The Culture of Comfort

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Libraries are meant to provide equal access to information for all community members. How then does the library build its capacity to serve the increasing numbers of socially excluded people who do not use its resources but who would benefit significantly from them? We need to identify the barriers that keep people from walking through our doors. We need to identify ourselves as one of the barriers.

Librarians are a barrier because we are mired in a culture of comfort. Like most people we remain where we are comfortable: comfortable with the programs we offer, comfortable with the services we provide, and comfortable with the people we serve. Even our challenges are comfortable: to do more of what we always do for the people we always serve. As a result we often fail to serve communities that do not look, feel, or think like us. Even when we acknowledge our responsibilities to communities that are not reflections of ourselves, our institutional culture lets us impose our concepts of appropriate services on people who were never interested in them in the first place. Thus our culture of comfort becomes a culture of colonialism. And like colonialism it assumes that the colonizers understand the needs of the colonized better than they do themselves.

The library's culture of comfort lets us define our communities as the people who use our services, and who know and like us. Our responsibility to the community is discharged when we meet the needs of these patrons. We then evaluate and measure our success by surveying individuals who use the library. By definition these are people who find the library supportive of the issues that matter to them and who see the library reflecting the values and social structures that they are comfortable with. This self-reinforcing loop lets us mask exclusionary library practices by claiming that we respond to community feedback, and that we serve all the people who want to be served.

Our culture of comfort lets us believe that if people do not use the library it is because they do not know about the library. It lets us believe that a marketing campaign, or a warm and personal introduction, is all that is necessary to inaugurate people into the library. But socially excluded people know about the library. And what they know is that the library makes them feel uncomfortable and unwelcome. We are so caught up in doing what we always do, in justifying what we always do, and then assuring ourselves that we

are doing the right thing, that we sometimes lose sight of our most basic mandate, to provide information to all. To provide information to all we need to understand why some people are uncomfortable and unwelcome in the library. As unsettling as it may be we need to evaluate our own responses to socially excluded people.

For example, recently a teenaged boy asked a librarian where he could go because his parents had kicked him out of the house. The librarian thought this was an inappropriate question because she was not a social worker. But as a librarian she could have answered the question as easily as answering a request for an address. The question was difficult because the boy was not a typical patron and did not embody the social values the library tacitly endorses. The boy makes us uncomfortable because he forces us to acknowledge that there are questions we need to answer from people who are often afraid to talk to us. And they are afraid for legitimate reasons. They are afraid of the library's bureaucratic and middle class environment that judges them by the questions they ask.

Many librarians are appalled when they hear this story and express sympathy and concern for the boy. But the issue is not what we feel or do individually. The issue is what we do collectively as an institution. Individually we can serve the boy as best we can in the moment, but collectively we need to acknowledge that he represents a much larger group that is not using the library. Collectively we can use our sympathy and concern to fuel inclusive policies, programs, and services that recognize the needs of people who are alienated from the library. We need to change our culture and ourselves if we intend to regularly and thoughtfully connect excluded people with the library.

Change is difficult. Recently a group of librarians met to discuss the needs of socially excluded groups and individuals. The discussion began with the ranking librarian expounding the excellence of existing services and explaining that many of the "new" ideas for discussion had been thought of and tried before, and had failed. She went on to talk about ways to convince non-users of the importance of ongoing library programs and services. What was not discussed were ways to engage excluded communities in conversations about what they wanted from the library. Nor was there a discussion about how difficult this would be, or how hard it would be to listen to community suggestions without overlaying our own biases and prejudices. The discussion was about changing socially excluded people's view of the library instead of changing the library's view of socially excluded people.

Librarians design programs and services to promote resources and to meet community needs. But without community consultation the programs and services we create only reflect our interpretations of what people want. For example, we believe that our job search and basic computer courses can help people such as Tom, a recent parolee, to find employment and re-integrate into society. When Tom was finally asked what he wanted from the library he replied "cookbooks." At age 62 Tom made his first trip to the library because he wanted to make himself a curry dinner. When we consult people about their wants and needs, and when we respond to their requests, we build an inclusive library that listens to even the faintest voices. If we begin by listening rather than rushing to

teach and instruct, we can change our view of socially excluded people. Only then will socially excluded people feel supported and welcome in the library.

Librarians can list excluded groups in our communities – the poor, the physically and mentally ill, the under-educated, the uneducated, the addicted, the abused, and the alone – but reiterating the list should not be confused with addressing the needs of these communities or building a more socially inclusive library. Before we can address the needs and wants of excluded communities we must acknowledge the systemic barriers that keep them from using the library. Then we need to accept that the first changes we make must be to our culture. Finally we can experiment with new approaches and build new relationships with the people who know that the library does not currently represent them.

We need to make ourselves and our institutions inclusive and accessible. We need to create policies, programs and services that are committed to equitable communities. To do this we must shed our culture of comfort. We need to emphasize ideas over tasks, and processes over solutions. We need to insist that experiences and effects are as significant a measure of our success as counting heads at a library program. Collectively we can debunk the myth that the current definition of the library and librarian is complete and needs only to be reproduced to be successful. This is not a "them or us," or an "old versus new" split in our profession. It is simply the recognition that if we are indeed society's most egalitarian institution we must become egalitarian.

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