

Library Services to Multicultural Populations: IFLA Satellite Meeting Vancouver, August, 8, 2008

By Valeria Gallo Stampino.

Diversity and other values have been explicitly enunciated in declarations such as the 2006 IFLA Multicultural Library Manifesto. However, as observers have pointed out, libraries have usually failed to materialize their good intentions into tangible services for multicultural populations. What perhaps set the recent IFLA Satellite Meeting apart from the usual declarations of principles was the multitude of actual concrete examples of such targeted services currently being offered.

Thursday's discussions covered a number of initiatives carried out by organizations in Canada and abroad. Through a series of partnership and in-house services, Toronto Public Library is able to offer a service model aimed to support the needs of newcomer youth. Le Grande Bibliothèque du Québec, through an agreement with their Ministry of Immigration, is offering an array of services directly targeted to newcomers to the province. With a very limited budget, Municipal Ikuno Library in Japan maintains a collection for Korean residents. Arlington Library in Washington devotes efforts to reach out Spanish-speaking communities through lots of "footwork", listening to the community, and constantly reinventing themselves. Here at home, Vancouver Public Library's new Skilled Immigrant InfoCentre is helping newcomers to BC find the information they need to step into the labour market. SFU and partners are maintaining the Multicultural Canada Portal, a digital initiative aimed to tell the stories of ALL peoples in Canada.

Steps towards improving staff education and training were also addressed at the meeting. The BCLA Diversity Committee presented their train-the-trainer model to transfer cultural competency skills to library staff all over BC. UCLA professor Clara Yu brought a tangible example of what can be done to commit to diversity early on library education. Yu's LIS course currently offered at UCLA focuses on self-awareness, theoretical frameworks, service learning on the community, and an opportunity for reflection, all with the objective of producing a transformation in student's attitudes and behavior.

Finally, another theme touched throughout the day was a critique of English language's omnipresence. To illustrate this, Gabrielle Reznowski appropriately opened with Mark Abley's quote, "Modern English is the Wal-Mart of languages: convenient, huge, hard to avoid, superficially friendly, and devouring all rivals in its eagerness to expand". Reznowski reminded us of the advantages of having a second language and provided an extensive critique of the lack of opportunities for learning a second language in the USA. This was also a point made by opening keynote, UBC professor Henry Yu who also critiqued an attitude that treats ESL students as "deficient" rather than celebrating the benefits that having a second language provides. Furthermore, Yu offered a harsh critique to a "very colonial" educational institution where the student body is ethnically diverse but this diversity is not represented in positions of power within the institution. In short, the wide range of presentations at the IFLA Satellite Meeting proved that beyond strong values of respect for diversity within the library community steps can be taken to provide meaningful services to multicultural populations.

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