
Designing an Intercultural Training Framework for Information Professionals

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Over the course of many years, shifts in the U.S. population have led to widespread changes in the backgrounds of students and staff in institutions of higher education. The ensuing cultural diversity and multilingualism brings a new richness to these environments, though not without challenges for members of respective groups to interact and work together effectively. In this column, M. Asim Qayyum suggests an approach for bridging the gap between divergent cultures. Building on an analysis of data drawn from a multicultural symposium, he suggests an intercultural training framework that can be utilized by information professionals and others.—*Editor*

Demographic trends in the United States indicate that students and staff in higher education institutions are increasingly coming from culturally diverse and multilingual backgrounds.¹ So what are the challenges faced by educators, librarians/information professionals, and students when they work or study in multicultural settings? How does the management of these institutions ensure that interaction between cultures is improved, removing barriers and bringing the minority community into mainstream activities? Life experiences show that only effective interaction can help members of minority groups understand and adopt majority values, and by so doing, play a fuller and richer role in the community. The urgent need is to understand the characteristics of diverse communities so individuals can be taught how they can reach out and communicate with each other for effective knowledge transfer. An ideal state will be achieved when minority groups are able to connect with and be identified as part of the community, and the majority population is able to understand and accommodate minority cultures.

To address the challenges and concerns outlined above, this article discusses the themes that can be used to design intercultural training workshops in academic settings. The objective is to prepare a ready response to the needs of the library community by understanding the culture in terms of the beliefs people hold about the world, the values they share about living in the community, and the way they treat one another.² The recommendations can be used by management teams to improve intercultural communication and to maximize the participation and amalgamation of minority cultures into the mainstream culture.

WHY MULTICULTURAL TRAINING?

The premise is that academics and librarians will successfully cross intercultural boundaries if they are aware of key

tenets of intercultural communication and its implications on educational activities. For example, Nataowitz concludes that librarians need training in broader subject areas to serve international students.³ Consider the presence of Latinos in the library profession: in 2003 there was only one Latino librarian for every 9,177 Latino patrons as compared to one white, non-Latino librarian for every 1,830 white, non-Latino.⁴ The demographics are still changing, affecting not only the community at large but also the workplaces and educational institutions as having coworkers or clients from different cultural backgrounds becomes the norm. The invisible societal structure is no longer homogenous or familiar, and librarians must realize that the new information structure is deeply embedded in various cultural contexts that need to be understood.⁵ Cultural competency-building practices in libraries, especially public libraries, were recognized and embraced some time ago, and existing information studies educational programs do offer some cultural awareness and internships.⁶ However, there is still demand for on-the-job multicultural training programs to guide information professionals.⁷

IMPORTANCE OF MANAGEMENT'S SUPPORT FOR CULTURAL TRAINING PROGRAMS

Management's support for multicultural training programs is critical because they have no tangible outputs. The selling point is that cultural competency training helps build an understanding of the varied experiences of diverse cultural and ethnic groups so that communication barriers across cultures are addressed and bridged. The Center for Capacity Building at the University of Illinois-Chicago (UIC) identifies top management's support for cultural training programs as a primary factor affecting the development and implementation of cultural competencies.⁸ The Center for Capacity Building claims that such support can help build an employee's desire to engage, ability to recognize personal biases, knowledge of the multiple factors and characteristics that can influence diversity, and skills for working effectively with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Putting these concepts into an actual training exercise, the model's architects found participants willing to take the lessons learned back to their organizations and implement them so that their organizations may benefit. That message is conveyed in this article as well.

DESIGNING A SYMPOSIUM TO DISCOVER MULTICULTURAL TRAINING THEMES

The best way to approach this problem seemed to be to ask concerned people directly. Therefore a symposium was organized to which faculty members and undergraduate and graduate students from the University of Tennessee at Knoxville (UTK) and the University of Puerto Rico (UPR) were invited. A majority of the participants were affiliated with the field of library and information science (LIS). The undergraduate

students were all from UTK, while the graduate students were from UTK and UPR. Also invited were some practicing information professionals working in the UTK library or elsewhere in the Knoxville area.

To create a conceptual foundation for the multidimensional and dynamic concepts of culture, discussion papers were created on the following three topics:

1. *Intercultural Leadership* addresses different styles and theories of leadership and how they relate to information and communication in an intercultural environment. It focuses on the role of the librarian or information professional as a leader.
2. *Diversity and Democracy* addresses the definitions and concepts associated with the terms intercultural, multicultural, diversity, and democracy. It focuses on how these issues relate to information professionals in the twenty-first century.
3. *Information and Communication Processes* explores the role of culture in the way we communicate and use information and in how we communicate with each other. It provides a foundation for information professionals to understand that cultural practices may be embedded in many activities that take place in a library or in an information agency.⁹

These discussion papers were circulated among the symposium moderators well in advance so that the moderators were all familiar with the basic concepts. This *a priori* knowledge helped maintain homogeneity among moderators and the flow of focus-group discussions in the symposium.

Each focus group had 12–14 participating undergraduate students (UGS), faculty members from UTK and UPR, and practicing information professionals. Immediately afterward, a seminar-style discussion session was held with approximately 50 graduate students (GS) enrolled in the LIS program at UTK. This event was video streamed live to graduate students from UPR in San Juan, Puerto Rico, where it was watched and then followed by three classroom discussion sessions. Each of the UGS groups discussed only one of the three topics of the symposium described above, while the GS groups discussed all three topics. Techniques used in UGS sessions were moderator-led discussions, breakout sessions, storytelling, and some question and answer deliberations. Open-ended questions were deliberately posed by moderators in all sessions to initiate and encourage dialogue. As a result, many students frankly narrated their own experiences, expressed ideas, and vented their feelings on a given subject. Both negative and positive encounters were freely disclosed and discussed, which resulted in a rich interactive exchange.

DEVELOPING THE INTERCULTURAL TRAINING FRAMEWORK

One immediate conclusion from the symposium proceedings was that a solid grounding in intercultural issues was lacking,

The participants were unanimous in voicing the opinion that developing communicative and leadership ability in this area is a must-have skill for the twenty-first-century information professional (IP). A training program to address these shortcomings was the recommended solution. Therefore a detailed analysis of the communications happening during the symposium was done to identify themes for an intercultural training framework. The premise is that this training framework can be used by management in any training setting, such as workshops, seminars, discussion groups, and even in LIS curricula. This article will now present the derived themes from the data gathered during the symposium.

Theme 1. Recognizing and Bridging Intercultural Boundaries

A recurring topic of discussion during the symposium was that multicultural training workshops should focus on developing skills among trainees to recognize and overcome intercultural boundaries and hurdles. Two types of boundaries were defined by symposium participants:

1. *Intercultural, or within a culture*: The emphasis here is that people should recognize the differences that exist within a culture, such as gender, political, class, disability, education, and religious affiliation.
2. *Intracultural, or within two or more cultures*: These dissimilarities are generally more visible and exist because of differences such as skin color, language, or religious and social values.

Two solutions emerged from the symposium's proceedings that training workshops can use to help the trainees cross cultural boundaries:

1. Identify broader subjects and emphasize lifelong learning so that IPs become aware of new knowledge being generated in the world. Such awareness will broaden thinking and enhance receptivity to change.
2. Focus on good work ethics that IPs should develop and practice in multicultural settings. That way, libraries can demonstrate the underlying strengths and values of their culture to their clients, and librarians can interact as effective leaders with colleagues, clients, and management.

Theme 2. Extending Cultural Comfort Zones

A *comfort zone* was defined by symposium participants as the sphere of life within which an individual acts during work, leisure, and social interactions. The rationale is that most people routinely function within a circle of friends and colleagues from within their own culture. Symposium participants commented that some people manage to extend comfort zones easily while, for most, an intervention has to occur to change this routine. A couple of intervention techniques are thus derived from the symposium proceedings to extend this comfort zone:

1. *Creating extended comfort zones on campus and at work*: Trainees in multicultural workshops should be encouraged to pair with a colleague from a different cultural background. This technique is similar to what Brown recommends when he suggests that a librarian should gain awareness of an unfamiliar culture by befriending an international.¹⁰ For example, one of the participants suggested that casual lunch and coffee meetings by workshop trainees should be encouraged, or that trainees might participate together in a sporting activity or leisure activity like movie watching. The trainees should be asked to bring back to the classroom their experiences from the activity. The ensuing classroom discussions could then focus on individual cases to understand the cultural commonalities and disparities, the ideas of reconciliation, or learning to disagree amicably if another person's expressed viewpoint does not fit one's own view of things or events.
2. *Creating extended comfort zones off campus or in a community*: The trainees should be encouraged to reach out and interact with a neighbor from another culture within their community. After each encounter, the trainee should report his or her experience to the class so that others can benefit from the episode. The rules of engagement during this reaching-out initiative should be that the majority culture will interact with a minority, while the members of the minority community will interact with a person belonging to the majority, or another minority culture.

Theme 3. Facilitating Intercultural Champions

An interesting concept that developed from the symposium proceedings was that of an intercultural champion. This theme was defined in more practical terms by the symposium participants than the notion of a "diversity champion" put forth by Somerville and Yusko.¹¹ Intercultural champions are defined as people who act as a role model and are willing to take the initiative and reach out and communicate freely with people from other cultures. Many symposium participants were of the opinion that staff members are usually able to identify such a person in their organization. Thus three training recommendations developed from symposium discussions:

1. Intercultural training workshops should demonstrate to the trainees the need to identify an intercultural champion in their classroom, community, or workplace.
2. The trainees should be asked to spot potential intercultural champions from among their colleagues and possibly develop an association with them. The trainees also should be encouraged to nominate a champion in their library for a special task or position on a relevant multicultural committee or council. Potential champions also may be nominated to act as mentors and assist in the adoption of the intercultural program tenets by new staff members and to become leaders in implementing ongoing

intercultural immersion programs for their colleagues or clients in everyday work settings.

3. Workshop training also can focus on creating new intercultural champions. A suggested technique was to ask trainees to mimic an intercultural champion in their life (present or past) by recalling and documenting the actions of that mentor or champion. Problem-based learning (described below) could then be used to study the habits and manners of intercultural champions and assess why it is easier for some people to cross intercultural boundaries than others.

Theme 4. Developing a Culturally Aware Information Professional

The emerging theme under this topic was the use of problem-based learning (PBL) technique.¹² PBL is recommended in training workshops to analyze contrasting cultural viewpoints and cases and thus develop a culturally aware individual. Symposium participants cited the use of PBL in studying the effects of life-altering events like wars, famines, natural calamities, or political disturbances that increase immigration pressures. This included looking at immigration happening because of wars (e.g., World War II, Middle Eastern conflict), or because of third-world poverty and by discussing the extreme conditions and circumstances that forced immigrants to flee their habitats, leaving loved ones and material possessions.

Symposium participants identified the use of PBL techniques in other situations also. For example, PBL can be used in amicable discussions, allowing trainees to learn how to reconcile with people from other cultures, how to disagree without animosity, and how to learn the viewpoints and behaviors of others and develop the skills needed to avoid stereotyping or make assumptions about other cultures.

As a final phase of developing culturally aware individuals, some visible minority participants suggested that workshop trainees should be educated about the potential impact of information available via the Internet. This part of training should focus on the nature of information currently available online and its role.

Theme 5. Increasing Intercultural Understanding through Exchange Programs

Symposium participants emphasized the importance of visits to the international house on an academic campus, or to nearby ethnic center(s). These visits can provide a rich intercultural immersion experience, and trainees may even take part in social events there. Over a longer term, management should ensure that ongoing collaboration continues to happen between the organization and ethnic centers in the area to exchange lectures and visits. While visiting ethnically diverse neighborhoods during an exchange and outreach program, trainees also should explore areas in the vicinity to increase their cultural awareness and become

knowledgeable about the diversity, the cultural practices, and the local demographic trends in the areas that their library or workplace serves.

Theme 6. Enhancing Interaction through Better Communications

Consensus emerged during discussions that good communication between patrons and coworkers is essential to establishing strong intercultural ties and an increased understanding of other cultures. Several recommendations were derived from the symposium about how future multicultural workshops can implement this in practice:

1. Teaching a “reach out first” approach. By taking an initiative in reaching out to people from other cultural groups, attendees can better communicate and understand the attitudes, concerns, and problems faced by minorities.
2. Teaching trainees to focus on the gist and content of the conversation rather than pronunciation, accent, tone or grammar as has been suggested in a previous study.¹³ Some cultural practices may be demonstrated in this respect, for example, high-context cultures sometimes indicate agreement simply out of politeness rather than by way of actually understanding.¹⁴ Similarly, a basic understanding of the nonverbal cues to recognize facial expressions, gestures, eye-contact habits, and other expressive signs needs to be achieved. Readers are referred to a checklist of communication techniques for librarians developed by Osa, Nyana, and Ogbaa.¹⁵
3. Training IPs to interact effectively with people from other cultures by understanding and acknowledging the other person’s strengths and interests rather than their visible appearances and language. The workshops need to ensure that trainees understand and react to the workings, skills, and abilities of fellow workers or patrons.

Theme 7. Promoting Libraries as Intercultural Arenas

Some practicing professionals in the symposium suggested that training workshops should encourage the identification of culturally diverse material and resources in libraries for collection development and promotional purposes. Promotion of these items could possibly coincide with local cultural festivals to enhance “intercultural understanding.”¹⁶ Thus the symposium participants recommended that future IPs should be prepared and willing to do the following:

1. Conduct poster sessions (focused on a specific culture or group) and community discussion forums to educate patrons and staff members. Such sessions will create low-intensive arenas, described by Audunson as places where one is exposed to the values and interests of others.¹⁷ According to Audunson, people are usually exposed to high-intensive arenas, such as their workplaces,

sporting venues, family reunions, and places of worship, where they may not get the opportunity to interact with people from other cultures. The library as a place should always encourage multiculturalism by providing a low-intensive meeting place where community issues are discussed, opposing viewpoints are welcomed, and tolerance is promoted.

2. Conduct multicultural readings and “show and tell” programs. Zhang additionally recommends that translations of appropriate material, such as glossaries of common terminology and library maps and information, may also be provided during these sessions.¹⁸ The emphasis should be on providing written material as international students generally have a better comprehension of the English language in a written format rather than through spoken dialogue.

One final observation under this theme is that intercultural workshops participants need to spend some time deliberating the issues of availability and cost-effective access to the Internet, the digital divide existing even within the most advanced societies, and the availability of other modern wireless communication tools. Minorities living in many areas may have limited financial means, and therefore all aspects of anticipated interactions need to be taken into account before designing a library activity.

Summary and Concluding Thoughts

The reality is that we live in culturally diverse societies. Based on this premise, this article focused on one segment of society and explored the intercultural challenges facing information professionals. The objective was to design procedures that will help improve work efficiency through successful cultural interaction. The objective was achieved by analyzing data from the proceedings of a symposium held to explore multicultural challenges facing practicing and aspiring IPs. The outcome is a suggested set of techniques and procedures that organizational management can use to design multicultural training programs. These recommendations also may be modified to fit LIS program requirements and added to study units, or they may be adapted for training people in non-information-processing work environments, where intercultural interaction is anticipated.

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