

Module 6: Instruction in a Multicultural/Multiracial Environment

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According to Lennie Copeland, producer of the film series "Valuing Diversity," multiculturalism is emerging as one of the major issues in our workplaces today. On our campuses and in our libraries most librarians are not prepared to respond positively to the challenges of diversity. "Many managers grew up having little contact with other cultures. They are actually 'culturally deprived,' and their graduate school texts did not cover the kinds of situations that arise in today's multicultural settings" (1,p.49). However, the transition from a homogeneous environment to a multicultural one is indeed possible. But before this can occur, we must be willing to view this challenging transition as an opportunity for personal, professional, and institutional growth and be willing to learn new ways to respond to the needs of our ever changing, diverse student clienteles.

Goals

This chapter attempts to outline prominent issues related to teaching in multicultural environments. The goals of this chapter include:

1. Sensitizing instruction librarians to interpersonal and group dynamics which will affect the way we teach multicultural students.
2. Providing a framework for preparing interesting and relevant classes for multicultural populations.
3. Providing strategies to more effectively reach multicultural audiences.

Sensitizing Instruction Librarians to Multicultural Issues

Before specific class content is discussed, a discussion of some of the underlying factors that will impact the effectiveness of that content needs to take place. Some of these factors include:

Cross-Cultural Communication

The manner in which ideas are imparted can be as important as the ideas themselves. Difference in age, gender, ethnicity, race, culture, language, sexual orientation, religion, and physical ability are all things to consider when communicating in a multicultural environment.

Group Exercise

In this exercise, the facilitator of the session divides the class into groups of 2 to 3 members and asks them to brainstorm a list of obstacles they believe students of color, gay and lesbian students, or older returning students may face when they come to the library, as well as obstacles they may face when receiving library instruction. Each group should then report their ideas to the class for discussion. (The facilitator lists these barriers on the board.)

Group Exercise

Once the above barriers are identified and discussed by the class, have the students return to their previous groups and discuss possible ways in which each of these barriers can be overcome through more effective classroom instruction. Again, each group should report their ideas back to the class for discussion.

Some barriers that are likely to be raised include:

1. Language Barriers

Possible Solutions:

- a. Do not use jargon, little known words, ambiguous statements, abbreviations, acronyms. Say Computerized Catalog rather than OPAC. These barriers can exist in both written handouts and oral presentations.
- b. Repeat important points to emphasize their significance - many students are too embarrassed or intimidated to ask for clarification.
- c. Avoid the use of phrases such as "Gypped" or "Indian-Giver" - they will probably be offensive to many people, even if no offense was intended.

2. Student Intimidation/Fear of Asking Questions

Possible Solutions:

- a. Encourage an informal atmosphere in the classroom.
- b. Refrain from interrupting or second-guessing a student's questions or comments.
- c. Sharing of instructor's experiences help humanize the library. Helping them to see others have the same library fears, and that everyone needs help to some degree when they first use the library will ease their feelings of "If I ask a question, I will appear dumb."
- d. Work with instructors before and during the class.

3. Unconscious Insensitivity

Possible Solution:

Remain open and do not take offense when others point out behaviors, words or actions that may be offensive to them. Remember, you want others to feel comfortable enough to do this!

The facilitator may wish to list some of the following ways in which cross-cultural communication can be improved.

1. Stay alert to the reactions of your audience. Constantly check with your eyes for understanding. If you see confusion, stop and repeat.
2. Use your body to help communicate. Gestures and movement amongst the students are effective ways to keep their attention. Be animated.
3. Periodically ask the students if they are following along. Always ask in terms of "Am I making sense?", rather than "Are you following?" This implies shared responsibility of learning by both the instructor and the student, rather than implying the student is not "keeping up."
4. Encourage "negotiated communication;" share your thoughts while asking others to contribute theirs. Encourage their questions by sharing your first experiences of learning how to use the library, or a particular tool.
5. Do not assume knowledge of the system. When teaching them how to use the online catalog, do not assume they know what the "call number location" means.
6. Be genuine. Students respond to instructors who are genuinely interested in them and their concerns.
7. Be open, accessible and very friendly. Sometimes how we say things is more important than what we say. If students come out of the instruction session with nothing more than the name of a friendly and sincere librarian, then they have gained an important ally.

Making Students Feel Welcome And Valued

When we talk about making students feel welcome and valued in the library, what do we really mean? Exploring some of the behaviors which are associated with helpfulness (or lack thereof) can be beneficial.

Group Exercise

At this point in the workshop, go around the room and ask everyone to relate a recent positive and negative experience they had in a situation where they relied on someone to assist them. Experiences such as going to the bank, or being waited on in a store can teach us much about what students look for when they come to us for assistance in the library, and how they respond to us in the classroom.

As the experiences are being related, the facilitator may wish to write down some of the helping behaviors that were positive, and those which were

negative. a short discussion on which of these behaviors are relevant to instruction should follow.

Reinforcing Students' Sense Of Self-Esteem And Confidence

Many students from traditionally underrepresented groups experience daily assaults on their esteem and confidence. When they are sitting in our classrooms many students need to be reassured that they can master the imperfect library, and that they all have the ability to learn how to navigate the imperfections. Sharing of ourselves and our experiences is particularly effective in building their confidence; negotiated communication is very important here.

Group Exercise

The facilitator should ask each librarian to reflect back on his/her undergraduate experience to recall any frustrating learning experiences they may have lived through or any experiences that made them feel "left out." Emphasis here should be on the **feelings** those experiences invoked in the person. The facilitator then engages the librarians in a discussion by arguing that traditionally, academic libraries, with a few exceptions, have not placed much emphasis on the needs or the interests of traditionally underrepresented groups. While lively discussion will surely ensue, again, an emphasis should be placed on how it must feel for those students to not find themselves reflected in their course work or on the library's shelves.

Other techniques for building students' confidence include:

1. Before the class begins, ask them about their ideas for term papers. Give them positive feedback and suggestions for narrowing a topic, or finding fugitive literature. The more personal contact, the more trust there will be.
2. Let the students know that you are available to them. Give them your phone number, and your office location. Share personal stories - let them know we all used to have a hard time in the library, but everyone can easily overcome the obstacles.

Class Content: What They Need To Know

Bias And Perspective In Library Materials

When looking for journal or magazine literature in the library, many students quickly resort to going with what they know, which usually translates to using *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature*. While the *Readers' Guide* is useful for some purposes, by virtue of the fact that it indexes only mainstream, popular literature, and excludes much of the alternative press (e.g. journals or magazines aimed at cultural minorities such as "Off Our Backs," a feminist magazine, or "The Advocate," a Gay publication), it is at best a biased tool.

Demonstration

Ahead of time the facilitator should gather three articles on the same topic, (i. e., affirmative action in higher education), one from a conservative magazine such as the *National Review*; one from a liberal source (use the *Alternative Press Index*), such as *Z Magazine* or *The Black Scholar*; and one from a middle-of-the-road-source such as *Newsweek* or *Time*. Have the participants examine each article in terms of the grid below:

	National Review	Newsweek/Time	Advocate
Author's Thesis			
Author's Perspective /Bias			
Language Used			

In order to facilitate students' critical thinking during bibliographic instruction, the preceding exercise may first be given a **trial run by librarians**. This exercise can be translated directly to the classroom. With some prompting, students will be able to fill out the grid in a similar manner.

Questions that can be used to facilitate further critical thinking include:

1. What is the editorial outlook of a particular magazine or journal? (Have students consult Katz's *Magazines for Libraries*)
2. Who is the intended audience?
3. What is the date of publication?
4. What information or point of view is missing?

Difficulties with Controlled Vocabulary

One of the biggest obstacles to finding information on people in diverse groups is that there are many different terms used by indexers to describe each group. There is currently no standardized vocabulary in place. Accessing materials on these groups can therefore be a major challenge for our users.

Group Exercise

(**Note:** When using this exercise, emphasize the necessity of exposing these terms even though they may be offensive, outdated or obsolete today.)

This exercise is intended to start us thinking about the various terms that might be used to find materials on a given group of people. The facilitator will begin the exercise by writing the terms "Blacks", "Hispanics", "Indians", "Homosexuals" and "Asian Americans" on a blackboard or piece of newsprint. Once that is done, the participants, working alone or in pairs, should list as many synonyms as they have encountered in their reference work. Afterwards, the lists, and where they encountered the synonyms, should be shared with everyone.

A likely list of synonyms might read:

1. **Blacks** - Afro-Americans, African Americans, Negroes, People of Color, etc.
2. **Hispanics** - Latin Americans, Latinos, Latinas, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, Cuban Americans, Chicanos, Hispanos, Mexicanos, Spanish Speaking, Borriquen, etc.
3. **Asian Americans** - Japanese Americans, Chinese Americans, Korean Americans, Orientals, Asians, Vietnamese Americans, etc.
4. **Homosexuals** - Gay men, Lesbians, Sexual Inverts, Homophiles, etc.

In the classroom a similar exercise using topics such as "Interracial Relationship" or "Women in the Medical Profession" will serve the same purpose. A useful follow-up to this exercise would be to have the students look in a number of indexes to find which terms are currently in use and compare them with terms used 10 to 20 years ago in the same index. Handing out a variety of indexes during a class and having the students look up a subject illustrates how different language usage is.

Using Multicultural Examples In Class

While it may be tempting just to plug multicultural examples in a bibliographic instruction session whenever examples are needed, teaching in a multicultural environment requires much more of us. It is important that multicultural examples be used and they be consistent, relevant and positive, and that the instructor know something about the issue(s) or author(s) cited. For instance, rather than using an example such as "breakdown of the Black family," try using "Black medical professionals."

Group Exercise

Facilitator begins the exercise by listing several standard broad research areas such as American Literature, American Politics or American History. The librarians are then instructed to work in pairs to develop subtopics that incorporate examples from Latino, Native American, African American and Asian American cultures.

The purpose of this exercise is two-fold. 1), to get librarians to explore their knowledge of other cultures, and 2), to get them thinking about integrating multicultural examples into their classes.

Honesty Is The Best Policy

It is important to let students know up front that there are many illogical and usually surmountable barriers they will face in the library. Warning them up front, and encouraging them to face the barriers head on. Equipping them with this knowledge will help them succeed.

Strategies For Keeping Them Interested

Pre-Class Contact With Instructors

While it is important to know the demographics of your users, it is important not to make assumptions about students based on easy group stereotypes. Part of learning to teach to multicultural students is treating each student as an individual, and not making judgments based on appearance. This means being acutely aware of the verbal and nonverbal feedback you receive during class, and more importantly, speaking with the course instructor before the class. It is safe to assume that all students are intimidated by the library, and that many multicultural students face additional barriers to access. Assessment of each classroom situation must be done in conjunction with the course instructor. When setting up an instruction session, librarians should consider the following questions:

1. How many students are in the class?
2. What are the academic interests of the students in the class?
3. Is the class mixed in terms of gender, ethnicity, etc.?
4. What are the communication dynamics in the class? Do many students ask questions?
5. Have any of the students voiced concerns about using the library?
6. What is the research assignment for the class?
7. How can the library instruction session most effectively help students address issues of diversity and multiculturalism?

Answers to these questions along with the usual interaction with professors before the class takes place will assist librarians with making decisions on how to conduct the class prior to the actual instruction session.

Active Learning

Active learning means that the students discover concepts on their own while engaged in various exercises meant to stimulate discovery. For example, instead of listing the various terms used to describe each ethnic group, have the students do it themselves. Follow the exercise with a shared discussion of controlled vocabulary and its role in the use of catalogs and indexes. Most students dread sitting through passive lectures; keep their interest with interactive teaching techniques whenever possible.

Demonstration

One exercise commonly used to encourage active learning in the classroom uses the conceptual framework of **Fact Tools vs. Finding Tools**. In this exercise, the librarian breaks the students into groups of four or five, then passes out sets of 3x5 cards to each group. Written on each card is a type of major reference tool such as "dictionary," "index," "Almanac," "card or computerized catalog," "encyclopedia," etc. The students are then instructed to sort the cards into similar piles. Once this is done the librarian asks each group to explain why they sorted them the way they did. A short discussion of the difference between fact and finding tools should follow this exercise.

Group Exercise

Using the conceptual framework of **controlled vocabulary**, groups of two librarians each should design an active learning exercise. Each group should test the exercise on another group to see how it works. A discussion of possible pitfalls and positive outcomes to using the exercises should follow.

Involve Interested Multicultural Staff

Because our profession is so homogeneously comprised of White, majority culture individuals, we have a built-in challenge when trying to reach multicultural users. Our users' trust must be earned due to the imperfect environments in which we all live and work. Involving interested multicultural student staff in assisting in the classroom has been successful at the University of Michigan since 1990. Having an undergraduate student of color in the classroom who is knowledgeable about online catalog, indexes, and information gathering creates positive role models for less confident students. Perhaps this option could be discussed amongst staff members during the bibliographic instruction workshop. Issues such as planning a coordinated team-taught class, and different levels of expertise when teaching with students should be discussed.

Educating Ourselves To "Alternative" And Multicultural Resources

Educating ourselves to other cultures' values and social "norms" will take us far in understanding the best way to reach others with our library instruction. Keeping

up with issues in the Black, Latino, Asian-American and Native American communities is very important to understanding the experience of racial minorities in this country.

If a teaching librarian has no basic knowledge of diverse cultures in this country, students will sense that. Do not try to fake your way through a bibliographic instruction session by pretending to know something about a particular group if you do not. There are currently a wide variety of very good sources to consult to begin to educate ourselves about the issues related to teaching in a multicultural environment.

Follow-up: The following list of handbooks, indexes and reference books will be very useful to those who are just beginning to learn about the different groups which comprise our multicultural campuses:

The Alternative Press Index
Chicano Periodicals Index
The Dictionary of Asian American History
The Dictionary of Mexican American History
The Encyclopedia of Homosexuality
Gay and Lesbian Library Service
The Hispanic Almanac
Hispanic American Periodicals Index
The Index to Black Periodicals
Latino Librarianship
The Negro Almanac: A Reference Source on African Americans
1989 Guide to Multicultural Resources
We The People: An Atlas of America's Cultural Diversity

Instruction in a Multicultural/Multiracial Environment: Selected Bibliography

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