



Cultural Mediation in Library and Information Science (LIS) Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

This paper attempts to highlight the importance of culturally mediated instruction in LIS teaching and learning. The paper deals with the general concept of the cultural dimension of human development through identification of students who are culturally different from the main stream orientation by creating culturally mediated instruction in a learning environment. The paper further elaborates the role of LIS schools in this direction. It concludes by suggesting ways in which LIS education could be improved by being inclusive with the changing global society and its needs.

Introduction

In today's global world, meeting the learning needs of culturally diverse group is the most challenging task facing library and information science (LIS) education. The populations of Africa, Australia, Latin America and North America today are more diverse than ever. LIS educators must meet the challenges of cultural diversity in preparing future library professionals by preparing their instruction so that it encourages the learning of all students regardless of their cultural background and experience. Cultural diversity is a part of human development and leading a full life without being excluded from the mainstream.

Culture as defined by Bates and Plog (1990) "is a system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviors, and artifacts that the members of a society use to cope with their world and with one another, and that are transmitted from generation through learning." This definition includes not only patterns of behavior but also patterns of thought (shared

meanings that the members of a society attach to various phenomena, natural and intellectual, including, religion and ideologies), artifacts (tools, pottery, houses, machine, works of art), and culturally transmitted skills and techniques used to make the artifacts.” Further more Samovar, Porter and Stefani expand the definition of culture as “the deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, value, actions, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and artifacts acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving.” Culture is everything we do, how we perceive the world and knowledge that guides us about how we understand and do things. Culture includes basic components of human development and librarians are the gatekeepers of this universe. Therefore, according to Human Development Reports (2004) “The cultural dimensions of human development requires careful attention for three reasons that include cultural liberty, (1) Cultural liberty is an important aspect of human freedom, central to the capability of people to live as they would like and to have the opportunity to choose from the options they have or can have; (2) In cultural liberty and human development, the approach is to clarify the importance of human freedom in cultural spheres rather than glorify endorsement of inherited tradition. Here the initial issue is not just the significance of traditional culture it is far reaching importance of cultural choices and freedom (3) Cultural liberty is important not only in the cultural sphere, but in the success and failures in social, political and economics spheres. Here the different dimensions of human life have strong interrelations.” Culture provides the background and opportunity that mediates between the individual and how reality is perceived. In this context therefore, the instructor’s cultural orientation necessarily affects the way in which subject material is organized and presented.

Cultural Diversity is about people. It is about providing the opportunity for a group or individual to access their cultural heritage. As the report on Cultural Policy Resources (2000) indicates our definition of “cultural heritage is in serious need of revision if it is to reflect genuinely global values and aspirations. Understanding of heritage everywhere still conforms to a single vision, dominated by aesthetic and historic criteria.” As Deniz Kandiyoti says “It still is biased towards the elite and the masculine, the monumental rather than the homely, the literate rather than the oral, the ceremonial rather than the workaday, the sacred rather than the profane receive attention and respect.” And in the words of Javier Perez de Cuellar “We have a long way to go. We have not yet learned how to respect each other fully, how to share and work together. This truly exceptional time in history calls for exceptional solutions. The world as we know it, all the relationships we took as given, are undergoing profound rethinking and reconstruction. Imagination, innovation, vision and creativity is required.”

Diversity and Cultural Mediation

Culture provides the background that mediates between the individual and how reality is perceived. Therefore the instructor’s cultural orientation necessarily affects the way in which subject material is presented. Cultural mediation recognizes this fact and the “value-laden nature of teaching” (Parson 2003). We know that cultural mediation originates from the multicultural education movement, which in this case has a term that

has multiple meanings associated with various suggested pedagogies. On the other hand culture is frequently invoked to explain both the success and failures of development. For example, some have attributed the economic miracle of East Asian economies to Confucian culture and Asian values and asserted that cultural diversity is not merely useful but essential for development. It has been established beyond doubt that the Protestant ethic is not the only source of thrift and hard work (World Culture Report, 2000). Managing diversity and cultural identities is not just a challenge for the few such as multicultural ethnic states in Africa and Asia. The world's nearly 200 countries contain some 5000 ethnic groups and thirds of these countries have at least one substantial minority - an ethnic or religious group that makes up at least 10 percent of the population.

Modern communication and transportation systems have allowed people to move quicker than ever, thus making more homogenous countries more diverse through immigration and trade. This ease of travel and communication has shrunken the world and changed the landscape of many nations. For instance in Toronto, Canada 44 percent of the population was born outside of Canada (Human Development Report, 2000). Many states and cities around the world can be considered a multicultural containing ethnic, religious, linguistic, and social groups that have common bonds of heritage, and values (World Culture Report, 1994). People must be granted the right to choose their cultural identity as Thai, a Quaker, and a Wolof speaker, a South African Indian descent – to know their heritage, and to enjoy the respect of others and live in dignity. Also people must be able to choose multiple identities such as Thai and Muslim or Wolof and Senegalese. The most important thing here is that people need not renounce their identities to have access to education, social and economic opportunities. This includes LIS students from different cultural back grounds being able to access their cultural heritage through a mediated instruction.

What about a lack of education in one's mother tongue? Does it have any effect in learning skills? Research indicates that in the United States children who were educated in their mother tongue for the first six years of school perform better than those immediately immersed in English. Similar situation could be drawn from 37 other countries of Africa and Asia. Many time the state policies of not recognizing these languages and culture contributes to the exclusion of many from benefiting and accessing the social and economic opportunities.

The Human Development Report (2004) identifies two aspects of cultural exclusion: 1. Living mod exclusion that occurs when the State or social custom denigrates or suppresses a group's culture, including its language, religion or traditional custom or lifestyles. 2. Participation exclusion along ethnic, linguistic or religion lines – usually referred to discrimination or disadvantage based on Cultural identity

Learning and Teaching

As discussed above the challenges for LIS educators are how to 1. Address cultural differences that exist among LIS students and 2. Prepare a culturally mediated instruction. Baptiste (1994) presents three distinct levels of culturally mediated

instruction in the learning environment. They are product, process and philosophy. The product level is the multicultural approach that is most commonly practiced. The process level is reached when multicultural aspects of study are incorporated into the curriculum and the philosophy level describes teaching strategies that address the curriculum in a manner that corresponds to the culturally diverse demographic nature of the student population.

In learning styles also there are differences among students. Some learn better in organizational lecture, while others hate lectures and learn through small group discussions. Some want notes in outline form on the overhead, others understand visuals or diagram better (Knap 2005). The question is how we as instructors meet the needs of diverse students adding their different style of learning to those of different cultural backgrounds. As Knap (2005) indicates “students learn differently, that no one way to learn is the ‘right’ or ‘best’ way, that there are, nevertheless, important communalities in how we all learn, and it is the teacher’s part and responsibility to design instruction, as far as possible, that respects and values all every student as a unique human beings by enabling them all to learn effectively and to discover that potentials that lie within them.

What type of method should be used to teach students? And where do they come from? According to Howard Gardner (1993) the present approaches to teaching as “westists” and “bestist” as students who are high achievers are regarded by teachers as ‘ideal students.’ These students who work by themselves, and exhibit individualism – while “westists” according to Western society exhibit one or two qualities of characteristics over others. Testist refers to focusing on the human abilities or intelligence that is most easily testable. By introducing such techniques teachers minimize collaboration and strengthen more individualism which is uncommon in traditional societies. Pitkanen (1994) presents five conclusions of his European research into immigration settlement policies and cross-cultural teacher training conducted in Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Israel, and the United Kingdom:

- “Teacher training institutions provide the students with competencies required to function effectively in relation to the goals expressed in the national policy programmes and curricula. However, since national policies and curricula vary widely, so does the nature and content of the training course across countries.
- With the increase in transnational mobility, European higher education institutions need to review their current policies and practices and support the recognition of ethnic and cultural diversity
- Efforts are needed to be made to develop teacher training that can provide students with cognitive powers, attitudes and operative competencies required to function effectively in multicultural environments.
- There is a need for education research in order to provide empirically validated knowledge needed to improve “culturally responsive education” and thus the academic performance of immigrant pupils.
- There is a need for international comparative studies in order to clarify and compare educational goals and practices in different countries”.

Drawing on a specific country such as United Kingdom, Pitkanen (1994) writes, “In the United Kingdom the project robustly considered that across-cultural teacher training can provide students with cognitive powers; can appropriately modify their attitudes towards people of other ethnic groups and can equip them with the operative competencies required to function effectively in multi-cultural classrooms. However, it revealed that, even among a highly educated sample of trainee teachers, there was a disturbing lack of knowledge about the major ethnic minorities in Britain, for example. This lack of knowledge extended to such fundamental matters as the legislative framework erected by successive governments to control entry and to encourage good race relations”.

These types of approaches have been discussed by a number of writers such as Watkins and Biggs (1996) who describes the Western tradition that favors individual work over collaboration. The question again is; how can we design a curriculum that is more inclusive, that enhances collaboration and that values and accommodate diverse learners in our schools. As indicated, LIS education, now more than ever needs culturally mediated instruction in order to educate future library and information professionals who are responsive to the needs of their diverse communities and who are able to be change agents to their institutions and professions.

The important issues are to first and foremost understand where the cultural differences lie, especially among the students, and then to determine how to create a common ground for working together and sharing common values, and as teachers to be able to work with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Since learning about a culture can be a lifetime undertaking where does the instructor does starts to learn how these cultural differences are mediated and reconciled? The following five examples by Knudtson and Suzuki (1992) illustrate some characteristics that distinguish views of the world by indigenous societies and Western points of view. Students coming from these two communities also exhibit these characteristics and their learning skills will be affected by their assumptions and their beliefs.

Table 1. Indigenous and Western World View

Indigenous World view	Western World view
Humans have responsibility for maintaining harmonious relationships with the natural world	Humans exercise dominion over nature to use it for personal and economic gain
Wisdom and ethics are derived from direct experience with the natural world	Human reason transcends the natural world and can produce insights independently
Time is circular with natural cycles that sustain all life	Time is a linear chronology of “human progress”
Human role is to participate in the orderly designs of nature	Human role is to dissect, analyze and manipulate nature for one’s own ends
Respect for elders is based in one’s compassion and reconciliation of outer-and inner-directed knowledge	Respect for others is based on material achievement and chronological old age

Diversity and Cultural Mediation

According to Ocholla (2002) the South African population of 41.244 million is made up of major population groups of African 76 percent, whites (European descent) 13 percent, colored is 9 percent, and Indian/Asian is 2 percent. There also is diversity among the white Europeans being Dutch, British, German, French, Jews, Italian and Portuguese. among the Africans the major ethnic groups are Zulu, Xhosa, Ndebele, Swazi and Tsonga.

Eleven languages are recorded through the constitution. In addition to this ethnic diversity there are several religions whose major ones being Christianity, Muslim and Hindu. Furthermore Ocholla cites Prime's (1999) "Cross-Cultural Management in South Africa: Problems, Obstacles, and Solutions in Companies and Diversity" in the country as (1) Eurocentric based on individualism in education, political, business and culture that dominated by elite group who controls the leadership position and (2) the Afrocentric majority culture for many decades founded on the African home base and an inclusivist Ubuntu based system that propagates human communalism, supportiveness, and solidarity with the community. The greatest challenge here is how can countries like South Africa will be able to establish a new model of cultural mediation that brings together the Eurocentric and the Afrocentric cultural paradigms without one dominating the other (table 2) in education, community and workplace.

Table 2. Eurocentric and Afrocentric paradigms

Eurocentric	Afrocentric
Individualism	Communalism
Self-centered	Togetherness
Competition	Collaboration
Exclusivities	Inclusivities

Conclusions

Until now what has been followed and used was the notion of assimilation into a European system or as in the case of Americans "the melting pot." What is needed now as far as LIS education is concerned is to create a new curriculum model based on culturally mediated teaching and learning that is inclusive of all cultures based on the cultural reality of our society. As I stated in the beginning, the global population of the world is changing and these changes require redesigning and adapting to understanding of and respect for differences rather than domination. A learning and teaching environment based on these ideals will be an important foundation for culturally mediated LIS education. As Human Development Report says, "Accommodating peoples growing demands for their inclusion in society and for respect of their ethnicity, religion, and language, takes more than democracy and equitable growth. Also needed are multicultural policies that recognize differences, champion diversity and promote cultural freedoms, so that all people can choose to speak their language, practice their religion, and participate in shaping their culture so that all people can choose to be what they are."

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