



World Library and Information Congress: 69th IFLA General Conference and Council

1-9 August 2003, Berlin

Code Number: 009-E
Meeting: 124. Libraries Serving the General Public
Simultaneous Interpretation: Yes

Valuing difference – the British Council experience of connecting cultures

Grace Kempster

The British Council
Manchester
United Kingdom

Abstract:

Grace will explore underlying reasons for the British Council success working in so many different cultures and argues that it has flourished through the currency of libraries at the heart of its offer worldwide. She will describe what it has learned about working in many different environments and conclude with a call for every librarian to focus on the expertise of working between cultures and maintaining enduring relationships between people.

Valuing difference – the British Council experience of connecting cultures

I am delighted and honoured to be with you today and to have this opportunity to share something about inter-cultural nature of the work of the British Council.

Next year, the British Council is celebrating 70 years of existence and its work as an international cultural relations organisation could not be more relevant in this troubled and fractured world.

In this brief presentation, I want to first reflect on why the British Council has flourished through the currency of libraries at the heart of its offer worldwide; what it has learned about working in over 100 very diverse countries and to reflect on how it is now focussing on its expertise on working between cultures and maintaining enduring relationships between people.

May I first refer you to our web site www.britishcouncil.org which will give you access to all of our country sites, most of which are in at least 2 languages and which will give you further information about the projects and programmes I can only make reference to in this brief overview.

Every day across the world, there are literally hundreds of activities going on in the arts, in science in education and in governance which try quite simply to bring people closer together:

For example, there may be a seminar between the police forces of India and the UK to discuss how women might be better valued and increase their prospects in both countries. In Belgrade, there will be a video conference between the young men and women of that troubled region talking with members of the European Youth Parliament in Brussels about how they see their future as young Europeans and the questions of identities. In Harare, there will be young men and women in the Management centre there studying some aspect of management through the collections and finding out about the latest trends in marketing. And in Japan, there will be a text message service for the translations from English to Japanese of the lyrics from a popular band that has just played there.

There will be thousands more activities and the great feature of all of them will be the tremendous diversity and great variation in even the same events. All this is because of one of the greatest strengths of the organisation which we are only recently appreciating to the full – the engagement of **locally appointed staff**. They are simply our greatest asset. While UK appointed staff will move around every three years or so and are few in number, many of our local staff have been with us for many years. They are inspiring people and most of all highly skilled in inter-cultural communication, living the connections and translations and dual understandings which this involves every working day.

Many of these staff work in and run our library and information services and most visit the UK for familiarisation and opportunities to update and refresh their skills – though not as often as we or they would like. They are simply crucial to our success.

They will shape and add not just local flavour but also accommodate local ways of doing business and interacting and the whole style of each of our libraries and offices will be locally driven: from the wonderful mural to greet you in Johannesburg which representing the intermingling of cultures through to the constant extreme business of our libraries throughout India and the importance of using text messaging to reach young mobile people in Japan.

Methods to handle customer feedback are appropriately diverse and of course can be a real challenge in cultures where criticism is considered extremely ill-mannered and our approach must be more subtle and intuitive.

I have visited many of our libraries and it is true to say that this access to knowledge, understanding and engagement with contemporary life in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland is still very much at the heart of our offer.

But of course there are changes not least because the countries we work in as well as the UK are all in **constant flux and change**. Constant change and movement of expectations are with us.

Our customers demand more and more and rightly so – and we have to keep pace with this. We are also aware that our role is to reflect life in the UK today, not yesterday. The four countries of the UK are wonderfully diverse, puzzling, dynamic and complex and interesting. We have to keep in constant touch with trends and developments in order to remain relevant and useful in the lives of people we connect with.

Our strap line is “Creating OPPORTUNITY worldwide” and this we do through the teaching of English in over 40 countries, through our exams services and through the active promotion of UK Education.

Our aim is to build sustained and enduring relationships in order to win recognition for and share UK ideas, creativity and expertise. I think this is a key point for our discussion today. We do what we do because everyone gains, we all have an interest and advantage in seeing inter-cultural connections succeed: More students studying in the UK mean that later in life there is some common ground and understanding between our countries for them and also for the friends and colleagues they make while here. These networks are strong and lifelong. They are, then sustained by the core principle of **mutuality**: both “sides” have an equal desire and interest in making the relationship work.

I feel this is a vital aspect of the work we all do in valuing cultural difference: any activity has to be based on a platform of mutual respect and equal need to engage for purpose.

If I may mention the situation in Iraq, the years of isolation and apartness has not only been a great loss for the people and communities of Iraq to connect and grow with the international environment – it has also been a great loss for the wider world where we have missed Iraqi talent and voices as myriad programmes and projects have not had their important contribution. As we seek to re-build relationships it is essential that the principle of mutuality is present. To give a small example of this, in the UK many of our collections supporting Islamic studies need the expertise and contribution of Iraqi scholars very much indeed.

Importance of libraries

I was reflecting that when the British Council began nearly 70 years ago, it was also in troubled times with the shadow of a second world war looming. However, with a strapline of “Truth will Triumph” it sought as a cultural relations organisation at arms length from Government [we are still a charity today] to simply tell the truth about UK culture and values - and how was it going to do this when both medium message mattered so much?

Of course through public libraries – places of freedom and finding out which by their presence and very functioning as the self-select re-cyclers of knowledge live all the values and essence of inclusion and of knowledge for all, free to help yourself.

When we look back, our libraries have had a profound and enduring impact on lives and even on generations of the same family. Whether they were havens, whether they were places of self-improvement, they were are still are cherished by people, not just because of the content but also in a way they carried some very important messages about core values of justice and fairness which at that time were considered British traits.

There have been changes and rightly so: British Council presence should not be a surrogate for a country's own public library service and needs to focus on how it can best reflect in its presence, its offer, its role as a cultural relations organisation. Many aspects have not changed – there are still over 40 lending libraries across Europe for example. However, by our renewed focus on young professionals we seek to have a more targeted presence, focussing these collections on support for those studying English and developing their professional skills. Offering events and activities which will build strong and enduring relationships in a digital age and finding our niche in a world where it is increasingly easy [for some] to connect globally with like minded people despite the tyranny of distance or the difficulty of geography. We have to more closely fit our knowledge work to the work of our organisation and this is right.

Our Knowledge and Learning Centre programme enables us to reach more people more effectively, including those who could not travel to the towns and cities. For example, our Connecting Futures Forum enables the young people from 10 largely Muslim countries who came together last March to continue their stories and continue their discussions with each other. This is important as we all change and move on in our lives and we need to reflect that changing landscape. It is so easy to stereotype and a natural human characteristic to try and simplify. To try and understand requires patience, an investment of time and a sense of purpose that it matters – for who can truly value themselves in all their rich possibility if they do not equally value another.

A while ago, in Brussels, the Director did a brave thing: he brought together for the very first time refugees and policymakers. It could have gone very wrong. But by choosing the language of culture with stories, plays, visual images, sculpture to express feelings and approaches, it made a profound difference to mutual understanding. Martin Rose is now Director of our small but essential unit within the British Council called Counterpoint. He is focussing his work on the spaces between where differences are explored and there is dialogue and exchange. It is only when we are able to talk through differences and emerge wiser that we truly rise above prejudice and ignorance. The book and reading and talking about reading experiences is seen as essential to get under the skin and to work in this area often the seat of conflict and hate.

We may not win every attempted engagement – it may be too soon, the wrong timing, the wrong motivations. However, when I see young people and their wish for a better world for themselves and others I am filled with optimism that they will have the will and determination to cross boundaries of all kinds and follow that “path less travelled by” – the one which leads from information to knowledge to understanding ... and ultimately to wisdom.

Conclusion

So what might I offer in closing to you?
I think there are three things:

- The power of the book and reading to change minds because the act enables space to reflect to consider and to reconsider and this distinctive quality will endure the most digital of times

- The urge to connect and understand has to be mutual and equal with a matching desire on both “sides” or else it will fail or succeed partially
- A prediction that the skills to communicate between cultures will come to world prominence and become a new and vital literacy alongside the information literacies which we explore at this conference – and our challenge is – will we be part of this communication evolution or remain at the margins, when we as knowledge professionals have so much to contribute? The choice is ours

Thank you