
Reflections on Diversity and Organizational Development

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Effectively addressing diversity issues can be a challenge in any organization—yet, when done well, it can manifest as more of an opportunity to foster a strong sense of community and maximize potential within it. In this column, Sarah Leadley maps the robust approach taken at the University of Washington Bothell/Cascadia College Library to develop cultural competencies among staff and establish diversity as a strategic priority. The library's integrated agenda, grounded in the principles of social justice and built around teachable moments, suggests a noteworthy facet of organizational development that is well worth modeling.—*Editor*

Diversity is an essential component of any civil society. It is more than a moral imperative; it is a global necessity. Everyone can benefit from diversity, and diverse populations need to be supported so they can reach their full potential for themselves and their communities.¹

We believe that libraries can and should play a key role in promoting social justice; and that a commitment to diversifying our profession, our collections, and our services is critical to social justice work in and for librarianship.²

This essay is a reflection on the diversity work our library has been engaged in over the last few years, led by our Equity, Diversity, and Social Justice Team. As director, my role has been largely behind the scenes: supporting the formation of this team, providing time for all staff workshops, and helping manage both internal and external requests for the team's time and assistance, all with the goal of building an inviting, sustainable, reflective, and intellectually challenging approach to doing this work throughout the library. For me, this has also been about more intentionally aligning my long-standing commitment to teaching and learning with social justice theories and practice. I believe that our efforts to build capacity and deepen our collective understanding of diversity within the contexts of higher education and our campus community have strengthened our instruction and public-service offerings significantly, fostered a deeper engagement with these issues among staff, and positioned us to contribute more fully to campus diversity committees and programs.

I open with the two quotes at the beginning of this article to provide some framing for this essay, but also to acknowledge that I'm stepping into an existing and very robust conversation. From a brief survey of the literature it is clear that there are many innovative programs and dedicated individuals doing work in this area.³ That said, the literature

also clearly points to the complexity of this work and to the challenges in having this work result in substantive change to our working lives. The many demands on our time mean that all too often, diversity and cultural-competency training for library staff is a one-time occurrence, or, because of the intensity of the issues, is dealt with only at the surface level. But for many of us in higher education, our student demographic is, or is becoming, more diverse, with greater racial and ethnic diversity, more returning veterans, and larger numbers of students with disabilities. A recent *PBS Newshour* story reports numbers that are probably not surprising, but perhaps worth repeating: “In 1976, white students made up 84 percent of the college student body. Now they represent just under 60 percent. At the same time, more students are returning to college after years in the workforce. Many come from low-income households and juggle classes along with the responsibilities of work and family.”⁴

There is abundant literature on teaching and learning that contributes to framing diversity and social justice as issues that are central to our work as librarians. As a former instruction librarian, my work was informed (and transformed) by the writings of “critical pedagogy” scholars, including James Elmborg, Rolf Norgaard, and Heidi Jacobs. Elmborg’s 2006 article on critical information literacy was inspirational to me as an instruction librarian.

Critical theory brings new dimensions to academic thinking about education and literacy, and these theories have made teaching and learning more interesting, complex, and, in some ways, problematic processes than past educational models have implied. . . . Critical literacy and critical pedagogy have led us to a different discussion of the means and ends of education. Its most influential theorists, including Paulo Freire, Peter McLaren, and Henry Giroux, argue that schools enact the dominant ideology of their societies—either consciously or unconsciously. Viewed this way, education is a profoundly political activity. Educators must either accept the dominant ideology of their society or intentionally resist it and posit alternative models. Neutrality is not an option.⁵

Norgaard writes, “Literacy is too often conceived of in normative terms along a deficit model (literacy, of course, being something we ‘ought’ to acquire). In such a model, information literacy can easily be reduced to a neutral, technological skill that is seen as merely functional or performative.”⁶ Jacobs notes that “information literacy not only incorporates the recurrent concepts of identifying, locating, evaluating, and using information but also encompasses engendering lifelong learning, empowering people, promoting social inclusion, redressing disadvantage, and advancing the well-being of all in a global context.”⁷ She cites the work of Rebecca Powell, “who reminds us literacy is both a cultural and a social expression, and therefore it is always inherently political. Literacy practices operate within a sociopolitical context, and that context

is defined and legitimated by those who have the power and authority to do so.”⁸ For me, the work we do as teachers is also grounded in the ongoing struggle to understand the relationship of the library (and higher education generally) to the power structures within our own and our stakeholder communities, and to foster reflective practice in exploring questions of power, access, and inequality.

This also extends to our library’s public service philosophy—at all service points staff take seriously their role in retention and student success. From the field of social work, Sue and Sue provide an excellent summary of the skills I believe all of our staff should have:

A culturally competent professional is one who is actively in the process of becoming aware of his or her own assumptions about human behavior, values, biases, preconceived notions, personal limitations, and so forth.

Second, a culturally competent professional is one who actively attempts to understand the worldview of culturally diverse populations. In other words, what are the values, assumptions, practices, communication styles, group norms, biases and so on, of culturally diverse students, families, communities and colleagues you interact with?

Third, a culturally competent professional is one who is in the process of actively developing and practicing appropriate, relevant, and sensitive strategies and skills in working with culturally diverse students, families, communities and colleagues.

Thus, cultural competence is active, developmental, an ongoing process and is aspirational rather than achieved.⁹

We are a profession that celebrates a long history of service and activism on behalf of our users. Librarians have long advocated for access; we serve vulnerable populations and we participate in education and open-access initiatives. But we also function within institutions and structures that are themselves often oriented and shaped by the dominant culture. As Todd Honma writes, “All too often the library is viewed as an egalitarian institution providing universal access to information for the general public. However, such idealized visions of a mythic benevolence tend to conveniently gloss over the library’s susceptibility in reproducing and perpetuating racist social structures found throughout the rest of society.”¹⁰ This may be a challenging statement to process, but I think it’s useful to consider those aspects of our internal workings that may be masking or complicating our efforts around diversity. In the case of my library, expressions of this are evident in that we are predominantly white, female, and middle class, which is not at all a reflection of our student population. It also is not all that unusual nationally.¹¹ Even when changes suggest themselves, compounding this are the all-too-real resource constraints that can make it challenging to be agile, to redirect people’s time and efforts to new initiatives.

Locally, our campus context is a driver for this work. Our university comprises 42 percent students of color; 46 percent are first generation and 60 percent receive financial aid. We have a strong academic transition/bridge program, a year-long academic preparation program designed to provide assistance for historically disadvantaged, low-income, and first-generation college students. We are collocated with a community college, where a commitment to social justice is woven deeply into the mission and operations of the institution. We have had opportunities over the years to serve on a variety of diversity and inclusiveness committees on our campus, but until recently had not formed our own internal group. When a librarian approached me with the idea of creating a team, informed by the publication of the ACRL Diversity Standards and his own work on hip-hop,¹² I was thrilled. Being someone who came to academic librarianship with an interest in social justice, this resonated deeply, but I also realized that this work could potentially align well with our campus priorities and the shifting demographics of our students. Dedicating resources and time to this work is not optional; it's an imperative. While interest and commitment among library staff has always been there, our efforts were diffuse and intermittent until the formation of our diversity team. This column is very much an acknowledgement of their efforts. I think they have clearly demonstrated not only the importance of this work, but perhaps more importantly, that it can reside within and permeate the collective that is our library community, not as an add on. Workshops based on critical race theory can be hard work, but they also create new connections and understandings among staff. As the team wrote in a recent *C&RL News* article:

Building cultural competency among a library staff is complicated work that is never finished, as our staff and student populations grow and our understanding of the work deepens. Discussing difference, even in the most celebratory way, brings up feelings of guilt, exclusion, anger, and frustration that can be challenging to confront in the work-place. We found that despite the challenges, however, this work is also rejuvenating and joyful. Talking about differences we normally minimize creates understanding and intimacy that make it possible to connect more authentically with our colleagues. Our assessments showed that staff members appreciated structured time to share the personal experiences they would not normally feel comfortable bringing up at work.¹³

WHAT'S WORKED—SOME PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

About the Equity, Diversity, and Social Justice Team

All employee groups are represented on the team: librarians, professional staff, and classified staff.¹⁴ I do not serve on the

team, but meet with them to review their work plan for the year and as needed. I find it essential to be part of the co-creation and adjustments to each year's work plan, sharing with them what I learn by serving on a variety of campus and university leadership groups. I can also speak to their excellent work in these leadership meetings, which has led to them being tapped to lead or contribute to campuswide diversity initiatives, raising the visibility of the library on campus. I can and do push-back if I think the team is taking on too much, one major challenge being that this could easily be full-time work for the entire team. Making sure that the program we're developing is sustainable is one of my highest priorities. I want to be able to look back in five or ten years and see that we have a rich and intellectually robust cultural competency program in place.

Integrating Language about Diversity into Our Major Documents

The team took the lead in crafting our Diversity Strategic Direction. I wanted to give this the prominence of a strategic direction rather than relying just on embedding language about diversity in our other strategic directions or a values statement. It seemed important to raise the visibility of this work and be able to connect tangible initiatives and accomplishments to this actionable section of our strategic plan. The Diversity Strategic Direction reads as follows:

The Library serves one of the most ethnically diverse higher education communities in the state. We seek to provide culturally relevant services and resources that reflect the diversity of our user community and we work to foster an inclusive organizational structure in which staff from all different backgrounds can thrive. As cultural competency is not intuitive and must be learned, library staff will regularly and continuously expand their understanding of the impact of culture on behavior, attitudes, and values, and the help-seeking behaviors of diverse constituent groups. Adapted from the ACRL Cultural Competency Standards: <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/diversity>

The librarians also created a goal within our Information Literacy Instruction Program Plan:

GOAL: Support Diversity and Inclusiveness

Objectives:

1. Provide instructional services inclusive of the diverse perspectives and needs of the campus communities served.
2. Deliver instruction that is inclusive of a variety of teaching and learning styles, and cultural backgrounds.
3. Encourage diverse inquiry-based and creative processes for engaging students in research.

4. Value cultural ways of knowing through respect for non-dominant or non-Western thought and modes of knowledge production.
5. Participate in professional development, educational opportunities, and critical reflection that help advance cultural competence of the librarians and staff within the program.

Workshops and BrownBags

Our All Staff Workshops take an incremental approach, integrating theory and praxis. They are also highly interactive and interspersed with humor. We didn't want to try to move too quickly, but to establish comfort around talking about difference before taking on issues around discrimination. Assessments (typically via brief feedback forms and offers of in-person follow-up) are conducted following each workshop.

Here are some of the learning outcomes that have framed our trainings:

Workshop #1: Cultural Awareness

Learning Outcomes:

1. Staff should gain a fuller picture of the demographics of the library user community.
2. Staff will think more in-depth about their own cultural heritage to better understand how their own cultures and biases may affect interactions with library patrons and each other.

Workshop #2: Intersectionality

Learning Outcomes:

1. Staff will explore the intersection of power, culture, and identity to better identify the everyday power dynamics that shape our service delivery and experience of the workplace.
2. Staff will reflect on their own identities and cultures to better understand how these may affect interactions with each other and our user community.

Workshop #3: Microaggressions

Learning Outcomes:

1. Staff will understand the concept of microaggressions to identify and articulate their understanding of microaggressions in the workplace.
2. Staff will explore behaviors and environmental factors that can make patrons and staff with marginalized identities uncomfortable in a library setting.

Workshop #4: Interrupting

Learning Outcomes:

1. Participants will increase their comfort level with interrupting acts of oppression.
2. Participants will develop and learn strategies and tools that will equip them to interrupt oppressive situations.

The brownbags are held outside of the monthly all-staff meeting times and are entirely optional. Topics have included the following:

- generational poverty
- race in library and information studies, with the suggested reading Todd Honma's "Tripping Over the Color Line"
- race and higher education, with the suggested reading by Douglas A. Guiffrida and Kathryn Z. Douthit, "The Black Student Experience at Predominantly White Colleges: Implications for School and College Counselors"¹⁵
- undocumented students, with the suggested short documentary *The Dream is Now* (2013), directed by Davis Guggenheim

Teaching Meetings

The librarians dedicated one of their regular teaching meetings to a discussion of a chapter on culture and communication in the classroom from *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice* by Geneva Gay.¹⁶

CONCLUSION

What I have appreciated about these activities is the attention given to addressing the emotional components of this work, combined with the intellectual challenge, framed by the work of scholars in the field. I think an approach that can foreground scholarship from a variety of fields (such as ethnic studies, counseling, and disability studies) along with well-established active learning techniques, creates openings into the work for a range of individuals. Adding to this, the workshop assessments indicate that having our colleagues within the library implement this first phase of trainings is a powerful strategy for building trust and enthusiasm for doing this challenging work as a community. Our workshop leaders are very clear in articulating their goals of facilitating learning; they do not position themselves as experts, and they take risks in expressing their perspectives and experiences. I know that we are in the early stages of this work, and that the challenges are large. Our work to date has focused primarily on building awareness and capacity among library staff, but there is certainly a whole constellation of concerns requiring my ongoing attention, among the most pressing being our recruitment and retention of diverse staff.

As director, after more than two years of doing this work very intentionally, I feel that my understanding of how to align our expertise with campus diversity initiatives has increased significantly. Most recently this resulted in a yearlong project to assess international student perceptions and usage of the library, led by our Assessment Team, which includes several members of the Equity, Diversity, and Social Justice Team. I think the focused expertise of the team, in tandem with the increased capacity of all staff, will also contribute to building our collective understanding of issues related to retention and persistence generally, an area of keen interest among our campus leaders. I think it would be dangerous to approach this via a deficit model without engaging fully in an examination of how our context may privilege the practices of the dominant culture. Finally, with our emphasis on exploring power dynamics and practicing self-reflection, I can also envision this work building our capacity generally around communication and conflict resolution, key skill areas for navigating and thriving in this dynamic environment of sustained technological and organizational change.

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