

Breaking Barriers: Libraries and Socially Excluded Communities

By Annette DeFaveri

When we talk about barriers to library use the allusion is to a wall. When we talk about breaking barriers the allusion is to a crumbling wall. But what keeps socially excluded people from using the library is not a physical barrier broken by a single well-placed hammer blow. The barriers are more subtle and insidious, and are ingrained in library culture. And they are most formidable for society's socially excluded groups. For every person who finds the library safe and pleasant there is another person who feels uncomfortable and unwelcome. This is a hard truth to accept, especially for people who see the library as one of society's truly accessible and democratic institutions. Identifying the barriers that keep socially excluded groups from using the library, understanding why the barriers exist, and finding ways to overcome the barriers is an iterative and generative process.

When the director of a local youth center was asked why the teens did not feel welcome at the library he replied, "Because they are not welcome." Teen behaviour, including loud conversations, overt displays of hormone-charged sexuality, and demanding yet sullen exchanges with adults make library staff uncomfortable, and they in turn attempt to restrict and regulate the teen's behaviour. The issue, he explained, is that teens are not going to change, so if the library is interested in welcoming teens it will have to change.

The coordinator of a family refugee service was asked why newcomers did not attend library events or make use of free library resources. She said that the library's inherent cultural expectations regarding group behaviour were alienating for newcomers. In many cultures gatherings are times for discussions and socializing. Library gatherings are more formal and often have a classroom style and feel to them that discourages conversation and interaction, except with the librarian. This approach presents the librarian as an authority figure who judges a newcomer's ability to assimilate, and who has the power and position to disapprove of a newcomer's behaviour. Feelings of inferiority and "otherness" result, and are transferred from the librarian to the library.

Feeling unwelcome and alienated from the library is not limited to society's most marginalized groups. For many working class adults the library is as foreign an institution as a university or museum. Even relatively well-off working class people may not have a tradition of library use and so may feel that their lives, their values, and their concerns are not reflected in the culture of the library. What they do feel is the library's culture of authority and deference. The library is not seen as an organization that facilitates the acquisition of information or one that promotes life long learning. For them the library's culture mystifies information and the process of acquiring information. The Working Together project talked with community members who do not use the library. Reasons for not using the library include:

- Reading is hard. You have to be a good reader to use the library.
- Feeling as if the library is a club and I'm not a member of the club.
- Feeling as if the library is like school and school is hard and not much fun.
- Believing that the library has good things, but feels too stupid to find them or ask for help.

- Afraid of asking the wrong question, or asking the wrong person the wrong question.
- Believing that the library is only for smart people.
- Feeling stupid at the library.
- Not understanding how the library works.
- Afraid to go in and ask for something in case it is something that everyone else knows how to find.
- Believing that the library is about books and do not read too many books.

How do we make the library a more welcoming and inclusive place for all community members? One way is to emphasize the importance of the library's initial contact with new patrons. On-line registration works well for people who are confident with technology. But for people who feel intimidated by automated services, and who have difficulty articulating their needs, even filling out a paper application can be isolating and discouraging. Welcoming new patrons and making them comfortable in the library should be the jewel in the service model crown. Librarians could register new patrons in person and take this opportunity to talk about the patron's reasons for coming in to the library, to ask if other family members need cards, and give a tour of the branch resources. This strategy personalizes the library and makes it immediately relevant in the life of the new user. The library has been described as the living room of the community. But to be sure it is a hospitable living room the hosts must work to welcome their guests and see to their needs.

Another simple but significant step is having patrons sit beside the librarian, rather than across the desk. Looking for information becomes a collaborative effort that demystifies the searching process. Working side by side with a patron highlights the library's teaching and instructional role without emphasizing the differences between those who know how the library functions and those who have difficulty using the library. A significant barrier to library use by socially excluded people is the need to feel comfortable with the library as a community space before feeling comfortable with the library as a community resource. Patrons must be and feel included in the ongoing and everyday activities of the library. It is not enough to tell socially excluded groups that the library has significant resources freely available to them. Nor is it enough to tell them that the library is a supportive and respectful organization.

Socially excluded people know that what an organization claims it will do, and what it actually does, can be very different things, and that this difference rarely works in their favour. In his radio play "Dead Dog Café" Tom King illustrates this dichotomy by telling the story of two First Nations people who, on Halloween, go trick or treating as the scariest people they know – a social worker and a priest. Poverty, mental and physical illnesses, limited education and refugee status are just some of the conditions that shape the lives of socially excluded people and inform their perceptions of community services. Each of these conditions can engender suspicion of authority, isolation, and non-participation. Often these conditions are reinforced by degrading and alienating encounters with other institutional community agencies. It is easy and common to include libraries with other authoritarian, alienating, and excluding community organizations. As a result socially excluded people are often unwilling to enter a library and unlikely to use its resources.

The library needs to demonstrate that it is a respectful and inclusive organization before it can convince socially excluded groups that it offers collections, services, and programs that can enrich and empower their lives. This was the situation that the Working Together project faced with LOVE (Leave Out Violence), a community group that supports young adults who are the witnesses, victims and perpetrators of violence.

The young adults who attend the LOVE Leadership class knew about many of the programs and services the library offers, but were not using them. Talking with the Leadership class revealed that they associated the library with school, which was often hostile and isolating. They felt that, like their schools, the library was an authoritarian institution imposing its values and behavioural norms on them. The challenge for the Working Together project was to show LOVE young adults that the library is an inclusive and respectful organization that strives to represent and include all community members.

To do this LOVE young adults were invited to hold their graduation ceremony at the library. The library also hosted an evening of readings by LOVE members and installed LOVE's original photographs in the Moat Gallery for the first two weeks of 2005. Once the young adults felt comfortable in the library, once they believed that they were part of the community entitled to use the library, the library could offer access to its collections, programs, and services.

By first becoming an inclusive community space the library is able to encourage socially excluded people to explore its diverse resources. And by using the library's resources, socially excluded people are more likely to enrich and empower their lives. As they begin to enrich and empower their lives they are more likely to participate in the community and become active, able citizens.

One suggestion for promoting the library as an inclusive community space is to create a programming series and template that facilitates the use of library space for community programs that may not have an obvious or immediate connection to the library's collections and services. Developing such a series creates an opportunity for promoting other library programs, services, and collections to those community groups it does not normally reach.

Another suggestion is to establish book clubs that meet in community buildings such as neighbourhood houses and focus on the clientele of the neighbourhood organization. Unlike the traditional book club, the off-site club would begin with the librarian reading aloud to members. As the club evolves, and as members become comfortable with each other, club members might choose to read aloud as well. When members are comfortable together the club could hold sessions at the library. This approach allows the library to build relationships with people in environments that are comfortable for them and to then expand the relationship to include the library and library resources.

The library could also facilitate regular library programming at non traditional locations. Many authors volunteer to read at the library and could be sponsored to read at other community meeting places or events. For example, a children's author could read at the annual general meeting of a local day care organization or at a

community dinner night at a neighbourhood church. A librarian or library staff member could accompany the author and promote library services and other programs being held at the library.

Community parks can play an important role in introducing the library to non-users. A Summer Reading Club event could be held in a park and parents could be encouraged to attend with a picnic lunch. The event could be promoted through neighbourhood service agencies. Parents who might be hesitant to go to the local library would have an opportunity to become familiar with library personnel and to join in a library activity. Comfort and enjoyment at one library event will encourage participation in other library events. And parents, through their children, will have an opportunity to feel welcome and included in the cultural life of the local library.

When introducing new approaches to making the library an inclusive community space it is important to emphasize to staff the philosophical and practical reasons for doing so. Encouraging community inclusiveness should be promoted to staff as an added skill rather than an added duty. To accomplish this staff needs to understand the advantages to bringing new users to the library and how this is a reflection of the library's core mission and values, and is not an extracurricular activity.

Fines, replacement costs and processing fees are affordable for the middle classes, but represent significant and often overwhelming costs for poor people. As a result, poor patrons with fines over \$10.00 who cannot pay the fines are excluded from accessing library resources. This barrier to library use has short and long-term consequences for the library and the community it serves.

In one instance, a mother with her three young children explains that coffee accidentally spilled on the picture book while she was reading to her youngest daughter. Her daughter was excited and knocked the cup out of her hand. The clerk takes the picture book, opens it, examines the pages and points out the damaged areas to the mother. "We have to charge you for this, you know, we can't repair it. We will have to order another copy and when we reorder there is a processing charge as well."

The mother again explains that this was an accident, and adds that she can't afford to pay for the book. The clerk takes the book to the librarian at the reference desk, where the book is again examined and the book's circulation statistics are checked. The librarian and clerk discuss publicly the best course of action: perhaps waive the processing fee, perhaps talk to the patron about a payment plan, or perhaps negotiate a one-time payment of half the price of the book.

And while this is happening, the mother waits at the checkout desk. Her embarrassment is visible to everyone in the area. Her face is flushed, and she has gathered her three children close to her. Her eyes don't lift from the counter top. She is quiet and still. When the clerk returns and discusses payment options the mother says again that she cannot afford to pay for the book.

And so, while this mother should be applauded for bringing her children to the library and encouraged to continue reading to her children, she is instead publicly humiliated and made to confess over and over that she cannot afford to pay for the picture book. Will this family be comfortable returning to the library?

If the library does not charge for the damaged book, it loses about \$25.00. When the library fails to recognize situations where charging replacement costs means losing library patrons, it loses the opportunity to participate in the life of the patron and the patron's family. By choosing to make a \$25.00 replacement cost more significant than the role the institution can play in the social, developmental, and community life of the family, the library forfeits its role as a community and literacy advocate and leader.

It will cost the library more than \$25.00 to convince this mother to return to the library. It will cost the library more than \$25.00 to persuade this mother that the library is a welcoming community place willing to meet her needs and support her family. It will cost the library more than \$25.00 to mount literacy programs aimed at her children, who will not benefit from regular library visits and programs. And when these children are adults, it will cost the library more than \$25.00 to convince them that the library is a welcoming and supportive place for their children.

In "Save the Libraries!" (Educational Leadership, March 2004, p. 83) Susan B. Neuman and Donna Celano discuss their interviews with low-income families and reveal that even if these families had library cards they would be reluctant to check out books because they feared the possibility of overdue fines. Library fines represent such an enormous portion of a poor person's monthly income that fines can be impossible to pay off.

It is important to understand that incurring library fines does not always, or even often, mean a disregard for library materials or disrespect for other library patrons. The lives of poor and socially excluded people are often complicated by mental and physical disabilities, lack of education, chronic unemployment, debilitating disease, addiction and social prejudices. All of these conditions can affect a person's ability to return materials on time.

Daniel is a member of the Coast Clubhouse, an organization that supports individuals recovering from mental illnesses and who might not have the family or economic resources to facilitate their recovery. When the Working Together project offered Coast members a chance to have their library card records reviewed, Daniel brought his card and his story to the session. He hadn't been able to pay his fines because of "some trouble with getting work, and other problems." He had borrowed 5 magazines and returned them late. The fines totalled \$40.00. He hadn't been able to save enough money to pay the fines, but was anxious to use the library again as he enjoyed reading.

Daniel's fines were from 1994, and though he still carried his card with him, he had not used the library since then. What does this cost the library? What price has Daniel paid?

Perhaps it is time to consider that library circulation policies can be ineffective at the circulation desk level. Policies designed to empower staff become ambiguous when they are not supported by introductory and ongoing training.

Circulation policies direct clerical staff to make subjective decisions about a patron's ability to pay fines, replacements costs, and processing fees without adequately identifying the criteria for making the decisions. As a result, clerks might rely on feelings of sympathy or on a desire to end an altercation with a difficult patron as a

reason to waive fines. Alternatively, fines might not be waived if a clerk does not feel sympathy for a patron, or feels that a difficult patron should be made to pay fines because of his behaviour and not because of extenuating circumstances. Staff members are encouraged to make independent decisions but are open to criticism and correction from their supervisors and branch heads. This ambiguity can force clerks to stick to "the letter of the law," or to always refer the situation to a supervisor. It encourages inconsistencies based on staff biases and prejudices. It fails to educate staff to the reasons for waiving fines in poor, socially excluded communities. If circulation policies worked as they are intended to work, Daniel would not have had to wait ten years to use his library card.

Recognizing the real costs to patrons and to society when access to the library's resources are restricted by fines, replacement costs, and processing fees, can encourage library systems to explore innovative and progressive solutions to the current challenge.

One suggestion is to approach the Friends of the Library, or another civic-minded group, for funding to cover the fines, or a percentage of the fines, incurred by individuals living in poor neighbourhoods. While this suggestion may alleviate some fiscal issues, it does not address the systemic problem of training staff to identify, know, and understand the socially excluded people in the communities they serve. This approach also fails to acknowledge the library's social responsibility to provide equal access to information to all community members, regardless of income level.

Another approach is to separate the issue into manageable parts. For example, consider removing replacement costs and processing fees from children's cards. If this proves expensive the Friends of the Library or another community group could be approached for support. By recognizing that poor families cannot pay replacement costs and processing fees the library breaks the barrier that keeps many families from using the library on a regular basis. And breaking this barrier promotes sustainable relationships between the library and families in the community.

The library can examine the borrowing habits of teens and consider making teens exempt from library fines. Fines keep teens out of the library. Few teens are financially independent and so library fines can be as daunting for them as for other socially excluded groups. And like other socially excluded groups teens that have the least, need the library the most. Omitting fines will encourage ongoing library use throughout teenage years and will promote a habit of library use that will be carried into adulthood.

Circulation policies have a profound effect on people who are homeless. Without proof of a permanent address the library will not issue a library card. Without a library card many poor and socially excluded people feel as if they do not "belong" to the library and will not even enter the building to use onsite resources. Vancouver's Carnegie Branch issues a special card that gives community members access to branch material but does not give access to all the system's collections and resources. While this is a valuable intermediary step it is still a discriminatory one. Access to all the library's resources should not be withheld because a person or family is too poor to afford housing.

While there are ever increasing numbers of homeless people in this country the experience of one family in the Mount Pleasant neighbourhood can help the library understand how important it is to issue library cards to all community members. This family of five lives in their car. They do not have library cards. The three school age daughters do their homework in the backseat of the car or in one of the community's many Laundromats. The parents want to stay in the Mount Pleasant area because they recognize the importance of keeping their daughters in one school. And the school has a hot lunch program. The parents know that the library is open to all community members, and that it would be an appropriate place to do homework, but they are hesitant, embarrassed, and ashamed to use the library. For these parents, and like many other homeless people, being banned from having a library card is the same as being banned from the building.

One suggestion is to create a new "Community Card" for adults who cannot provide proof of a permanent residence. This card could be issued for other adults who, for reasons of poverty, mental or physical illness, and other conditions that create social exclusion, cannot meet the financial expectations of the current library card. People with a Community Card, which would be physically indistinguishable from other library cards, would not be stopped from borrowing library materials because of fines. Similarly, replacement costs and processing fees would be noted, but would not prohibit library use. The default position for this card would be no fines. To ensure the protection of the collection, borrowing limits could be attached to the Community Card. The Community Card would come up for review and renewal on a regular basis. This would give staff a chance to ask "Are you happy with your card?" and be trained not to say, "Do you have an address yet?" or "Can you afford to pay fines yet?" With the introduction of the Community Card would come additional staff training to sensitize staff to the issues of social exclusion in the community. With the introduction of the new card could come additional staff training focused on the needs of socially excluded communities and the library's responsibilities to these communities.

The results of addressing the problems associated with fines, replacement costs, and processing fees are increased information access, literacy, and life-enrichment that socially excluded groups are often seeking and deserve, and that the library strives to provide to all community members.

At the heart of every positive story about the library is a personal experience with a library staff member. Staff develop and sustain the relationships that embody and define library services. However well-conceived the service model, without the people to humanize it, a service model is simply a set of instructions. Breaking barriers to library use is about building relationships. Building relationships is about taking time, and it requires staff who are trained, knowledgeable, and understanding of the community's needs and the library's role in meeting those needs. As we build relationships we build communities. When we build communities we sustain lifelong learning for all community members.

Annette DeFaveri is the national coordinator for the Working Together project and a librarian at the Vancouver Public Library. She would like to thank Brian Campbell, Corinne Durston, and Mark Leier for their support and critical comments.