9-2022

Centering or Empowering—Shifting Power to the Library Members

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Contribution Title: Centering or Empowering - Shifting Power to the Library Members

Pre-Print: September 21, 2022

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COLUMN EDITOR'S NOTES: This column examines advances in public-facing library services. The focus is on how broadly framed library services evolve and impact users as well as how diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility, usability, and leadership advance service development. The column seeks to bring a broader viewpoint of public services as all services impacting users, beyond traditionally viewed public services such as instruction and education, programming, and circulation. The strength of the column is its broad, international focus and contributors are encouraged to explore issues and recent advances in public services relevant to their geographical region as well as the larger global audience. Interested authors are invited to submit proposals and articles to the column editor Annie Bélanger at belange1@gvsu.edu.

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ABSTRACT:

Libraries are activated by our community members and our staff. Libraries use a variety of words to describe the people that frequent them. The words are often used habitually, rather than after a critical review of their origin and impacts. If libraries are not neutral, how might this translate into the language that we use, the way we make decisions, and how we engage with our community members? This column will explore the growth of public services, the language we use to refer to the people we serve, and how to empower our community members as well as partners in ways that advance equity, accessibility, and inclusion. This column discusses several tools that can be used in decision making to empower community members.

Keywords: Libraries, User Services, User focus, Interactions, User Experience, Empowerment, Equity Lens, Asset-framing, Equity, Inclusion

Introduction

Libraries are activated by our community members and our staff. To this end, many libraries center the community's needs as a way to plan and develop services . The dictionary defines center (noun) as "the point from which an activity or process is directed, or on which it is focused" (OED Online, 2022a). Centering our community's needs is critical to ensure that we are focused on our communities. However, when libraries center the community needs without direct engagement with members of that community, particularly those most marginalized, they will reinforce the existing patterns of exclusion. As we consider the colonial and patriarchal history of libraries, centering without engagement continues this hierarchical approach of libraries knowing what is best for their communities and members.

As we grapple with our complicated history, vocational awe, and a false belief of our neutrality, I posit that shifting our approach to empowering members would be one of the ways to ensure that the library becomes of the community, for the community, and by the community. The dictionary defines empower as "to give (a person) the means, ability, or strength to do something; to enable." (OED Online, 2022b). A 2015 OCLC research report points out that libraries empowering their members can mean both enabling them to do something that they could not previously do as well as giving members more agency in controlling and directing important parts of their lives (Proffitt, Michalko, Renspie, 2015).

This column will explore shifts in public services' community focus, the language we use to refer to the people we serve, and how to empower our community members as well as partners in ways that advance equity, accessibility, and inclusion. It should be noted that this column article largely centers on public libraries and their members, whether they access the library or not. It is using public libraries as a proxy for other types of libraries as these often serve more focused subsets of community members. In my opinion, the information shared can be easily extrapolated to these other types of libraries.

Names & Worldviews

Libraries use a variety of words to describe the people that frequent them. These words have included patron, user, customers, clients, members, and more. The words are often used habitually, rather than after a critical review of their origin and impacts. Yet language is a mirror of its time. Karl Jasper described language, whether evidenced through a dictionary or lexicon, as "the intellectual situation of the time" (Zgusta, 2017, p.20).

If language use mirrors the mores of a collective or community, libraries must contend with the fact that the words we use are not neutral like other decisions throughout our inner workings. Many librarians have shown that libraries are not neutral. Based on the belief that libraries are not neutral, I will explore how the political roots of language and colonialism have translated into the language that libraries use to describe those they serve.

The word patron is historically rooted in the support, often financial, of an organization. It is historically linked with the phrase "patrons of the arts". Consider the power that the patrons of the arts had in shaping the Italian Renaissance by providing financial security to the artists they favored and aligned with their vision. This financial security was paired with an important influence over the works of artists.

Alternatives to patrons have focused often on two terms: user and customer. Both of these terms also come with their own limitations. User as a term has "some negative connotations, as in the sub-definition: a person who uses something or someone selfishly or unethically" (Sullivan Free Library, 2010).Customer focuses "interactions with people as transactions" (Schmidt and Etches, 2014, p. 10). If we want to foster empowered relationships, then both of these terms are not in alignment.

Molaro (2012) points out that when asked directly whether they were patrons, customers, or users, they preferred to be called members. The term "[m]ember evokes a sense of belonging or even ownership" (Schmidt and Etches, 2014, p.11). Molaro (2012) further points out that "how we view patrons reflects our philosophical worldview". Our views are then codified into language that further reinforces our worldview and biases. I posit that if both those that access libraries and could access them were viewed as members, this would shift our relationship towards a collaborative, engaged approach with them. In collectives, members hold power and can use that power beyond selecting what services and resources to access.

Public Services & The Community

In 1994, IFLA and UNESCO Issued a joint Public Library Manifesto that committed library services to be "physically accessible to all members of the community", to active outreach to those unable to come, and to "be adapted to the different needs of communities in rural and urban areas" (IFLA/UNESCO, 1994). It is clear in their intent that the community must be the focus as libraries are not ends in themselves. Libraries embracing the manifesto would be working towards "[f]reedom, prosperity and the development of society and of individuals [as] fundamental human values." (ibid).

Joe Murphy (2014) posited that libraries of present and future are to be gap filler. Rundle (2014) points out a dual set of fallacies in the vision of libraries as gap fillers. First, he points to David Lankes (2012) who articulated that "If libraries continue to be remedial organizations, focused solely on the problems and deficits of our communities the communities themselves will find libraries obsolete". Secondly, he ponders that if libraries are 'gap fillers' then "who determines where the gap lies, and who determines how it is to be filled" (Rundle, 2014). I posit that if the community members, particularly the most marginalized ones, are not part of determining the gaps, or positively flipped, the benefits, then libraries unintentionally reinforce the structures of colonial oppression and capitalism within which we exist.

Roy Tennant (2014) postulates that "the mission of librarians is to empower". Since libraries are the entities that bring librarians collectively together, libraries therefore should have a mission to

empower, to promote self-sufficiency, and to advance growth. Kulkarni and Deshpande (2013) state that "To satisfy library users it is necessary to establish dialogue with them and find out their expectations. The proper channel of communications with the user's needs to establish and participate [.] in library management empowers the users" (abstract). They argue that to implement Ranganathan's Five Laws in a practical manner, library services should be assessed from the user's perspective. This further supports that libraries must empower. In order to empower, we must contend with the power we exercise when we choose what is important to our community and when we decide that we know better than our community members. Additionally, we must contend with the reality that deciding factors are imbued with bias, whether it is motivated by racial, class, gender, or ability based prejudice.

Hursh (2021) encourages libraries to look past transactional engagement to relationship engagement, which must involve building deeper relationships with members over time. By focusing on relationships, libraries can learn more about their community and members as well as ensure that they make space for the members' voices to be heard and listened to. This in turn creates more empowerment by community members.

Libraries can benefit from looking beyond our profession to other cultural institutions that are driving social change efforts. OF/BY/FOR ALL "envision(s) a world in which all people are empowered to share their talents to strengthen their communities. Communities in which people feel safe, welcome, and connected to the strangers who cross their paths every day." (OF/BY/FOR ALL, n.d.) This vision is anchored in a desire to help organizations connect authentically, effectively with their local communities. They believe that the more an organization is representative OF its community, that programming is created BY its community, then the organization becomes one FOR ALL to belong. I wonder how the value of libraries to their community would shift if they could adopt a OF/BY/FOR ALL approach to community outreach, engagement, and partnerships.

Inclusive Community Engagement

Vocational Awe & False Neutrality

As we consider engagement, libraries have the benefit of learning from the nonprofit world in terms of equitable and inclusive partnerships. However, nonprofits, like libraries, can suffer from vocational awe, which "refers to the set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that result in beliefs that libraries as institutions are inherently good and sacred, and therefore beyond critique." (ettarh, 2018) As we consider deeper engagement, we must work actively to ensure we are engaging in a way that balances power between partners and the community, avoiding a 'savior' approach.

Vocational awe and our service mission can lead to the belief that libraries are neutral. Since libraries are collections of the decisions made about service and resource development, they then reflect the bias in these decisions. As Bourg (2018) pointed out in her ALA MidWinter

President's Program remarks, "neutrality is about not taking sides", not supporting all sides equally. The fact that libraries exist are a decision related to the values of education and access. Libraries are an artifact of the community's decision on how to spend its resources.

Danie Kahneman, a research psychologist, points out that common sources of bias, such as our intuitive and association processes, often result in poor decision making as "we focus intently on the wrong things or fail to seek out relevant information." (Soll, Milkman, & Payne, 2015) Therefore, we must individually and collectively work to identify and mitigate both implicit and explicit biases. The tools outlined below are meant to support libraries in creating a systematized approach to identifying and mitigating biases as they prepare to make decisions, communicate, and act.

Tools: Equity Lenses

A critical tool to support a focus on equity, accessibility, and inclusion is an equity lens. An equity lens is a set of questions that help an organization see from a new perspective, hold to their values, and increase participation by those holding non-dominant identities. The Center for Nonprofit Advancement (2020) describes "[t]he purpose of an equity lens is to be deliberately inclusive as an organization makes decisions.It introduces a set of questions into the decision that help the decision makers focus on equity in both their process and outcomes."

The power of equity lenses lies in drawing explicit attention to power, the inclusion of marginalized identities, and holding leadership accountable. The Nonprofit Association of Oregon (2019) believes that an equity and inclusion lens, aka as equity lens, can help to:
- "Strengthen everyone's awareness of and ability to incorporate difference.
- Create teams that are relevant to and representative of [the] community.
- Create energizing and innovative work environments.
- Collectively address systemic barriers and inequities."
While an equity lens can be used daily, it should at minimum be used at the start and the end of a service, program, or partnership development process.

The questions contained within an equity lens can be modified and adapted from different organizations and different processes. For example, an organization could have an equity lens used for its community outreach and one for fostering partnerships within the community. Equity lenses typically contain questions such as:
- "What decision is being made?
  - What beliefs, values and assumptions (some of which will be cultural) guide how the topic is being considered?
- Who is at the table?
  - Who or what informs their thinking on the issue?
  - Who is most affected by these decisions, and thus should be at the table?
  - How can they be included?
- How is the decision being made?

- ○ What participatory structures can be added to hear from more voices, to equalize participation, and elements of consensus be used?
- What assumptions are at the foundation of the issue? Be explicit in naming these and the values and cultural bases for them.
- What is [the] likely impact?
  - ○ Does the policy, program, or decision improve, worsen, or make no change to existing disparities? Does it result in a systemic change that addresses institutional inequity?
  - ○ Does the policy, program, or decision produce any intentional benefits or unintended consequences for the affected groups?
  - ○ What is the real impact likely to be for different groups who are important to the organization?
- What is your decision?
  - ○ Based on the above responses, what are the possible revisions to the policy, program, or decision under review that could address inequity/promote equity?"

(Center for Nonprofit advancement, 2020)

The James Madison Library created an equity lens for its ongoing work, which they title the *Questions we ask ourselves*:
- "To what end?
- To whose benefit?
- Whose comfort is centered?
- Who has most agency and voice?
- Who is silenced, ignored, or harmed? Who is elevated, honored, and made to feel safe?
- Who can experience and express joy?"

(Nowviskie, 2020)

Community Research & User Assessment Equity Lens

Inspired by the Nonprofit Association of Oregon's equity lens to conduct information gathering and research (2019, p. 20) and past personal work experience, I suggest the following equity lens to anchor community research and user assessment that is anchored in respect and a desire to empower the members.
- ☐ What assumptions are we bringing to the work?
  - ☐ How will we mitigate bias in our questions?
  - ☐ How are we examining the language in the invitation to ensure that we are inviting the breadth of the population to engage?
- ☐ Have we defined our data privacy policy and a plan to manage the data?
  - ☐ How are we mitigating possible harm from engaging with us?
- ☐ How will our data gathering plan help us identify areas where we may unintentionally restrict equity, accessibility, and inclusion?
- ☐ Is there a history with the community we are engaging with?
  - ☐ If there is a history of trauma, how will we reconcile it before engaging?

- ☐ What current data do we have that can help us remove barriers to our spaces, services, and resources?
- ☐ Will the data help us create a representative picture of the population?
- ☐ Do our findings include specific equity, accessibility, or inclusion concerns along with recommendations?
- ☐ Have we reported back to participants about our finding and next steps?

Community Engagement Equity Lens

A library community outreach and engagement community lens must first be anchored in a clarity of the distinction between outreach and engagement. For the purpose of this column, I suggest that outreach is to reach out to the community, often through sharing information, updates, and marketing materials. I view engagement as an active practice with two-way communication and, ideally, learning. In other words, engagement is taking part in the community, with the community.

Adapted from the Nonprofit Association of Oregon's equity lens to engage community, staff and board (2019, p. 19), I suggest the following equity lens to anchor our empowered community engagement.
- ☐ What approaches and practices will be used to ensure that those that need to engage can fully participate?
    - ☐ How are we creating opportunities for those least likely to speak to be heard?
    - ☐ What tools support different members of the community in engaging?
    - ☐ What steps are we taking to remove barriers for community gatherings? (e.g. dependent care, safety, language, accessibility accommodations, etc.)
- ☐ Is our team representative of the population we seek to engage?
    - ☐ If not, what steps are we taking to ensure a diversity of perspectives?
- ☐ Which community groups and associations can help us to have authentic conversations in the community?
    - ☐ How are we compensating and recognizing their support?
    - ☐ What power do they have in the relationship and in setting the engagement agenda?
- ☐ Are we leveraging simple language that is culturally appropriate to the groups we seek to engage with?
- ☐ How have we fostered a welcoming environment?
- ☐ How are we reflecting that we have heard from the members?
    - ☐ How will they know how their insights have been used?
    - ☐ How do we plan to share what we have learned and associated actions with participants?
    - ☐ How will we demonstrate accountability?

Inclusive partnerships Equity Lens

OF/BY/FOR ALL (2018) created a Partner Power tool to foster empowerment for potential or existing partners. By turning their instructions into a series of questions and augmenting them, I suggest an inclusive partner equity lens to support that partners are empowered and treated as equals in the efforts.

- ☐ When and where will we meet?
    - ☐ Have we found a time and location that is most convenient for the partner?
    - ☐ Have we reduced barriers for the partner to come to the meeting?
- ☐ Have we learned about our partner ahead of time?
    - ☐ What challenges do they face?
        - ☐ How might we support or collaborate with them towards these challenges?
    - ☐ What values do they bring to their efforts?
        - ☐ How do these align with our organizational values?
    - ☐ What communities do they serve, and how do they do it?
        - ☐ How does this align with our desired outcomes?
    - ☐ What goals do they have?
        - ☐ How do their goals align with our organization's goals?
- ☐ Have we prepared for the meeting?
    - ☐ Do we know what questions we want to ask? *Consider questions about challenges, goals, commitments, and success.*
    - ☐ How will we listen empathetically?
    - ☐ Can we answer the questions we seek to ask about our own organization?
- ☐ Holding the meeting
    - ☐ Leverage active and empathic listening
    - ☐ Ask open-ended questions
    - ☐ Confirm your understanding
    - ☐ Take notes about key insights, what matters most to them, and follow-up needed
- ☐ Follow-up
    - ☐ Note insights and reflections -
        - ☐ Share these with the partner to continue the conversation and ensure they can correct any misunderstandings quickly
    - ☐ Make sure to make time to continue the conversation
    - ☐ Plan to reach out
    - ☐ Reflect on what you learned and what shared efforts could be

Tools: Asset Framing

Another method that libraries can consider is whether they are reviewing community needs from a deficit-framing or through asset framing. Deficit-framing means "defining people by their problems" (Shorters, n.d.) Asset-framing is "a narrative model that defines people by their

assets and aspirations *before* noting the challenges and deficits." (California Health Care Foundation, 2021, slide 3) The field of psychology and bias research has shown that humans act on intuition and lighting fast associations the majority of the time in order to manage the overflow of information that our brain is receiving every minute. Therefore, it is critical that we work against stereotypes.

Deficit-framing further builds on stereotypes, stigmatizes people based on their challenges, and fails to account for the societal and systemic reasons for the continued challenges. In other words, deficit-framing inadvertently sabotages our efforts towards equity, accessibility, and inclusion. Using asset-framing seeks to prime the intuitive mind to find "associations of genuine worth" rather than those of fear. (California Health Care Foundation, 2021, slide 4) Using asset-framing can provide a more accurate picture by introducing the community members "by their aspirations and contributions before mentioning their challenges than it is to sum them up as an "at-risk [x]." (Shorters, n.d.)

Asset framing is particularly useful in considering the libraries' communication and outreach efforts. By leveraging asset framing, library communications can help to elevate the voice of others who hold less power as well as undermine stereotypes and associated stigmatization. In considering the power of libraries as social institutions, I invite reflection on the reach of an annual report to those who hold power in a community and the associated impact of focusing on the strengths of individuals, how investing in them will benefit society, and how the library is part of that positive growth. In order to leverage asset-framing, consider:
- ☐ Have I identified 1) what story I want to tell? And 2) why is this story important?
  - ☐ Reflect on what assumptions you are bringing to your story?
- ☐ Have I stated my hopes twice as often as my concerns?
  - ☐ "[S]tate what you want (prime hope) twice as often as you state what you don't want (prime fear)" (California Health Care Foundation, 2021, slide 4)
- ☐ Have I flipped to person-first or person-focused language?
  - ☐ Caveat: listen to what the people use to describe themselves and honor that
- ☐ Have I focused on the system - the real barriers - that cause the challenges?
  - ☐ Have I named it as the source of the problem?
- ☐ Have I found positive facts that can reinforce my story, and undermine the negative statistics?
- ☐ Have I highlighted solutions if they exist?

Inspired by Shorters, n.d. and California Health Care Foundation. 2021

Conclusion

Considering libraries' roots in patriarchy and colonialism as well as our difficult relationship with vocational awe and neutrality, libraries must first understand what values they are bringing to their work. If libraries value equity, accessibility, and inclusion, then inherently they cannot be

neutral. Their values, both aspirational and lived, are demonstrated in their decisions and actions.

To live a commitment to equity and inclusion, Libraries must work to regularize decision making and critically assess actions in order to actively identify and mitigate bias. Once equity-centered decision making becomes a habitual practice, over time, libraries can shift how they engage their communities in ways that empower them. Libraries will have to recognize that empowerment comes from equal participation where power dynamics are acknowledged and mitigated. If words matter, what language shift should Libraries explore to move towards shared power with our community members who hold the least power?

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