

A Statement of Opinion

A Cup of Kindness; Librarian as Cultural Mediator

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The importance of human relationships in public services is well known, if not acknowledged. The complexity and challenge of understanding human dynamics is even more enigmatic. When a patron is bewildered or difficult, the interaction can be taxing enough, but when the patron is a foreign student, many factors come into play. Recent literature abounds with cogent observations regarding foreign students and libraries.

Anecdotal observations, studies, and surveys point to the foreign student situation as a "troubled" area for public services. This is even more pronounced in the "give and take" of the reference enterprise. As in any human exchange, nuances creep into the process of information transferal, most of which are not necessarily "hard information", reference answers, facts, etc. Often, human foibles, culture, individual psychology, and more, come together making for a unique exchange everytime.

As the world becomes more complicated and inter-dependent economically and culturally, if not politically, foreign students will be participating to a greater extent in higher education in the United States. Not only are these students sitting in classes and in the union, but they are actually actively engaged in transforming to

some extent American higher education. Their virtual presence is quite significant to the course of the collegiate enterprise; and, in some fields, notably engineering and basic science, they comprise a majority in graduate programs. These factors make the foreign student an important element to consider in library public services.

Institutions of higher education have attempted to integrate foreign students into the mainstream of college and university life. Various degrees of success can be noted by many librarians—but, one fact remains, foreign students *are* a different group of students who need to feel "at home" with the American library. One can speak of special bibliographic instruction sessions, sensitivity training, etc., but all this will not necessarily ring true to that target segment most in need of assistance or a friendly ear—the foreign student.

Anthropological conceptualizations of culture aside, the strength and willingness must generate from the librarian him/herself. A genuine interest in foreign cultures and their people is desirable if not paramount. It is only fair to say that such qualities are not simply garnered in in-service training, however competent and thorough the training may be, but are already present within the librarian's

personality, experience, and formal education. There may not be easily definable personality traits which lend themselves to quantifiable methods and/or results.

What precisely are those qualities of mind and personality which might make up that librarian in public service who can and would truly enjoy working with foreign students? There probably is no special species, but there are some very important characteristics. Again, it should be emphasized that these are not iron-clad, but some of these characteristics would be found in the ideal candidate.

The first characteristic is a real willingness and desire to work with foreign students both as groups and as individuals. Foreign students are special people and tend to comprise a *Terra Incognita* to most Americans, for whom lack of geographical and cultural knowledge may be an obstacle to successful communication. Indeed, no two American students are alike, and yet, foreign students seem to become one amorphous mass. To adequately dispel this illusion, one must be aware of the existence of the multiplicity of world cultures as well as the fact that there are regional and even subcultures which shape the world view of foreign students. Not that one should emulate a Margaret Mead, but a strong nuanced awareness of myriad cultures, customs, and attitudes would be beneficial.

Communications is another area which seems especially crucial. With such an emphasis upon good interpersonal skills a given in public services, one must wonder what happens to that emphasis when the informational exchange seems to evaporate into a nagging sensation that there is something missing, or that something did not quite "click" when the foreign student says "Thank You" and the

exchange is "terminated". Often, linguistic differences and culturally determined body language, coupled with previous perceptions of libraries and library services come together to impact upon public service.

As important as communication to public services, patience is a key ingredient to successful reference services. A librarian with patience and an affinity for listening to English, nuanced by a non-English accent and syntax, is in good stead when working with foreign students. This ability or predisposition is rare and is not easily duplicated. It is very much an undefinable personal quality much as, for example, is a talent for impromptu public speaking. Certainly, the two are not perfectly analogous, but the quality is recognizable, and, seemingly, a gift.

Becoming a cultural ambassador is another striking characteristic which provides the framework within which other qualities form a cohesive whole. What emerges is a person who is genuinely sensitive to and interested in foreign students as persons as well as patrons. I believe that this is the paramount predisposition which a reference librarian should have. In short, the foreign students will come to this librarian because he/she knows that that American librarian is responsive to his/her needs, not because he/she was trained to do so, but because he/she truly likes foreign individuals and is interested in their welfare.

Certainly, at times, this ambassadorial role (consular if one prefers) will verge on personal problems as well as helping with papers and research problems. A fine line exists between the librarian's professional role and that the teaching faculty member, social worker, confidant, etc. But one must remember that an engaged, high

profile librarianship role can only enhance the status of the librarian in the foreign students' eyes, since so many librarians throughout the world suffer from lower status stereotyping. Further, such a profile allows for the give and take, the artistry, if you will, of reference services.

If there is a "bottom line" to this thinking, it is that the foreign student is an important factor in American higher education. Coping with a foreign culture and its myriad manifestations can be very taxing and a lonely venture (as anyone who has travelled and live abroad can attest); and the seemingly open-ended American library world need not add to that burden. Responsibility for learning within the American higher education environment is a human enterprise, the humane quality should not be left to chance. Instead, a genuine concern for a mutually beneficial and active engagement with foreign students can only be mutually rewarding.

In emphasizing certain quasi-stellar qualities of mind and personality, there is no need to denigrate programs designed to instill or enhance greater awareness and/or sensitivity for reference librarians *vis-a-vis* foreign

students. These are wonderful and certainly efficacious endeavors. It is only fair to realize that certain humane qualities, perceptions, and concerns are tied to interest in foreign cultures, people, etc., and those qualities simply are not created in a vacuum, but are intellectual and cultural traits which are present in the practicing librarian. There are people who love the adventure of things foreign and are active in pursuing these interests—qualities which a reference librarian may bring to the foreign student relationship.

NOTES

¹See Mary Alice Ball and Molly Mahony, "Foreign Students, Libraries, and Culture", *College and Research Libraries*, 160-166 (March 1987) and Sally G. Wayman, "The International student in the Academic Library," *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 9:336-41 (January 1984), as solid examples.

²U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States 1987*, p. 140.

³Ball and Mahony, p. 165.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 161.