



## Information for Social Change

*"an activist organisation that examines issues of censorship, freedom and ethics amongst library and information workers..."*

### "IN" versus "WITH" the Community: Using a Community Development Approach to Public Library Service

By Brian Campbell

In 2004, Vancouver Public Library initiated a project to develop methods for libraries to work with low-income communities through a community development approach and to explore ways to overcome systemic barriers to library use by the socially excluded. Funded by Human Resources Development Canada, the Libraries in Marginalized Communities project included Halifax Public Libraries, Toronto Public Library and Regina Public Library. Community Development Librarians (CDLs) work in the community, and with the community, to determine how best the library could serve its needs.

After only a few months of community work, the CDLs argued the project title did not fit neither the project's goals nor the reality of their work. The title was changed to Working Together: Libraries – Community Connections. In that title change lies the essential difference between the outreach work normally associated with libraries and the concept of community development.

As librarians, we believe we are fulfilling our mission to provide equal access to all. Library staff often point to specific programs like literacy programs, computer training, ESL and outreach to daycare centres as examples of making the library accessible to everyone. Many of these programs are outside the library's regular operating budget, and neither the programs nor the attitude of working with the community are mainstream in the library organization.

The reality, however, is that libraries do not do a good job of providing library service to the very poor and socially excluded. There are many reasons for this. Libraries are organized and structured by mainly middle-class professionals who have absorbed their profession's and their class' norms. Most librarians work in libraries where the rules of behaviour have been established to ensure an organized, functional and controlled environment. Users approach staff behind reference or circulation desks where the rules ensure us a familiar role. Most of our current users understand and are comfortable with these rules. It is difficult for most of us to understand that not everyone feels the same comfort.

Indeed, the first shock for the CDLs was to discover many in the community are angry with the library or unwilling to go back to the library because of their experiences. Many simply do not think of the library as a resource for them. Many individuals felt the library didn't want "their kind": indeed, the frequent discussions in libraries about smelly users, inappropriately dressed patrons, patrons nodding off in the library and socially awkward users flag this as an area of discomfort both for staff and the usual library patrons.

Fines and charges for lost/damaged material are major blocks for low-income users: because of them, children are often discouraged from using the library. In one example in Vancouver, a man was still carrying a library card he had not used for 10 years because of outstanding fines.

When the question of service to the socially excluded is raised, this community is misunderstood or viewed as equivalent to other populations the library might not serve adequately. Arguments have been made to me that while it is true libraries are not serving the socially excluded, they are also not doing a good job of servicing the wealthy, businesses or the technologically savvy either. These three and other groups are viewed as service gaps equivalent to the socially excluded: a view I find flawed. Those who are socially excluded have nowhere else to go. The library could be an extremely important resource in their life. Indeed, the stories librarians are most proud of are those where the librarian or library has played a key role in the life of an immigrant, a homeless person or someone who is distraught (See *Beyond Words*). These stories demonstrate our desire to work with those who are socially excluded as a core part of library service. Library branches like Carnegie in Vancouver, Albert in Regina and others are ongoing attempts to provide these services.

One lesson of *Working Together* is that we do not see the library in the same way as many socially excluded see it.

What is the difference between the two project titles? It is the difference between working in the community and working with the community.

### **Working in the Community**

Libraries often work in the community. Taking outreach programs offered in the building into the community to a designated external location or group of individuals has been part of the library repertoire for many decades. Homebound drop-offs to the visually impaired, seniors centre visits and children's story times in daycares and school classes are well-established outreach services.

Community outreach is an association between the library and selected institutions or individuals that results in the provision of a specific service. The arrangement is primarily between institutions, and reflects users' needs and requirements as mediated through the institutions. The service is typically scheduled in advance, at a regular location for a particular group. Most often, the program is very similar to those offered in the library and probably does not involve those receiving the service involved in designing or planning it.

Outreach typically responds to only one facet of an individual's life. For example, libraries provide books to the visually impaired but are rarely engaged in the other library-related issues faced by those patrons. Nor is the project typically engaged with the individual's place in the community.

While there may be some feedback mechanism, it is generally the library that determines the service, how it is provided and whether or not it is a success, often on the same basis – including the need for efficiency and statistical outcomes (attendance) – as regular library programs. Outreach projects are valuable tools for libraries and extend their reach into the community, but they are not the same as programs and services that grow out of the community.

### **Working with the Community**

The community development approach begins from the position of the individual and from the perspective of the community. It assists individuals or communities to articulate their needs and then investigates ways and means to work collaboratively to respond to those needs.

Outreach begins by providing programs, while community development begins by building relationships. Building relationships can be simple or complex. They can be between two individuals or between an individual and an institution, or between two institutions. Building relationships is particularly important when focusing on socially excluded groups who need to develop a foundation of trust and respect before they willingly and frankly discuss their needs. It is necessary to earn their trust.

The community development approach recognizes and acknowledges the conditions that define the lives of socially excluded groups and individuals. They may be unemployed or have low incomes. They experience addictions, poor literacy skills, mental illnesses or limited education and training. They are unlikely to have the bureaucratic or organizational skills that allow them to maneuver within the institutions that dominate their lives and control their choices. Generally speaking in our society, the socially excluded are exploited in the labour market and frustrated by the social safety net agencies which are forced to restrict the resources available to them. In many cases they are looked upon as obstacles who frustrate the ability of staff to meet their quotas for production statistics or budget control. At every point, the "system" is alien to the socially excluded. Even an institution as benign as the library is a minefield of protocol, established norms, and financial penalties.

There is an additional reason for spending time to establish trusting relationships. Socially excluded individuals are more than the characteristics used to define them. They have strengths and weaknesses, personal histories, relationships, and stories that transcend the labels put on them by various agencies. Getting to know their full story allows community development workers to understand them in real terms and to understand the community in its full complexity. A relationship of trust is a basic foundation on which we can begin to work with communities.

Once relationships have been established, the process of working with individuals to discuss and articulate their needs, and to establish a path to meeting those needs, can begin. This means responding to more than one facet of the individual with one program. It means working with the whole individual in the context of the whole community. While this might seem like a linear, incremental process, it is in reality a very complex process with moments of revelation and intimacy, and moments of frustration and distance.

Establishing relationships with a number of community individuals and groups provides both a grounded understanding of the community and an entry into it. Relationships nurture the resources that are necessary to respond to the community's needs. Community relationships make it possible to propose concepts and programs representing a continuum of responses over a long period of time rather than a series of fragmented resource bursts.

Outreach supports detachment, but community development requires risk. Community development looks into the library rather than the other way around. It changes community perceptions of librarians and libraries and deals with communities and individuals not as fragments or episodes but as a totality. It requires engagement and personal vulnerability rather than static or official plans. Outreach is an extension of our present business model. Community development is a rich and complex approach that evolves innovative models of librarianship and sustainable communities.

An important lesson learned in the Working Together projects is the amount of time it takes to establish relationships, gain trust and develop services with the socially excluded that respond to their needs. While most library services are justified quantitatively, working with the community is measured in changing lives and gathering stories.

This approach is not simple and the extent to which it can be used in libraries is still open to discussion and evaluation. Even while the CDLs are working full-time in the community, it is still very difficult to break away from the approaches of a librarian based inside a library. Running to programs rather than establishing relationships is still a problem.

However, we are discovering a level of complexity and richness in working with the community that can only benefit both libraries and their communities. From learning how to develop and present computer training programs outside of the classroom setting to finding the value of community asset maps for ongoing branch library work, the lessons of this project will inform a new way of thinking about community libraries.

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