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Joseph W. Raker
Boston Public Library

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Multicultural Acquisitions: One Librarian's Perspective

by Joseph W. Raker (Boston Public Library) <jraker@bpl.org>

Two opposing forces appear to be at work in the world today. One force pushes for homogenization, the other stresses diversity. In most academic, economic, and political circles, English is spoken. Around the world people drink Coke or Pepsi. The world community is more economically and socially interdependent. It appears to be on the verge of becoming one global community of similar interests and viewpoints. At the same time, however, there is another trend at work. That trend stresses differences, affirms ethnic or racial history and traditions, lauds the values or customs that differentiate one group from the rest of the community. This tendency crosses national borders, in some cases forming supranational entities.

In their book, *Intercultural Communication in the Global Workplace*, the authors Iris Varner and Linda Beamer define culture as the software of the mind: "It is like DOS ... it enables us to process information in various specific applications. Culture can be thought of as a mental set of windows through which all life is viewed." (See Varner, Iris, and Linda Beamer. *Intercultural Communication in the Global Workplace*, Boston: Irwin, Inc., 1995, p. 2.) The authors see culture as a shared view of groups of people. Culture ranks what is important and dictates how we behave. The authors contend that culture is learned and therefore learnable. This is reassuring for the librarians who must serve the needs of various cultures. Many aspects of a culture can be learned so that the service and the material provided will not be offensive but rather a reflection of the richness of a culture and a true service to the individual patron.

Libraries reflect the reality of the world about them. They are not immune to social forces. In an attempt to be relevant, they focus on the patrons who form our greater society. If the community is becoming multicultural in outlook, then so must library services and collections.

The Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Movement, Native American, Gay and Lesbian Movements and the ever increasing influx of immigrants from all over the world have not only changed the society in which we live but also the type of service libraries must offer. We librarians are keenly aware that there are great differences in the way our patrons view various aspects of life, the way they express themselves, and the way they practice their religious beliefs. We are not a monocultural nation but a multicultural society.

In an attempt to provide appropriate reading and instructional materials to the community, librarians have made many mistakes. These have been both a source of embarrassment and, at times, a reflection of a Euro-centered mind set or a lack of understanding of the other cultures. Had the librarians known the community, identified the resources, and used effective means to acquire the material, much of the frustration and the unintentional offenses could have been avoided. This paper is an attempt, at least from one librarian's perspective, to examine some of the pitfalls to be avoided in the acquisition of multicultural material.

The Community

Pitfall number one is assuming we know the community. Who are we serving? What are our patrons' values, dreams, biases, etc.? How do we find out who they are? The solution is to let them tell us.

Identifying the community to be served is the first step in multicultural acquisitions. Most librarians categorize these groups under major cultures: such as African American, Latino, Asian or Eastern European. Some would include in multicultural acquisitions Feminist issues, as well as Gay and Lesbian literature. However even within these major grouping, there are many subgroups, many of which do not fit neatly into defined categories.

In an effort to understand an ethnic or cultural group, we ought to permit the community to identify itself. What are this group's values, wants, dreams, and, their role within the dominant community? These cannot be second-guessed by the librarian. Let the community identify who they are.

For example, during the 1980s there was a large influx of immigrants from the Soviet Union. These Russian-speaking and reading patrons were perhaps the most avid readers and vocal patrons that some librarians had served. Unknown to some was the fact that the

majority of these early immigrants were also Jewish. For the first time they were able to freely practice their religion and delve into the richness of their culture. Unless they identified themselves as Russian Jews would the library, in addition to Russian language material, also have provided them with material of Jewish interest?

The Latino community is one of the fastest growing groups in the country. One patron may be from San Salvador and another from Argentina. Each has a different history and distinct culture but with many similarities. For political and economic purposes they may want to ignore these differences and stress the fact that they are Latinos. At other times they may want to celebrate their distinct heritage. Libraries must, in each case, provide them with the material that helps them do so.

Unparalleled in the history of the United States is the influx of people from the Asian countries. While they are all Asians, there is a stronger difference between a Vietnamese and a Chinese than just language. Librarians should not look at the Asian community without seeing the varying cultural and historic differences.

Communication with the various ethnic or cultural groups is the key to understanding them. Also, making contact with the group can provide information on some otherwise unknown resources. Identifying the resources is the next step in multicultural acquisitions. What resources are available for the librarian to acquire?

Resources

Pitfall number two is not staying abreast of the resources available. There are a variety of resources and types of material which can be purchased. Librarians ought not to limit themselves to the print format and to the normal print sources of notification of material available. Multicultural material is also multimedia material.

Some purists would argue that to be authentically multicultural the material should reflect and compare various cultures, anything else is really multiethnic. While this may be true, our goal is to provide the needed service to the patrons, not necessarily an analysis of their cultural values vis-a-vis another culture. An analysis of various cul-

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tural perspectives may be needed for course material in multicultural approaches to various disciplines, nevertheless the goal of every library is to provide the patrons with the material they need. This may include simple how-to books which allow them to function in their new country or classic literature from their homeland.

Resources are available in several formats. Some cultures have a strong written tradition while others have a rich oral tradition. Culture goes beyond the written word and includes music, dance, and art. Multicultural acquisitions would therefore include books, newspapers, and magazines, as well as audio and videocassettes, microfilm, and CD-ROMs.

Finding this material is an ongoing task. The major publishing houses in the US are very aware of the multicultural market. This is obvious by the increasing number of titles published in foreign languages. Even those titles published in English focus on perspectives of other cultures. In the area of juvenile literature books reflecting African American values are routinely seen. More and more Gay and Lesbian issues are covered. The same can be said of Feminist issues and to a lesser degree, of Native American topics. Major microfilm publishers and CD-ROM producers have had success with multicultural projects. Some fine examples of this are University Microfilming International's *Black Newspapers Project*, University Publications of America's *The Papers of The NAACP* and, of course, Softline Information, Inc.'s *Ethnic News Watch*.

Are all the needs of multicultural resources covered by these major houses? Most definitely not. There is a wealth of information and quality material available from small presses and even government publications. Some libraries house archives of various ethnic groups whose history and influences developed within their geographic area. Various ethnic social and religious societies have archival material tracing the history of their particular group. An example of a particular ethnic group's library in the Boston area would be the Armenian Library in Watertown, MA. An example of a religious group, also in the Boston area, would be the library of the headquarters of the Unitarian Church in Boston.

A librarian becomes aware of these resources by reaching out to the community. The librarian should develop contacts with the various ethnic groups and with other libraries. Contacts with the community will help uncover some of these publications and archival material. Contact with other libraries will enable the librarian to tap the specialty dealers and bibliographic lists used by others in the field. There are professional organizations which share information such as the *Ethnic Materials and Information Exchange Round Table* of the *American Library Association*. Joining an appropriate listserv is an invaluable means of keeping up to date with the issues and publications of particular ethnic groups. Examples of these would be the *Latin American Librarian's Announcement List (LALA-L)* <Listserv@uga.cuga.edu>, the *Conference of Black Librarians (BLACKLIB)* <Listserv@guvn.ccf.george-town.edu>, and *Newsletter on Chinese Community (CCNL)* <Listserv@utarvm1.uta.edu>. With more Latin American and African vendors on the Internet, communications are swifter and more avenues are open for resources not provided in print form.

The Acquisitions Process

The third pitfall is lack of creativity and flexibility in the acquisitions process. Flexible and creative approaches are needed during the actual acquisitions process. An acquisitions librarian will use a number of procedures demanded by practical situations and the constraints imposed by the availability of the material and the format in which the material comes.

The old debate of firm order versus blanket orders and approval plans remains alive in the area of multicultural acquisitions. Approval and blanket orders from trusted and proven vendors are a sure way to

receive material while it is available and without the hassles of Customs, claiming, and the usual follow-up involved with firm orders. Some would argue that the material dependent on the exchange rate is cheaper if purchased in the country of origin. Others will argue that the cost of brokers' fees to clear Customs and problems related to payments nullify these savings advantages.

Shopping trips, either local or foreign, are very effective means of acquiring material, especially material which is never cited in national bibliographies or vendors' lists. These quickly become out of print and unavailable due to short press runs. Many of these publications are of a particular ethnic society and are intended for limited use by its members or a small group of interested readers. Some large institutions still fund foreign trips for bibliographers. There is hardly a library anywhere which does not, at times, send selectors to a local specialty or ethnic bookstore. Inherent with shopping trips is the danger of duplication. The library may already have copies of titles being purchased. For some libraries, duplication is not an important issue. Many public libraries can accept, and may even want, the duplication. For others, a certain amount of duplication may be the price the institution is willing to pay in order to acquire material otherwise unavailable.

The best means of acquiring material is the establishment of contacts with a good bookman. In this age of electronic information there remain some true bookmen. These vendors, especially once they know that there will be a continued relationship with a library, will become an invaluable source for ethnic material. Often they can provide material somewhat outside of their expertise or make referrals for similar vendors of specialized material.

In conclusion, if a library is dedicated to serving the multicultural communities that form our contemporary society, it must be willing to listen to the community, identify its needs, search for the resources available and be flexible in the acquisition procedures used. The best way to do this is to establish contact with the different communities and with the booksellers who serve them.

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