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# LIBRARY LOST IN TRANSLATION: DIVERSIFYING OUR APPROACH TO STRENGTHEN INFORMATION LITERACY SKILLS IN INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

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## INTRODUCTION

Whether you read the headlines regarding the presence of international students in U.S. colleges and universities or simply look around your campus, it is clear that the demographics are changing with more international students making up our student bodies. The 2016 *Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange* states that international students now constitute 5% of total student population at U.S. institutions. This is an increase of 0.2% from the previous year, a 0.8% increase from 2014, and a 1.6% increase from just seven years prior (Barta, Chen, Jou, McEnaney, & Fuller, 2016). At the University of Rochester (UR), there has been an 18% increase in international student enrollment from 2000 to 2014 (Barta et al., 2016). Statistics from the UR's International Services Office (ISO) show a total of 2887 international students and 488 visiting scholars representing 134 countries who were enrolled in/attended UR in the 2016-2017 academic year (2016). The level of education at which these students enroll (i.e., undergraduate vs. graduate) and the countries from which they arrive has prompted college officials, within the library in particular, to plan more carefully for the services we provide to encourage and support their success.

The planners for the LOEX conference breakout session, Library Lost in Translation, have a sense of what entering a new library in a foreign country can feel like.

*As a college student, spending her junior year abroad at l'Universite de Bourgogne, particular projects required research. Kim had worked at her college library so she knew several systems and services quite well. Where would she ask for assistance and acquire the necessary materials from a bibliotheque universitaire (BU) that functioned in much less customer service oriented ways?*

*Mantra, as a first year PhD student in the University of South Florida, had to develop an annotated bibliography on the most current research on Ernest Hemingway. Her professor told her to look up MLA International Bibliography to locate sources. Walking into the library, she saw a bank of computers. It stumped her. She had arrived from India three weeks prior and her library there looked very different. What would the gentleman at the front desk think of her if she admitted she did not know how to find her sources? The computer screens asked for her Net Id. On logging in, the library website revealed itself with several tabs and links. Where was MLA International Bibliography?*

With these backgrounds, both librarians are sensitive to developing services and experiences that support all of our university students, but focus special attention on the confusion that exists when an international student aims to use an American college library for the first time.

## FEELING THE PAIN

In the interactive session at LOEX, participants with background experience using a library abroad shared their stories. While in the end, navigating a foreign library was manageable and not terribly different from the processes and systems used in the United States, issues including language barriers and bureaucratic red tape (e.g., to access a library card) stood in the way of making

the transition seamless. The participants also acknowledged, however, that as librarians they have transferrable knowledge that helps them understand the underpinnings of how any library functions.

The first thing the participants did was complete a poll that helped establish a baseline of the most essential services and resources an American library provides to help scholars achieve success.

### Figure 1: Completed Polleverywhere Survey of Essential Library Services/Resources

Participants listed databases as the most essential resource, with librarians, help, reference, instruction, consultations, assistance, and guides also showing up prominently. Understanding that the people-related and personal services that American university libraries provide may appear foreign to many international students, it is important that these services are highly advertised, introduced, and encouraged. If we consider the background experiences of international students and the expectations they bring based on libraries in their home countries, we cannot take for granted that a Chinese student, for instance, would even consider asking a librarian for help. Furthermore, if we recall Mantra's state of confusion when trying to find the MLA database in a sea of numerous other targeted databases and a website filled with competing information, possibly written in library jargon, it would be easy to imagine this international student giving up.

Once the participants established the most essential services to encourage researchers' success, they were sent to the homepage of a library in another country to discover the library experience from a different perspective. Pairs or trios of librarians followed a link to either a university homepage, where they would have to first navigate to the library's website, or directly to a given library's site. Some sites appeared in English, while others left the participants struggling to access an English-translated version of the page. If the pair or trio possessed some language skills in the region where they were sent, that became an advantage. The library sites explored represented a variety of countries and continents:

University of Cape Town: <https://www.uct.ac.za/>

IIM Calcutta: <https://www.iimcal.ac.in/>

University of Auckland: <https://www.auckland.ac.nz/en.html>

Peking University Library: <http://www.lib.pku.edu.cn/portal/>

Universite de Bourgogne: <https://www.u-bourgogne.fr/>

Universidad La Salle, Mexico: <http://www.lasalle.mx/>

Delhi University: <http://crl.du.ac.in/>

### Figure 2: Example of a Table Tent that Provided a Web Address and Questions to Consider

Participants navigated their designated website while talking out their observations, insights, and in some cases, frustrations. They considered elements like website design, languages and terminology used/offered, key services from the previous poll everywhere that could be easily found, etc. The LOEX conference room was abuzz with lively conversation and outward displays of emotion. In the end, after about 10 minutes of navigation, participants added their feedback to a Google doc (<https://goo.gl/13bel5>) that served as our takeaway notes.

Depending on which library website a group explored, the participants noted elements of a website that they, as simulated international students, found helpful—overall layout and design, easy one-step discovery search box, English language and library terminology aligned to what American librarians are used to, and many relevant and helpful images. In other words, what some participants liked about foreign websites mirrored what they might be most used to, easing the transition from one library system to another. However, if we took this strategy as a guiding principle for international student-friendly web redesign, attempting to have an American library website emulate the look and feel of various sites from all around the world would be nearly impossible.

Elements that participants found to be frustrating or counterintuitive were: an overabundance of information on one page; inconsistency in which webpages within a university were available for English translation; navigating one's way from the university home site to the library's page; non-standard protocol of words being hyperlinked (or not); jargon in English that may have been a literal translation; costs associated with services like research consultations; unclear connections between links and the resulting pages; and inconsistencies between icons and overall wayfinding. Placing oneself into the shoes of an international student at a U.S. library, participants began to see how difficult a first visit to the library, whether physical or virtual, could be. The visit could be off-putting, intimidating, and in the end, not at all helpful.

To complicate matters, a foreign library website could hinder more than it helps. Session participants further commented on key elements of website navigation that they felt were missing. Many suggested that an absent call for help, whether in the form of a chat button, a list of research librarians' contact information, or links to essential services like Interlibrary Loan or research consultations, would leave students feeling helpless—giving up altogether or turning to their foreign peers for advice. Considering past practices of students in their home countries, librarians offering assistance may not be a service international students have been used to. Based on informal interviews at the University of Rochester in 2011, Chinese students within the Electrical and Computer

Engineering Department talked about their impressions and experiences with libraries and librarians in their home cities. The idea that a librarian would do more than sit behind a desk and retrieve or shelve books was astonishing. They were surprised that in the United States, librarians offer library tours, introductions, and classes/workshops to help prepare students for their research assignments. That said, without knowing this, there would be little chance a Chinese student would ever consider approaching a librarian for help.

In the United States, we have the opposite situation of offering assistance that may not be recognized and taken advantage of by our students. This led the session participants into the next activity, which was taking the insights gleaned from seeing the library through the eyes of a foreigner to exploring one's own practices to see how we can be of greater visible service to our international students.

## DEVELOPING NEW PRACTICES

From placing ourselves into the minds of an international student in India, France, China, or South Africa, participants then looked at their own library website with the eyes of a student who might hail from one of those countries. Is it a welcoming site, so that even with language barriers, students can identify what they need from the library? How is our library portraying itself to a student who may have never heard of services like Interlibrary Loan, Reserves, or Research Assistance via chat? Do our sites look cluttered with information overload and jargon?

Again in pairs and trios, participants evaluated their websites with a critical lens and began to make suggestions for what they could do better. For instance, a website that appears riddled with too much information could offer a prominent "where to start" guide. This could be more welcoming and less stigmatizing than a link for "international students." Standardization of service names, with clarification of what a service provides, could help students—whether international or domestic—choose the targeted assistance they need. Meaningful and universally understood icons could ease the pain of students whose English language is not proficient enough to handle specific library jargon. Information gathering exercises within our libraries like focus groups and user experience testing of our websites, along with an investigation of websites of the countries where the bulk of our international students originate, could help bring clarity to issues American librarians have been taking for granted.

Beyond notes captured in the Google doc, the participants discussed suggestions for action beyond the library homepage. Within library classes, for instance, we could disseminate glossaries for the library-specific jargon and address specific terms that come with double meaning. What does *access* mean to an international student? Is a *journal* more than something I write in to reflect my thoughts? What are materials on *reserve*? On library tours, we could begin with a conversation of all attendees' past experience with libraries and make translations as we navigate the various spaces, services, and resources along the tour. We can create LibGuides that equally provide assistance to students studying abroad and that are arriving from abroad. At UR, we have plans to film a welcome video that includes past international students sharing their experience with the library. Student comments could cover what challenges they initially faced, what they find to be most helpful, what other students should not miss, and how the library helps them succeed. The immediate plan is to play this video at our 2017-2018 international student orientation, but this could also be prominently displayed on the library's homepage (and/or that of other relevant student services offices). Such a video could prove quite powerful, especially as we have anecdotal evidence that certain cultures, whether national or disciplinary, rely on each other for answers about the library. This can cause a cycle of misinformation and certainly does not update those students on what's new and most helpful within the library. This sentiment was punctuated by a LOEX participant who shared a story of a distraught international student. The student met with the librarian at the prompting of her professor when it became more and more difficult for the student to find any research on her chosen topic. Peers of the student had directed her to use ScienceDirect, because that's what they knew. In the end, ScienceDirect was far from the best source the student should have been using and the librarian was able to send the student on the right path. Anecdotes from UR suggest that a Warner School of Education student was able to learn more accurate information about what the library offers due to a class-related library orientation than what she was learning from her international peers.

A final consideration that librarians must tussle with is whether or not to translate library information (on the webpage, in LibGuides, etc.) into multiple languages representing our international student population. This becomes a philosophical question. We see Asian students converting their web browsers for easy readability in their native language. While this provides an extra advantage to students who may struggle with the English language, it may hurt them in the end, as all coursework and assignments will be read, heard, and written in English. The earlier international students can immerse themselves in English at an American university, the stronger their language skills will become over time. At UR, we have translated a welcome message of our Library Dean into several of the languages representing our highest percentage of international students by country (2015). We did this, not to encourage students to depend on their native language, but as a first welcome where we made it clear that we recognize their unique differences and their courage to study abroad.

## IN CLOSING

In a current political climate where international students are hesitant to visit home for fear they may face difficulties returning to the United States, it is uncertain if we will continue along the path of increasing growth in international student enrollment. Lost will be the richness of multiple cultures blending in the residence halls, classrooms, and all over campus and the strength in creativity and problem solving that comes with a diverse student body. For now, libraries welcome students from all cultures and it is inherent that we continue to find ways to support every student.

*Library Lost in Translation* provided an engaging discussion where participants were encouraged to see their library through the eyes of an American culture first-timer, a learner of the English language, and a novice library user. They had to “travel” to a foreign library to experience the frustration of a newcomer and then “return” to their U.S. library to begin seeing their services and communication strategies in a new light. The Google doc of takeaway notes showcases the ideas generated within the session and the hope is that the participants returned to their home institutions ready to make some modest changes.

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