

American Library Association International Papers Committee
2009 Annual Conference-Chicago
IRRT Paper Presentation
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Developing Cultural Competence to Create Multicultural Libraries

Introduction

The multicultural nature of society has changed libraries world-wide resulting in the need for significant changes in the types of services, programs, and collections provided to culturally diverse communities of users. However, understanding how to provide services to diverse groups is a major challenge facing 21st century librarians. Few library and information science (LIS) professionals are prepared to deal with the enormous responsibility of transforming libraries into multicultural institutions, which truly meet the needs of diverse populations, particularly since the communities served are generally ethnically and culturally different from those providing services (Peterson, 1996). Transforming libraries into multicultural institutions will require culturally competent professionals who understand and respect the diverse backgrounds of individuals, and who have developed a high level of expertise and knowledge about culture and its significance in all aspects of librarianship.

During the past several decades, other service-oriented fields including health (Jeffreys, 2006), social welfare (Delgado, 2007), psychology (American Psychological Association, 2003), and education (Banks, 2001) have prepared for a multicultural society by developing cultural competence professional guidelines. Examples include The American Psychological Association's (2003) cultural competence guidelines, which identify specific areas where disparities among diverse groups can be eliminated by culturally competent practitioners and professionals in the field. Cultural competence guidelines do not exist for the LIS profession. However, the profession is moving rapidly to provide more services to diverse populations representing a broad range of cultural groups. To provide adequate library services for multicultural populations, the profession must ensure that providers of the services including staff and LIS professionals have a clear understanding of the cultural backgrounds of communities served. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the need for culturally competent LIS professionals to create multicultural libraries, thus ensuring improved services to multicultural populations.

A framework for cultural competence applicable to LIS professionals is identified in this paper. It is based on the work of others in service oriented professions (Banks, 2001; Campinha-Bacote, 1999, 2002, 2003; Cross, Bazron, Dennis, Isaacs, 1989; Delgado, 2007; Jeffreys, 2006; Lum, 2003; Lynch, 1992, 1998; Sue, Arredondo, McDavis, 1992) and lays a foundation for a cultural competence framework for LIS professionals. In the first section of the paper,

theoretical perspectives for understanding cultural competence are discussed. This is followed by a section in which terminology associated with multiculturalism and cultural competence is defined. Next, the process by which individuals become culturally competent is conceptualized within three domains: cognitive, interpersonal, and environmental. The domains are described and examples are provided in the way of best practices found in public, school, and academic libraries. Finally, this paper discusses critical sociopolitical issues associated with cultural competence that often affect the ability of librarians to create multicultural institutions.. Although differences exist among international communities, arguably there are sufficient similarities across library communities to merit consideration of cultural competence as the basis for creating strong multicultural libraries.

Theoretical Background

This paper draws on the works of social constructivist and sociohistorical cultural theories of Jerome (1996), Lev Vygotsky (1978), and others (Schweder, 1991; Scribner & Cole, 1981) whose writings inform us about the social nature of knowledge construction and the influence of culture in how knowledge is acquired. According to this theoretical perspective, individuals acquire knowledge through active cognition. Knowledge is a process involving social, historical, and cultural processes that are subject to individual interpretation. Reality is subjective rather than objective and individuals' experiences and backgrounds are at the heart of perceptions of the world.

The theory of caring introduced by Nel Noddings in the early 1980s also provides theoretical support for cultural competence. Noddings's "ethic of caring" is key component of cultural competence and underlies intercultural understanding. According to the theory, caring is central to building relationships and is expressed in actions such as listening, attending to the spoken message of others, gentleness, and demonstrating an attitude of reciprocity (Noddings 1988). Reciprocity may be as simple as positive responses by recipients of caring practices or actions which bring about a "delightful" feeling by those engaged in the caring act. The theory also distinguishes authentic caring (or caring for individuals) from "aesthetical caring" (caring about ideas and things) to reject the notion of universal caring which becomes an abstract commitment (I care about everyone) in contrast to actual involvement in caring relationships (Ibid., p. 18).

The ethic of caring is the transforming element of a cultural competence model for LIS professionals. The transformation is from obligatory caring to authentic caring which results in intrinsic personal satisfaction and motivation. Understanding cultural differences may lower barriers that previously prevented receptiveness of diverse cultural backgrounds. Thus LIS professional guidelines to provide equal services regardless of ethnic and cultural background, socioeconomic status, and gender preference are transformed from a duty (I must comply with professional guidelines to provide services) to a more natural sentiment of caring (I want to provide service). The shift comes from self-reflection about the inherent goodness of providing the service. The difference between "must comply" and "I want to comply" is a transformation that is more likely to occur among individuals who are culturally competent.

Definitions

A starting point in the discussion of cultural competence is to establish clear definitions of concepts associated with cultural competence. This section provides definitions for terms used to define culture, competence and multiculturalism. Additional terms, which are relevant to the discussion of cultural competence are also defined in this section (e.g., ethnicity and race).

Culture is defined as the shared daily activities of groups or organizations (Rosaldo, 1989). This definition implies that what is meaningful to individuals is found in what they do and say and in what is evident in daily events. This definition of *culture* allows us to envision one or more linguistic, social, and cultural contexts shared by family, friends, and colleagues.

Competence is defined as a highly developed and ability, which implies a holistic or tacit expertise (Van der Vleuten & Schuwert, 2005). Competence is a quality or state of being of considerable complexity (Short, 1984), which demonstrates a command of certain information (Ibid.). Competence transcends performance and outward behaviors. However, competence is required for individuals to become proficient in their performance in carrying out tasks or assignments. At the same time, competence is “developmental, impermanent, and context dependent” (Epstein & Hundert, 2002, p. 227).

Multiculturalism is a term used to imply inclusive representation of diverse cultures. Originally used as a term applied to discussions focused on “race”, multiculturalism is currently used across social institutions to describe a genuine commitment to diverse representation of multiple cultures and groups including religious, sexually oriented, age, and ability. Multiculturalism implies creating open, supportive, responsive and inclusive environments, which accommodate diverse cultural differences in everyday activities. More importantly, “multiculturalism means that we must change institutional policies and practices” by responding to and confronting issues, policies, and practices in ongoing operations of organizations and groups within society that inhibit such a commitment (Barr & Strong, 1988, p. 89).

Ethnicity refers to an individual’s origins. Individuals may have one or more ethnic backgrounds. For example, an individual may be Irish, Dutch, and Native American. An individual’s country of origin may not always clearly identify an ethnicity. Individuals from some countries in Africa and in other geographic areas have multiple ethnic backgrounds since political boundaries frequently divided ethnic groups (Rotberg, 2004).

Race is a social construct created to distinguish individuals by the color of their skin. At one time, individuals were classified by skin color as being members of one of several races. In fact, it is now recognized that there is but one race—the human race (Campinha-Bacote, 2003). However, the term race continues to be used to distinguish groups by the color of their skin (Peterson, 1996).

Cultural competence is a highly developed ability to recognize the significance of culture in one’s own life and in the lives of others; and to come to know and appreciate diverse cultural backgrounds and characteristics through interaction with individuals from diverse linguistic,

cultural, and socioeconomic groups; and to fully integrate the culture of diverse groups into services, work, and institutions in order to enhance the lives of both those being served by the library profession and those engaged in service (Montiel-Overall, 2009).

Cultural Competence Process

Much of the literature in the library and information science field on cultural issues has framed the discussion of creating multicultural libraries from the perspective of improving the lives of underserved populations (Peterson, 1996). For example, in the United States low use of library services by minority communities (e.g., Latino and African American) indicates the need for improved services to these populations, which are generally low income groups (Zapon & Gong, 2005). Statistics on library users indicate that white middle class communities are more likely to take advantage of library services and that this population of users mirrors the population of those providing the service (Guëreña, 1984; Haro & Smith, 1978; Orange & Osborne, 2004). Accordingly, to attract other populations (e.g., underserved, unserved) many have suggested the need for a more diverse library staff to improve appreciation of cultural groups and to provide them with better services (See Jenkins, 1990 for a discussion of Ernestine Rose, a librarian in Harlem). And while many have advocated for improving services to adequately serve diverse populations (Trejo, 1969) few have focused on library services to further develop “existing assets” of minority communities. Instead, underserved populations are often seen as “lacking” language skills, education, literacy, and citizenship indicating an underlying deficit model in planning library services.

Although it is critical to recognize the importance of library services enhancing the lives of individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, it is equally important to recognize how libraries benefit from communities they serve as well. Culturally competent librarians understand this. They have developed this understanding over time through a process of self-awareness, growth in interpersonal relationships, knowledge of the settings (environments) and complex ecologies in which interpersonal relationships exist. Cultural competence is a process developed over time. The ability called cultural competence begins with an understanding of self in order to better understand others and is fully realized when personal development leads to the development of cultural competence at an organizational level (Georgetown University Center for Child and Human Development and University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities, 2006).

A possible framework for discussing cultural competence is proposed in the following section, which describes three domains in which cultural competence is understood, cognitive, interpersonal, and environmental. The domains have overlapping spheres of knowledge indicating a certain connectedness among the domains (Figure 1). The *cognitive domain* introduces the notion that cultural competence begins with cultural self-awareness. In this domain, individuals examine their own culture and reflect on conscious and unconscious biases. A renowned anthropologist explained “Becoming conscious of, and analytic about, our own cultural glasses is a painful business....With some mental effort we can begin to become conscious of the codes that normally lie hidden beneath our everyday [lives]” (Keesing, 1981).

The *interpersonal domain* is developed through personal interaction with individuals who are culturally distinct from those we are familiar with. Understanding others occurs through professional development, travel, and learning another's language. Cultural understanding also occurs by attending events, participating in ceremonies and meeting and talking to individuals from other cultures. Self-awareness continues throughout this step also so that differences and similarities can be examined and reflected upon. The result of becoming more knowledgeable about language and culture is greater empathy and leads to what has been referred to as "an ethic of caring." (Noddings, 1989). The *environmental domain* involves developing an excellent understanding of environmental factors that influence culture. In planning library services, knowledge of factors such as space, transportation, child care, leisure, and language(s) spoken are essential for delivery of effective services.

Cognitive Domain

The cognitive domain is a starting point in the process of becoming culturally competent. It refers to the awareness of one's own culture including cultural activities, values, beliefs, actions, ceremonies, and other aspects of daily activities and actions that shape thinking. The process of self examination begins an assessment of unconscious notions, which shape the way individuals think and acts. "Becoming conscious of, and analytic about, our own cultural glasses is a painful business" (Keesing, 1981, p. 69) because uncovering notions of culture requires mental effort to uncover ideas "hidden beneath our everyday behavior" (Ibid.).

For library professionals, self-examination of culture would include thinking about one's own ideas about how literacy is defined, how it is developed, organization of information, understanding and knowledge of language acquisition, and perceptions of libraries and their purpose. As an example, literacy is defined within certain cultures as the ability to read and write. Numerous cultural groups, however, define literacy more broadly to include the ability to decipher signs, symbols, weather conditions, and geographic changes. Campbell (2004) provides an example related to the Inuit's in Canada's arctic region who use changes in ice formation, water currents, and ice topography to demonstrate a form of literacy necessary for navigation in the waterways of the arctic.

Indigenous people in other areas of the globe use similar signs, symbols, sounds, and tastes unrelated to written text to demonstrate high levels of literacy. Other examples are found in children's exposure to literacy as storytelling, drawings, nighttime stories or books, and development of literacy through music, and the development of literacy by visually impaired using tactile knowledge.

Organization of information is another example of cultural differences among groups. Systems of organization such as Dewey's decimal classification (see Wiegand 1998, for a discussion of Dewey's system). The system, which classified all information ("human knowledge in print") into a discrete number of categories developed by Dewey (e.g., social science, language, religion), is limited to the cultural lens of its creator. Understanding the limitations of this perspective in terms of its applicability to other cultural groups is critical in establishing order to collections among cultural groups, which do not share this cultural lens.

Finally, an examination of the purpose of libraries and perceptions of libraries as place helps uncover perceptions based on culture. For example, libraries in Mexico are dissimilar from those

in the United States and many other countries. The perceived function of a public library by a librarian in Mexico as primarily a governmental institution is largely determined by cultural norms. (See a 2006 article by Siria Gastelum in *Críticas*, a news source of the *Library Journal*, describing Mexican libraries as unattractive government entities with peeling walls and cracked floors and little in the way of local collections that would appeal to different populations of users since the same book collections exist in every public library in the country.)

An understanding of other cultural perceptions is facilitated after self-reflection has occurred. In the case of Mexican librarians, dialogue with librarians from the United States has resulted in greater understanding of differences in their professional roles. This has resulted in joint seminars between librarians from Mexico and the United States along with exchange programs and guest speakers for librarians from the two countries. Discussions about differences in perceived functions of libraries, programs, and benefits begin a “next step” in the process called the Interpersonal Domain.

Interpersonal Domain

This domain identifies various means by which relationships with others are built including having good communication skills across and within groups, creating situations that promote understanding (Campinha-Bacote, 2003) and appreciation (Ibid.), and developing an ethic of caring (Noddings, 1988) and a desire for greater knowledge about others.

Relationships are built on the success encountered in these endeavors, which can occur formally or informally. For example, communication with groups or individuals who are perceived as having different cultural norms and practices may be developed informally through interaction within the library or in the community. Personal encounters are suggested as one of the most important bridges between individuals (Haro, 1981). It places individuals in positions where they are able to observe cultural differences between themselves and others. For example, hand sharing, eye contact, pace of work, gestures, body language, facial expressions, proximity, and other forms of non verbal communication become apparent in personal encounters (Lynch, 1992). When personal encounters are difficult to establish because of language difficulties or other barriers, confidants or informants are often employed. As insiders, they are able to facilitate communication between LIS professionals and community members and other potential library users particularly when little or no prior communication has occurred between them (Lincoln & Guba, 1990). Confidants can be critically important in helping to build relationships in these situations by providing information about essential protocol for socialization between groups that have dissimilar cultural backgrounds (Ibid.).

When personal encounters are difficult to organize or occur on a limited basis, formal learning settings may be necessary to develop this domain. For example, LIS professionals may learn about cultural practices through coursework, readings, professional development workshops, seminars or colloquia. The impersonal nature of these settings makes them less than optimal substitutes for building authentic relationships. However, they may be building blocks to more successful first hand experiences and greater understanding between cultural groups that differ from one's own.

Relationship building, which occurs in the interpersonal domain further develops cultural competence. Individuals build on the knowledge of their own cultural background and ideas stemming from acculturation to understand the culture of others.

The intersection of the cognitive and interpersonal domains represents knowledge of cultural similarities as well as differences, and understanding of why differences exist, an appreciation of cultural diversity, and genuine openness to assets of cultural groups (Lamont & Small, 2007).

Environmental Domain

The environmental domain refers to the settings in which relationships are built and knowledge occurs. This domain embodies the notion that what occurs in people's lives is part of a complex ecology involving social networks, community, family, schools, and libraries each contributing to how individuals make sense of every and respond to information. The environmental domain is part of the entire the ecology of which humans are a part and through which they acquire and use information (Davenport, 1997). Understanding one's own environmental domain is a prerequisite to understanding the environmental domain of others and requires the same self-reflection required in the cognitive domain. The overlap is seen in Figure 1.

The environmental domain also refers to numerous environmental conditions that must be understood in order to be culturally competent. The environmental domain includes knowledge of community resources and assets such as the languages and dialects of the community. Culturally competent library professionals recognize the influence of first language acquisition on the development of subsequent languages (August & Shanahan, 2008). They also recognize political factors associated with language acquisition (Cashman, 2009). For example, dialect differences are associated more with political factors and power structures than linguistic differences (Joseph, 2005). In the environmental domain, the role of the culturally competent librarian is to respect linguistic differences and to inculcate this respect throughout the professional activities and policies of the library organization.

The environmental domain also involves knowing about how mundane aspects of people's complex ecologies such as transportation, home mobility, safety issues, and housing conditions (e.g., occupancy, lighting, noise, and comfort) affect development of literacy and access to information.

The diagram below illustrates how the environmental domain overlaps with the other two domains previously discussed (cognitive and interpersonal). Which each refers to a distinct aspect of the process involved in developing cultural competence, the domains are not separate but interrelated. LIS professionals who are culturally competent understand the interrelationship and are continuously evolving into more culturally competent individuals, continuously moving toward cultural competence and beyond (e.g., cultural proficiency).

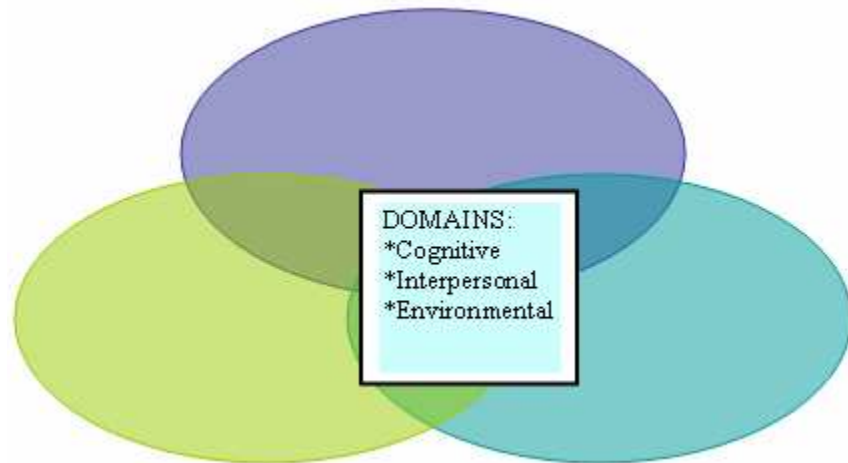


Figure 1 Three domains are illustrated, cognitive, interpersonal, and environmental. Although illustrated as separate domains, there is considerable connectedness among the domains. For example, the cognitive domain refers to self-reflection as a starting point in the process of becoming culturally competent. Self-reflection extends to the interpersonal and environmental domains as well. Individuals must engage in self reflection to understand their cultural biases in developing relationships in order to engage in meaningful relationship with others. Individuals must also reflect on environmental factors in their lives that shape their thinking to be able to understand how environmental factors affect the lives of others.¹

Best Practices

Cultural competence is operationalized in public, school, and academic libraries in collection development, access to information, staff hiring and professional development, organizational policies, and outreach to name a few. Best practices are those which demonstrate ways ensuring that library practices do not interfere with cultural norms of a particular group. This was highlighted in a recent conference held in Washington, D.C. sponsored by the American Library Association’s Office for Information Technology Policy where a group of librarians met to discuss “what constitutes offensive use of indigenous expression and who has the obligation to prohibit that which offends” (Kniffel, 2009, p. 79). The discussion by participating librarians at the Traditional Cultural Expression Conference focused on problems within the profession of “presumed superiority” of practices and the need for library institutions to respect the cultures of others in the work they carry out. Examples best practices within different library settings demonstrating cultural competence are described in the following section.

Public Libraries

Best practices in public libraries include rethinking ways of doing things that interfere with cultural norms of a particular group and create ways of building on cultural norms of groups served by the library.

¹ See Montiel-Overall, P. (2009) for further discussion of the three domains.

*Recognize and respect preferences of library users for text or digital information, forms of communication (telephone, face-to-face) and for presentation of information (electronic/Web, flyer, poster).

*Provide services in the dialect of the community even if the dialect is not the “official” dialect of the country or region. Services include having signage in the dialect of the community, providing bi-dialectal story time for children, including popular magazines written in dialect, encouraging writing groups to use dialect.

*Provide access to popular literature of interest to library users. Graphic novels are an example of literature that is extremely popular with youth but raises issues of concern with adults.

School Libraries

School librarians have a unique opportunity to demonstrate cultural competence in scheduling and arranging the library. Cultural competence is also demonstrated in information provided to teachers for classroom instructional lessons.

*Recommend literature that connects the culture of students with classroom instruction.

*Display artifacts in the library that reflect the cultural background of diverse populations of students.

*Recognize that not all students have equal access to technology.

*Include categories for popular culture in library collections to match students’ top reading choices (Hall & Coles, 1999).

Academic Libraries

Cultural competence is evident in practices in academic libraries in a multitude of ways.

*Establish special sessions for groups of students whose background may not have prepared them for use of electronic databases, references, and other tools for research.

*Provide instructions in the language(s) of users.

*Plan for instructional methods geared toward multigenerational students.

*Work diplomatically to bridge the gap between perceived and actual technological skills and technology (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2009).

Sociopolitical Considerations

Consideration of sociopolitical factors have a major effect on efforts to promote cultural competence in the library profession, in that social and political attitudes and practices that have guided practices established by organizations are often difficult to change. Language issues are a clear example of the effect of sociopolitical influences in creating multicultural libraries and in

developing culturally competent LIS professionals. In many countries, for example, standard languages are expected to be used and promoted in government entities such as libraries regardless of the language spoken by the communities in which they are geographically located. For library professionals, even those who have developed a high level of cultural competence, this potentially presents a conflict and challenge, which may or may not be possible to overcome. In some geographic areas of the United States, where “English Only” policies exist, it is not possible to obtain or use public funds for bilingual storytime, computer instruction, or reference interviews in languages other than English. In other countries, open discussion or display of certain information is prohibited (e.g., HIV-AIDS). These and other examples illustrate challenges to creating multicultural libraries that transcend culturally competent librarians.

Conclusion

Changing demographics globally require rethinking and retooling libraries to meet the needs of library users by creating multicultural institutions represented by culturally competent professionals. This paper has attempted to outline essential considerations for developing cultural competence as a means of improving multicultural library services. Culturally competent librarians provide a foundation for creating multicultural libraries to address social, linguistic, and cultural needs of library users and ensure that public, school, and academic libraries provide more equitable services by acknowledging and respecting cultural diversity among library users. Furthermore, culturally competent librarians ensure that library programs build on cultural values and norms of the community rather than replace them.

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See file My Documents/Cultural Competence Assessment. This pdf file has a cultural competence assessment that I could use with permission of the National Center of Cultural Competence 2006.

Campinha Bacote 2003
Using the Model of
cultural desire, cultural awareness, cultural knowledge, cultural skill, and cultural encounters
(directly engage in face-to-face interactions)