

# The Librarian as Mediator: A Significant Change in the Educational Role of Librarians

*Donna Roe and David Moody*

The face of academic librarianship is changing. While much attention has been focused on the impact of new technologies, new sources of information, and new ways of management, perhaps the most significant change is in the faces across the desk.

Students in higher education are becoming more multicultural, their needs and demands shifting, their personal backgrounds and values diversifying. Today multiculturalism includes such factors as race, national origin, religion, gender, age, sexual orientation, physical and mental enablement, and socioeconomic status. No longer is the typical college student male, fresh out of high school, and of Anglo/European American heritage.

The numbers of students from diverse ethnic and cultural heritages are steadily growing. In this paper the term “minorities” will be used to describe those people not of “white” (Anglo/European American) background. However, a phrase such as “diverse cultures” better represents the broad spectrum of individuals described: Arabic/Eastern Mediterranean/Semitic American, African American, Asian American, First Nation/Indigenous/

Native American, Hispanic, Latino, Mexican, Puerto Rican and a full complement of other international students.

## **The Changing Minority Student Population**

From 1990–1995, total enrollment in institutions of higher education increased by 3.21%. However, in this time period, the actual number of Anglo/European American enrollees decreased by almost four percent, while enrollment from diverse groups rose nearly 30%. Overall, the percentage of those diverse groups rose steadily by about 1% a year, from 23% to 28%.<sup>1</sup>

Should this trend continue through the year 2020, the percentage of academic students from diverse groups would stand at 53%, outnumbering those from Anglo/European American backgrounds. Examination of population projections from the United States Census Bureau show a persistent decrease for whites is indeed likely to continue. In 1995, 75.26% of the population of this country was of Anglo/European American background; by 2020, this is expected to shrink to 67%. In 2020, it is projected that the increase in the minority

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population will be almost 18% greater than the increase in the Anglo/European American population. To look at this another way, in the period 2015-2020 the Anglo/European American population is expected to rise about 3.1%; the population of diverse ethnic groups is expected to rise almost 10%, or more than three times as much.<sup>2</sup>

Do these changes have implications for instruction of the academic library user? Tucker points out several areas where non-traditional students have different expectations than their younger counterparts. One of the most important is that they prefer to learn “horizontally”, that is, in an environment that recognizes and builds on the expertise and skills they bring to the classroom. Rather than simply accepting information uncritically, they want it to be relevant to their life, to have meaning that relates to their experiences.<sup>3</sup>

Such an approach would seem to be vital when instructing users of diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Language barriers are the most obvious hurdle to effective communication, but by no means the only one. Different groups interact with people and process information in different ways, leading to a need for flexibility without which even basic communication can become difficult.

These changes offer new opportunities and challenges for librarians as educators. To best instruct the increasing numbers of multicultural library users, librarians need to communicate and teach in a manner that is relevant for the individuals, that has meaning which they can relate to their own experiences. In addition, as librarians examine the ways of working with diverse groups, there is an opportunity to explore methods which take into account the individual learning style of each user.

No longer can one generic instruction session be expected to serve the vast majority of users. Students approach the search for information from different angles, with different viewpoints, with various backgrounds and abilities. They want to know how to find and evaluate information on their own, without being restricted to only the physical resources of the library. The time has arrived when the emphasis is less on the information itself and more on the strategy of the search which may be different for each person; the same old answers will not fit all.

### **The Unchanging Minority Academic Librarian Population**

One possible way to meet the challenge of providing effective education to an increasing number of

multicultural users would be a similarly dramatic increase in the numbers of multicultural librarians. Their presence would make the library a more welcoming place for users and help to improve library instruction by providing a diversity of viewpoints, ideas, and teaching styles.

Recognizing the value of this, ALA and academic library institutions and programs have set up incentives designed to recruit from diverse cultures into the library profession. Initiatives introduced to improve these circumstances include such plans as: ALA's Spectrum Initiative which is targeted to recruit minority librarians with annual \$5000 scholarships to minority students of ALA accredited library schools,<sup>4</sup> the scholarship incentives offered by many library schools to increase the number of minority librarians (some reach \$10,000 annually),<sup>5</sup> higher starting salaries or contract bonuses offered to potential minority employees, academic libraries with diversity policies to recruit and retain minority librarians, and the addition of collection development funds for Diversity, African American Studies and other specialty areas.

Despite these efforts, results have been disappointing. While research describing the racial/ethnic makeup of academic librarians is limited, the number of librarians from minorities lags far behind the increase in minority student population.

Mary Jo Lynch states in the November issue of *American Libraries* that the *ALA Survey of Librarian Salaries 1998* includes statistics on the racial and ethnic makeup of librarians actively working in academic libraries. The 1998 figures show that 13.22% of academic librarians are other than Anglo/European Americans. In the article Lynch goes on to ask and respond, “Can we compare this data to any older data in order to determine if the field is changing? The short answer is ‘no.’” The 1985 and 1991 ALA samples cannot be legitimately compared because they included both full-time and part-time employees, some of whom did not have master's degrees from ALA accredited library schools.<sup>6</sup>

In the fall of 1992, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* published an article which listed the racial/ethnic characteristics of full-time faculty, including librarians.<sup>7</sup> This study showed that in 1992, 11.3% of academic librarians were other than Anglo/European Americans.<sup>8</sup> This may be a little like comparing raisins and grapes but in six years there was only a 1.82% increase in minority librarians working in academic libraries. Minority academic librarians actively working in the field are increas-

ing by a rate of three-tenths of a percent each year. The minority student population is increasing at three times the rate of minority librarians. Even though these numbers cannot be *legitimately* compared they give an overall picture on which to build a premise. If these figures are extrapolated into the next century, it becomes apparent that there is not going to be a significant increase in minority librarians. At a maximum, only 19.92% of academic librarians will represent other than Anglo/European Americans by the year 2020.

Presently, minority academic librarians, 13% of all academic librarians, serve a multicultural student population of which 32% is minority. Obviously in academe there is a discrepancy between the number of minority librarians and the number of minority students. And it is going to get worse. By the year 2020, a maximum of 19% minority academic librarians will serve a multicultural student population of which 53% is minority.

Even though measures must be taken to attract, educate, get, and keep minority librarians in the field, it is the position of these writers that the number of minority librarians will not dramatically increase. Part of the reason for this is that minorities seem to be choosing fields other than library science, often fields more related to information technology than traditional library science career fields. Another reason is that tuition scholarships and other incentives may not be enough to attract and keep minority librarians. The demands of minority students are frequently different than those of non-minority students. Scholarships may need to include housing (possibly for entire families) and subsistence allowances as well. The third barrier to increasing the number of minority enrollees in library schools and hires at American colleges and universities is reverse discrimination lawsuits, where Anglo/European Americans are suing because they do not have the same opportunities as minorities.

Clearly the minority librarian pool is not changing as much as the minority student population. Under these circumstances, can academic librarians effectively teach and communicate with a multicultural student population?

### Reuven Feuerstein

Promisingly, there has been a movement going on in education for the last fifty years that provides a bridge. The movement is designed to provide educators with the ability to teach all cultures in a way that is meaning-

ful, relevant, and effective. The movement is based on two theories called Mediated Learning Experience (MLE) and Structural Cognitive Modifiability. The founder is Reuven Feuerstein, an Israeli psychology professor and a protégé of Piaget. Feuerstein worked from Piaget's educational theory in which it is postulated that when a learner is stimulated by a learning experience, the result is a change *to* the learner. This concept can be represented as <S - O - R> [stimulus/learning situation—organism/learner—response/change to learner], a model which suggests an association between Piaget and his contemporary Pavlov.

Feuerstein developed the theory in another direction, stating that the learning experience is effective when it produces a change *in* the learner and this can only be accomplished through a humanitarian interchange. Feuerstein's redesign of the theory can be expressed as <S - h - O - h - R>. [stimulus/learning experience—human connection—organism/learner—human connection—response/change in learner]. In other words Feuerstein was stating that the learning situation could neither have meaning nor be effective without mediation to guide and convey the educational message (stimulus). The "h" is a small letter because the mediator guides rather than controls the learning situation.

Feuerstein was given the opportunity to use his theories in the 1940s when he worked with a group of children who had been diagnosed intellectually and developmentally retarded. These children were survivors of the Holocaust who had lost family and all connection to their cultural heritage. Feuerstein believed these "at risk" children were not only capable of learning but were also capable of excelling. He gave new meaning to the term culturally deprived, which he defined as people who are deprived of their birthright culture. These theories were confirmed when every one of the children mediated by Feuerstein went on to college and a professional career.<sup>9</sup>

### Mediated Learning

During the years that Feuerstein worked with these children, he developed his theory of Mediated Learning to include essential criteria for learning. They are: 1. Intentionality and Reciprocity; 2. Meaning; 3. Transcendence; 4. Mediation of Competence; 5. Self Regulation and Control of Behavior; 6. Sharing and Individuation Behavior; 7. Challenge and Goal Planning; and 8. Self-Change. The first four of these criteria are fundamental

for a Mediated Learning Experience to take place. To briefly define these four concepts: Intentionality occurs when the mediator purposely guides the interaction in a certain direction. Reciprocity occurs when the mediatee indicates involvement in the learning process. Meaning occurs when the learning experience has value and significance for the mediatee. Transcendence occurs when a learning interaction transcends or goes beyond the immediate situation. Mediation of Competence occurs when the mediator conveys to the mediatee a sense of confidence to engage successfully in the learning experience. The goal of MLE is to make students autonomous and independent learners.<sup>10</sup>

### **Multiple Intelligences; Modalities of Learning**

Feuerstein worked with children who were members of his culture. Another educator, Howard Gardner, who studied Feuerstein's work recognized certain modalities of learning, any one or more of which could be used to teach to the cultural values of any nation or group of people. Gardner defined these learning modalities as: Verbal/Linguistic, Logical/Mathematical, Visual/Spatial, Body/Kinesthetic, Musical/Rhythmical, Interpersonal, and Intrapersonal. Recently the modality of Nature/Natural World has been added to reach the learning styles of indigenous peoples.<sup>11</sup>

### **Mediating in the Library**

What does this have to do with diverse academic student library users who by the very nature of being in college make a statement about being not only highly intelligent but also possibly gifted?

While Mediated Learning was initially used with culturally deprived children the principles involved apply universally because they deal with the common processes of thought rather than information that is subject specific. Mediated Learning is not primarily concerned with differences in cultural backgrounds or learning styles. It is designed to teach educators how to mediate learners to become aware of their thought processes so that they can effectively utilize their own particular backgrounds and learning styles to become autonomous, independent learners.

The nature of the Mediated Learning Experience in the library will vary according to the situation. A user in a quick reference interview cannot be mediated in exactly the same manner as a staff member who will be mediated over a long period of time. One common fac-

tor must be kept in mind for any type of Mediated Learning Experience: the human connection. Within the human connection, the mediator must focus on the thinking/thought processes/mind of the learner in such a way that the learner, not the librarian, answers the question. Learning occurs when change takes place in the mind of the learner.

Within the focus of this paper it is not possible to help librarians to understand all cultures or all the concepts of Mediated Learning. What is intended instead is to instill a sensitivity to the fact that cultural and learning differences exist. What is intended is to foster a willingness on the part of librarians to accept students as they are and not expect them to subscribe to the librarian's way of thinking/reasoning. Imagine for instance, librarians who initiate interpersonal contact with students, much as good teachers roam the classroom. The librarian who physically goes to the student, at a place where the student has chosen to learn, is more likely to reach the student cognitively. In this way, the librarian invites the student to show how that student learns best.

The remainder of this paper will focus on some ideas for using Mediated Learning in library situations. These ideas are intended to provide librarians with some strategies they might adapt to their own particular circumstances and libraries.

### **The Public Services Mediator**

The demands on public services librarians often leave little time for them to actually instruct users. Instruction is seen as a process that is handled during bibliographic instruction sessions. While BI sessions would be the ideal place to practice Mediated Learning because there is sufficient preparation time to create the session, librarians spend more time at the reference desk than in the BI classroom. It is more difficult to use Mediated Learning in the spontaneous interview that takes place at the reference desk. The spontaneous reference question seems to negate the possibility of using the MLE motto, "Just a moment let me think." Unless there are few students who need assistance, the librarian is not able to give users time to think about forming research strategies. Instructing one student is not a problem; but when several students need instruction at the same time, an MLE strategy that could work is to ask the group of students in front of the desk, "Who has questions about operating the system?" and "Who has questions about

forming specific research strategies?" If another librarian is available, it may be expedient for each librarian to take a group. Mediating a small group can facilitate the librarian's responsibility because after some basic instruction, at the invitation of the librarian, the students can interact with and help each other. In giving an overview of an MLE instruction, it is important to remember that it is never only a matter of finding the answer but instead how best to guide students to find it.

A few quick questions will assist the librarian in knowing how to mediate—input from and interaction with the students provide cues on how to best mediate. The librarian can also readily identify some potential pairing of students, those with experience paired with those who have no experience, by asking such questions as, "Have you used our catalog before?" "Have you ever used an automated system?" Other questions can help form the intentionality of the instruction: "Do you want information from materials that you can borrow from this library?" The librarian should be direct, friendly, and interactive. The librarian mediator should stand beside or smile naturally at those who seem most uncomfortable. Any student who has a question about using the library is "at risk". If these students are not mediated in humanitarian ways, they will avoid using libraries, particularly YOUR library.

The librarian must always consider that some of the students may be from cultures and/or have learning styles different than the librarian. Daily preparation, before attending the reference desk, should include search strategies for current places, events, and people from different cultures, especially cultures that may be represented by the students to be mediated that day.

Having the students, not the librarian, operate the workstations will help the librarian connect with those students who learn best in verbal/linguistic, logical, visual/spatial, kinesthetic, and possibly rhythmical modalities. Verbal and non-verbal interactions between the librarian and students will promote understanding in those students who learn interpersonally (personal share) or intrapersonally (awareness about self) as well.

It is important to remember that in order for MLE to take place, there must be Intentionality and Reciprocity, Meaning, Transcendence, and mediation of a feeling of Competence. After the librarian ascertains student interest, Intentionality or purposeful direction might look like this: "To teach students how to use the catalog by having them complete a search." Intentionality and reci-

procity are highly interactive. The librarian can recognize reciprocity when the students' facial expressions and questions show interest.

As the librarian seamlessly guides students to the Meaning phase, the instruction is given importance and energy. It is a matter of engaging students in the "why" of the process. Simply asking a question like, "Why does this step seem important?" will involve students in the mental process of learning. This act helps them move toward independence and autonomy.

To push the learning experience further and to give it value in terms of the students' individual cultures, the librarian must get the students to transcend or bridge the prevailing experience. In the Transcendence phase, the students must relate generalizations from the learning experience to a similar principle in their own lives. For example, the librarian might make a generalization, such as "There is no set amount of time that is right for completing a search task." Ideally the librarian could follow up with a question like, "Where else does that apply in your life?" And ideally students would have time to reply. More likely, however, is the situation in which the librarian will have to set the stage for the transcendence to happen in the students' minds, with a statement like, "Is that also true when you eat dinner at home or prepare for a holiday?" The *association* provided allows students to immediately transcend to their own cultures and values.

The next and final phase that is needed for an effective MLE is, in actuality, an ongoing phase and one that should be peppered throughout the instruction. Mediation of a feeling of competence is accomplished when the librarian communicates positive feedback to the learner. The librarian mediates a feeling of competence by verbally rewarding individual learning achievements, by acknowledging explicit strategies used by a student, by focusing on the successful completion of parts of the learning activity. As the librarian observes a student implementing a successful search, he or she might say to the student, "That was an exceptional search strategy." A rule of thumb is to emphasize the positive strengths to remediate the weakness.

### The Technical Services Mediator

Mediation in the technical services environment offers opportunities not always available in public services. The audience is better known to the instructing librarian, which makes it easier to devise a plan that will accom-

modate diverse cultures and backgrounds.

Assume that five members of the Cataloging Department require instruction in use of a new automated system. All are experienced users of the old system. English is a second language for two of the members.

For this session, the instructing librarian could set up three workstations. One would be connected to a liquid crystal display unit, while a fluent and non-fluent department member could be paired at the other workstations. A set of handouts would be prepared for each cataloging function to be covered, consisting of two parts: a step-by-step outline of each function as performed in the two systems, arranged in parallel columns, and practice examples.

The instructing librarian should demonstrate a function, comparing its operation in the two systems. As department members work on the examples, the librarian should mediate by moving around to answer questions and discuss the work.

When everyone seems comfortable with performing the function, there should be general discussion. The mediating librarian can ask members to comment on the differences in the way the function was performed in the new system, whether these differences make the work easier or harder, and how workflow and procedures might change to accommodate the new system.

In designing this session, the librarian knows that some department members could have language barriers. Therefore, a decision is made to avoid reliance on the verbal-linguistic learning modality. Also, the suggestion that members be paired during the practice phase is made so that the fluent English speakers can help to bridge communication gaps which might occur during the demonstration phase.

The greatest emphasis is placed on discerning relationships and patterns (logical/mathematical thinking), taking advantage of the members' knowledge of the old system. Other learning modalities employed are physical performance of the new task (kinesthetic learning), interaction between members (interpersonal learning), and reflection on the lesson just learned (intrapersonal thinking).

In terms of the Mediated Learning process, the intention of the mediating librarian is to select functions of the new system which are most familiar and provide a good basis for comparison. Reciprocity is apparent when department members show interest in learning the new system, overcoming a resistance to change.

Meaning becomes reality when learners provide an answer from their own experience to the question, "Why is this important?" Transcendence occurs when learners can bridge the process to something familiar in their own lives.

A sense of competence is also a necessary part of the session. This can be mediated by an enthusiastic, "can-do" attitude on the part of the instructor, encouraging a similarly positive response from the learner. This attitude also helps the learner to perceive the process of change as a challenge rather than a problem. Department members can think of the new system as a chance to improve their skills and knowledge, and have confidence in their ability to solve future problems that may arise.

Finally, the general discussion after the practice session is an important element of the process. This human connection gives the mediating librarian a sense of how well the lesson has been learned, and gives learners material to build more bridges of their own. Mediated Learning is a two-way street, on which the mediator and mediatee are constantly learning from each other.

## Notes

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