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Cross-Cultural Competence for Librarians

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Introduction

I've been interested in issues of diversity for a long time, and was first exposed to theories of cross cultural competence during graduate studies in linguistics. Later in research for my MLS, I explored aspects of cultural competence in relation to library services and the ongoing challenges of diversifying the library workforce. I'd like to talk with you today about why meeting that challenge is important and the alternatives available to improve our services to our diverse communities.

First of all I'd like to talk a little bit about public perception of libraries and their fallibilities when it comes to inclusiveness. I'd like to use as an example a scene from Star Wars, Episode II: Attack of the Clones in which Jedi Master Obi Wan Kenobi visits the Jedi Temple Archives seeking the location of the planet Kamino. Kamino doesn't appear on the archives' star charts; Obi Wan insists it should be there but the archivist responds, "The Archives are comprehensive and totally secure, my young Jedi. One thing you may be absolutely sure of: if an item does not appear in our records, it does not exist." Of course later it's determined that the existence of the planet had been erased in an act of archival sabotage.

I think perhaps this movie snippet speaks to the general public's views of libraries and the power we hold in what we collect and how we make it available to the public. In many ways we are holders of the communal memory, In addition, libraries play a crucial role in empowering diverse populations for full participation in our society. We strive to be inclusive in collecting, organizing and sharing information, but library policies and practices are often driven by the dominant cultural values and beliefs. I believe we need to examine: How are those values and beliefs formed? Are they shared by our entire community?

Numerous potential pitfalls open up through our subconscious prejudices in all aspects of libraries and librarianship. For example, let's consider the Dewey Decimal cataloging system in which numbers 200-290 are assigned to the Christian religion with the remaining 200's for the entirety of the rest of mankind's religions. Not very inclusive, is it? Think, too, of our outreach/marketing/programming, personnel. Do all of our community members see themselves? Are they favorable images?

Now that I've identified yet another potential challenge for libraries, I'd like to discuss one alternative to what we're currently doing in the library field to meet that challenge. I hope that this presentation provokes questions of ourselves, our profession and our institutions. Through this self-examination perhaps we can become more aware of the prejudice that seems to be inherent in being human, prejudice that we would probably like to deny exists, prejudice that affects our abilities to serve our increasingly diverse communities. By becoming aware of this prejudice in ourselves perhaps we can better recognize it in our policies and practices and work toward eliminating it throughout our institutions.

Let's take a look at some efforts at diversity in the library field. Of course, diversity is a fundamental value of the American Library Association and its members. It has a large number of scholarships, sections, and roundtables devoted to diversifying the library workforce. Efforts such as ALA's Spectrum Scholarships or the Association of Research Libraries' Initiative To Create a Diverse Workforce do help, without a doubt. Equally doubtles is that the results fall short, year after year. If we take a moment to look around the room, we can see that fact played out. So, the big idea I'm presenting today is that if efforts to diversify the workforce are falling short, perhaps our individual development of cross cultural competence may be another way of addressing this shortcoming.

In any improvement effort it's good to start with a measure of where a person or institution stands in order to evaluate progress. The first cross cultural competence measurement tool I was exposed to was the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity or Bennett Scale, developed by Dr. Milton J. Bennett.

The Bennett Scale provides a structure for understanding how people experience cultural differences. Six stages of perspectives describe how a person sees, thinks about, and interprets events happening around them from an intercultural difference perspective. The six stages of the scale represent a set of perspectives with successively greater ability to understand and have a more positive experience of cultural difference.

The first three stages are considered "ethnocentric" in that one's own culture is seen as the only culture or to varying extents the "better" culture.

- Denial. Being comfortable with the familiar. Not anxious to complicate life with "cultural differences". Not noticing much cultural difference around you. Maintaining separation from others who are different.
- Defense. A strong commitment to one's own thoughts and feelings about culture and cultural difference. Some distrust of cultural behavior or ideas that differ from one's own.
- Minimization. Awareness that other cultures exist all around you, with some knowledge about differences in customs and celebrations. Not putting down other cultures. Treating other people as you would like to be treated.

The last three stages are considered "ethnorelative" in that one's own culture is seen as equal among many other cultures.

- Acceptance. Understanding that people from other cultures are as complex as yourself. Their ideas, feelings, and behavior may seem unusual, but you realize that their experience is just as rich as your own. Being curious about other cultures. Seeking opportunities to learn more about them.
- Adaptation. Able to "take the perspective" of another culture to understand or evaluate situations. Able to intentionally change behavior to act in culturally appropriate ways outside your own culture.
- Integration. Able to move easily among cultures.

Where do you think libraries in general fall on this scale? How about yourself? What steps might we take to move along the scale?

We can make guesses about where we are on the scale, and, of course, there is a test to take to see where you are in this particular model. But the Bennett Scale test and many other instruments are only available for a fee and what library in this day and age has any money for anything no matter how important it may be in serving our communities? Following are a variety of sites which have tools available for free that may prove useful in developing our cross cultural competence.

These sites may help in evaluating individual or institutional competence

- National Center for Cultural Competence
<http://nccc.georgetown.edu/resources/assessments.html>
- Harvard University's Project Implicit
<http://www.projectimplicit.net/index.html>
- SDSU's Cultural Awareness Self-Assessment http://go.sdsu.edu/student_affairs/culturalassessment.aspx
- DOD's Defense Language Institute Cultural Awareness Assessment [http://famdliflc.lingnet.org/caa/\(S\(igqedv55cowakj55cgvz2fzm\)\)/index.aspx](http://famdliflc.lingnet.org/caa/(S(igqedv55cowakj55cgvz2fzm))/index.aspx)

And these sites offer some exercises and other training tools to perhaps improve our cross cultural competence:

- ALA Office of Diversity <http://www.ala.org/offices/diversity>

- Training for Change <http://www.trainingforchange.org/>
- Diversity Central, Resources for Cultural Diversity at Work
http://www.diversitycentral.com/tools_and_resources/managerstoolbox.php
- Culture Advantage
<http://www.culture-advantage.com/awarenesspage1.html>

The road to cross cultural consciousness would seem to start with asking ourselves questions. On a personal level we might all start by doing a bit of self-evaluation about our subconscious biases. On an institutional level we might look at how the dominant culture is articulated within our institutions and our daily library practices. I know that in some way most of us have already given some thought to these ideas, and often put those thoughts into action. Perhaps by implementing programs for the development of cross cultural competence libraries can even better meet the needs of our diverse communities.