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|  | <p style="text-align: right;">2nd Version Date : 26/09/2007</p> <p>The IFLA Multicultural Library Manifesto – a tool for creating a better world</p> <p>Kirsten Leth Nielsen</p> <p>Head of Multilingual Library, Deichmanske bibliotek/Oslo Public Library. Norway Kirsten-leth.nielsen@kie.oslo.kommune.no</p> |
| Meeting: | 150 Library Services to Multicultural Populations |
| Simultaneous Interpretation: | No |
| <p>WORLD LIBRARY AND INFORMATION CONGRESS: 73RD IFLA GENERAL CONFERENCE AND COUNCIL 19-23 August 2007, Durban, South Africa http://www.ifla.org/iv/ifla73/index.htm</p> | |

It's no coincidence that «The IFLA Multicultural Library Manifesto» is under construction in the beginning of the 21st century. It is long overdue. There are at least 6000 different languages and cultures on our planet today, and the development we are witnessing points more and more in the direction of a larger cultural diversity. Migration is increasing world-wide, resulting in a population where an increasing number of people have a transnational identity, an increasing number of people study abroad, and an increasing number of people want or need to live somewhere other than their homeland for a period of time. This is, on the whole, positive, but it also has its drawbacks. Never before has the distance between people been so small, yet so huge. Never before have cultures and languages been under such pressure and been so threatened, and never before have these pressures and threats loomed so large and been so frightening. Global warming is not the only destructive element threatening our world. The narrowing of languages and cultural identities is every bit as threatening to our human and cultural diversity – a diversity that is of at least as much importance for creativity and growth as our natural resources and climate are.

Definitions

Culture, multicultural and cultural diversity

Before I present the Manifesto, it's necessary to define some terminology. For our purposes, «culture» is defined in the following manner: «culture should be regarded as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs». This definition can be found in the “UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity” from 2001, and it is this publication on which “The IFLA Multicultural Library Manifesto” is built. The terms “multicultural”, “multiculturalism” and “cultural diversity” are considered synonymous.

Cross-cultural and inter-cultural

In my many years of experience working in an international milieu, and as a member of IFLA's section for «Library Services to Multicultural Populations», I have found the terms Cross-cultural and inter-cultural are used in slightly different ways in different parts of the world. In this lecture, the term «inter-cultural» will be used to denote an equal dialogue between persons of a similar status, who are from different cultural backgrounds.

Positive aspects of development

As I've already mentioned, greater diversity and increased human interaction is for the most part positive. It generates synergy and creativity, and allows new cultural expression to evolve. I'd like to illustrate this with an example. A major exhibition of Norwegian silver had a silver coffee pot with a half-moon-shaped handle as its logo. The exhibition's title was «Norsk arvesølv», an expression that best translates as «Norwegian family silver». The silver coffee pot was made in Bergen in the year 1719 by an artisan from the German Hanseater, and the half-moon symbol was borrowed from the realm of Islam. The silver coffee pot is one of the most beautiful articles I have ever seen! Communication creates a broader understanding between people, and thereby creates a platform for a peaceful coexistence. As I've already stated, cultural diversity is just as important as biological diversity for the survival of the human race. I mention this again because it's an important point that cannot be emphasized enough.

To emphasize this yet again, I'd like to share a story with you. It takes place in the Middle East in the 1600's. A ship filled with immigrants arrives at a harbour in Levanten. The ship docks and a messenger is immediately sent to the country's ruler to petition for asylum. The messenger returns without having accomplished his mission. He has been told that the ruler sees no reason to grant the passengers the right to remain in the country. The immigrants' leader is a wise woman, who decides to brew a pot of strong tea. The tea, along with a cup of sugar, is sent with the messenger, who returns to petition the ruler once more. Upon arrival, the messenger informs the ruler «I have brought you the reason to grant us asylum», and asks him to produce a cup. He pours the tea, adds sugar, gives the cup back to the ruler and says «Please, drink! ». Afterwards, the messenger can return to the ship with the good news that the passengers can now disembark. With very simple means, the wise woman was able to demonstrate how the immigrants' presence in the country would contribute to society, and that they would become completely integrated with their new countrymen.

Negative aspects

At the same time, however, it's clear that the development we are experiencing today can and has many negative consequences. The fear that certain strong religious, ideological or economic groups will come to dominate, has already taken hold. The oppression of culture and language has in some cases caused a partial - and in many cases, complete – eradication of ethnic groups, and their languages and cultures. A lack of communication and dialogue sets the stage for misunderstanding and conflict. Too little contact between ethnic groups, segregation and a lack of places where people of different backgrounds can meet and become acquainted, creates suspicion and creates an atmosphere in which prejudice, racism, discrimination and conflict can grow.

The library's role

This is where libraries come in. As centres for culture, information, learning and meeting, libraries have the possibility to be active initiators in a positive process of development. Libraries offer services that include everyone, regardless of social status, skin colour, or religious belief. As a value-neutral arena for learning, where access to uncensored information and cultural expression is the foundation on which services are based, libraries have a unique position. Libraries offer an access to information that enables all citizens to be active. As a meeting place, libraries set the stage for inter-cultural communication. This aspect will be addressed further, later on.

A long way to go!

But what must be in place for libraries to be able to develop good, operational multicultural services? Unfortunately, libraries today are not adequately equipped to meet these challenges. Only a very few geographic areas today have libraries that are able to meet the needs of the multicultural population to a certain extent. Even in countries where libraries are well-developed and well-functioning, we see that multicultural library services don't yet meet the requirements outlined in the Manifesto. I can use my own experience in Scandinavia – one of the richest and most peaceful areas on earth - as an example. Scandinavian libraries, both public and professional, have a high status on an international level, and are considered to be well-equipped and to be run with a high level of professionalism. Despite this, they do not measure up in the area of multicultural services. Despite Library Laws that guarantee free access to information to all citizens, the fact of the matter is that libraries' development has its roots in the middle class, with the consequences this implies: libraries are above all built by and for the Nordic Caucasian majority, by and large the middle class. This is mirrored in the staff, the services offered, and the collections' content. Library heads and librarians with linguistic or cultural background other than Nordic can be counted on the fingers of one hand. A strategic collections development, with a goal of contributing to cross-cultural understanding, is practically nonexistent. Patrons with a different linguistic background are not seen as a resource, but rather as a problem, and a group needing «special services». The status is more or less the same for professional and research libraries. The professional milieu has yet to accept the fact that many patrons are first-generation immigrants, or foreign students and researchers from around the world. It's clear that there are still many challenges that need to be met when forming services in The Multicultural Library. The Manifesto can be a useful tool in this start-up phase.

The Multicultural Library

The Multicultural Library is built on three important principles.

1. The Multicultural Library includes **all types** of libraries, not only public libraries.
2. Services are offered to both majority and minority groups and services to minority groups are integrated in services intended for everyone. **Multicultural services are not a special service.**
3. All together, services include also services adapted for cultural and linguistic minorities, with special emphasis on marginalized groups, such as refugees, asylum seekers, immigrants and indigenous groups.

Goal of the Multicultural Library

Library as an arena for learning

Libraries as arenas for learning are an accepted and documented concept. «Knowledge is power» is a wise expression. It is a fact that knowledge lays the foundation for understanding. Collections and services in libraries that contribute to an understanding of both majority and minority groups in society are part of the foundation of the Multicultural Library. «Language is power» is also an important expression, one that illustrates that she or he, who has the power of words, is well-equipped to participate fully in society. Media collections that contribute to an understanding and the learning of languages are important in this respect.

The library as cultural centre

One of the library's most important roles is to contribute to the preservation of linguistic and cultural

expression, in order to make the world's cultural and linguistic diversity available to future generations. Indigenous groups are under extra pressure; linguistically, they represent small groups, based on oral traditions and often without written language. Culturally - because they have become highly marginalized in our increasingly technologic society. Libraries have an important function, in that they present and make available diverse cultural expression, expression that mirrors both local and global culture. Libraries must therefore place special emphasis focus on indigenous groups.

The library as a meeting place

Libraries have contact with a wide area and with many groups within the population, and have arenas that are open for everyone. This makes them ideal as physical meeting places where people from all groups in society can meet and become acquainted. Studies show that even if a patron does not necessarily have contact with and / or speak with other patrons, there is still a feeling of mutual understanding, created by seeing people of other cultures using the same services.

The Library as a shaper of attitude

All of these roles make the library a perfect arena for transmitting positive attitudes and values in relation to a multicultural and multilingual society – attitudes that contribute positively to society.

The library's role as a proponent of integration

All these roles also create an atmosphere that promotes integration. Via the acquisition of knowledge, citizens are given the tools necessary for understanding and accepting minorities. This again creates an atmosphere of inclusion. For new countrymen, information about the new country contributes to understanding of the society in which one now finds oneself. Linguistic competence is naturally the foundation for communication and participation. Access to language-learning tools of all kinds in the library makes possible the acquisition of language skills.

How to accomplish this?

Firmly rooted in management

On a meta-level, a clear political will, carried out by the library's administration, is obviously necessary before the Multicultural Library can exist and function. A strategy must be established by which the library's leadership feels these services to be an integral part of the library's services overall. This will then result in appropriate policies regarding recruiting and human resources, finances, services and content. Another prerequisite is that the policy must be decided upon with the cooperation of all relevant parties in the library's patron mass or in the local milieu, to ensure that policy reflects the demographics in the area.

Collections

The backbone of the Multicultural Library has so far been the physical collections. At the same time, the tendency has been toward electronic or virtual services, which are slowly replacing physical services. Services for immigrants and those who are in the area temporarily must reflect these groups' needs, in relation to cultural expression and information from the patrons' own languages and cultures, as well as material and services that introduce these patrons' cultures and languages to society at large. In effect, this means collections must include media in many languages, and reflect a broad selection of both large and small cultures and language areas.

Language without script and threatened cultures – a chapter for themselves

The Multicultural Library has, as mentioned, a special responsibility to acquire, preserve and make available cultural expression and knowledge from cultures where more or less everything is conveyed orally. This is an area in which libraries are well-equipped, based on staffs' professional and methodological competence. Tendencies in society today can lend a helping hand in this

respect. Oral transmission is experiencing a renaissance – large storyteller conferences are not unusual many places in the world – including places where this has not previously been a tradition.

Services

Educational programs, user instruction and informational material the library provides, are all part of the gateway to the library and local community. Informational services the library provides are also an important part of this. In order to create services that are relevant and efficient, the library must cooperate with those for whom the services are intended. The most important aspect in these services is that the content and interface accommodate the patrons' needs.

Multilingual access

In an environment where many mother tongues exist, all types of information must be made available in languages the patrons understand. This means that information explaining services is produced in the relevant languages, that the collection is searchable in the relevant languages, and – last but not least – that languages used on printed signs in the library's physical buildings reflects the patrons' various languages. A Multilingual approach to how we communicate with our patrons in cyberspace is also a necessity in our age - to create a better dialog.

Staff

That familiarity creates a feeling of safety is a well-known phenomenon, and applies to patrons of “The Multicultural Library”. Experience has shown that we seek contact with those people with whom we identify the most, consciously, or unconsciously. This is only one reason the staff of “The Multicultural Library” needs to reflect the demographic of the local area and the group it services. But the collective competence of the staff must also reflect the patron group. Even though it is often not possible to have representatives on staff for all patron groups, a staff member who represents a large immigrant group in the local population will nonetheless be able to exemplify some of what all immigrant groups have in common. In addition, it is of course important that the entire staff acquires knowledge of the cultures and languages represented in the library. Finally, the staff must be able to communicate well with many types of patrons. Knowledge of inter-cultural communication is obligatory, as is knowledge awareness of mechanisms that create racism, discrimination and exclusion.

The Manifesto in context

As previously mentioned, “The Multicultural Library” is a concept that encompasses all types of libraries, regardless of content and function. It is therefore not an isolated concept, but rather flexible and dynamic. Many countries already have laws in place that guarantee good library services to the population, free of charge. In addition, there are three other library manifestos which supplement “The IFLA Multicultural Library Manifesto”: “IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto”. 1994, “IFLA/UNESCO School Library Manifesto”. 1999 and “The IFLA Internet Manifesto” 2002; all documents that establish important principles for library development. A brochure designed by the section for Library Services to Multicultural Populations, “Raison d'être for Multicultural Library Services” is also useful when lobbying politicians and private sponsors. The brochure exists in 12 languages, and is available from IFLA's website, as are the other documents I've mentioned. These documents can be used at a local level, in the library, when planning services and deciding policy. When services and policy are ready to be put into action, additional help is needed, which can be met by the myriad of guidelines developed by various libraries. However - many of these have not implemented elements from “The IFLA Multicultural Library Manifesto”. In order to expedite this process, a revised edition of “Multicultural Communities: Guidelines for Library Services”, guidelines developed by Library Services to Multicultural Populations Section, will be published in the autumn of 2007.

Status and continuation -"The IFLA Multicultural Library Manifesto"

"The IFLA Multicultural Library Manifesto" was given status as an official IFLA manifesto when it was approved by the Governing Board of IFLA during the World Library and Information Congress: 72nd IFLA General Conference and Council in Seoul, Republic of Korea in August, 2006. This approval was the first step toward the goal of having the Manifesto approved by important international cultural organisations. Library Services to Multicultural Populations Section in IFLA is now working intensely in order to attain the final goal for the Manifesto – to have it approved by Unesco, so that it can have the same influence as two other important Manifestos - "The Public Library Manifesto", "The School Library Manifesto".

Implementation – vision or reality?

Many will say that these are impressive words, but that it is naive to believe that "The Multicultural Library" is attainable. There are many factors that point in that direction. Large groups in the global society, not only including indigenous groups, live in poverty, and library services are not their first priority. A legal right to library services is the exception, rather than the rule. A large percentage of the world's population doesn't have access to library services at all. And of course "The Multicultural Library" can only be realised by the use of extensive resources. The concept requires the ability and willingness to adapt and change; a new attitude and way of thinking must be implemented throughout the chain of development. This is in fact the most challenging aspect – today, only idealists work in this field.

I will still allow myself to postulate that a well-developed library is one of many prerequisites for a healthy economic and cultural global development. Libraries alone can't change the world, of course, but we can be a major player in initiating change. Similarities can be seen in the crisis of global warming. If we don't undertake efficient means for change, we risk an increased level of conflict between groups, stagnation in economic development, and a dilution in the world's languages and cultural inheritance.

We have no choice!

It may feel like fighting windmills, undertaking a project as all-encompassing as "The Multicultural Library". My only comment is that we have no choice. As professionals with education and expertise in library and information services, we have a professional, social and moral responsibility for global development. We have the knowledge and insight needed to change development in the right direction. My personal experience, after having lived more than 50 years, is that anything is possible, even if the results will only be harvested in the distant future. With "The IFLA Multicultural Library Manifesto", we will be a step further. We have a document we can use in a very real, practical way, to effect change.

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