted the author's as well as our own interpretations and conclusions. We will strive to seek out sources in international librarianship scholarship and reporting that reflect critically on underlying assumptions/theories and entrenched processes/methods.

Another Fall 2015 student, Jonathan P. Bell, reflected on how his understanding of IL evolved during the course and how critical theorist perspectives influenced his work:

> I came into the International and Comparative Librarianship class thinking we would study how practicing librarians worked in countries other than the United States. I assumed our class would focus on day-to-day library operations and practices worldwide. I knew that the work of librarians in [other] countries wasn't the same as US librarianship, but I figured we would examine the core similarities that bridged international differences among practitioners. Instead I learned that the practice of librarianship varies globally, though the goal of providing responsible information service is the same. I did not expect to find such a rich theoretical grounding—especially in Critical Theory—in International Librarianship! That was quite stimulating and refreshing.

If we aim to practice a form of international librarianship that is reciprocal, action-oriented, and focused on advancing our shared profession, while also applying a philosophical lens of critical librarianship, we can move our activities beyond short-term charity work or descriptive studies into work that can have an influential and long-lasting impact. With the imperative upon all of us to internationalize our work, now is the time to reflect critically upon what we have been doing and identify strategies for moving our work forward in the ways advocated for in this essay.

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