CULTURE AND THE USE OF ACADEMIC LIBRARY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Library users have diverse cultural backgrounds which the Librarians should understand and consider while dealing with them. Users come to library with specific cultural knowledge or 'cultural capital', including their particular experiences and prior knowledge. Valuing users' cultural knowledge and building upon it is a key component of culturally responsive library service. It is argued that culture is dynamic and that exploring, valuing and promoting users' culture in the library will support their personal and academic development. The librarians were challenged to explore the collectivism and individualism as cultural orientations and the power relations that have historically existed between certain societal groups, as well as culture as it impacts the use of library among diver's users' populations. Librarians are also challenged to explore the pool of knowledge found in users' home communities.

Introduction

Culture is dynamic and ever changing; a group's culture includes the goals, ideals and beliefs that will ensure the group's survival. However, there are variations among individual members of a cultural group in terms of their beliefs and values. Culture is largely mediated by language, as manifested in metaphor, story telling, songs and greetings; therefore, a group's culture reflects its shared traditions, which can include a common history, language, religion, customs and literary traditions. It is important to emphasize that culture and individuals vary in the degree to which they are collectivist or individualist, but that, generally, an individualist orientation among users is the norm in many U.S. Libraries. Among world cultures, collectivist reintegration to culture is often found among Native Americans, Latin Americans,

Africans and Asians (Greenfield, et.al.1996). African-American culture has been described as more collectivist than the dominant U.S. culture in terms of its emphasis on individual achievement (Hollins, 1996). Like other belief systems that under gird cultures, individualism and collectivism are often invisible to the people who live within those respective webs of 'meaning'.

Nigeria is a multicultural society each culture has specific identity. The major languages in Nigeria are three; they are Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba. In the Northern part of Nigeria, the major language is Hausa, while the other minor languages are Fulani, Kanuri, Nupe, etc; in the middle belt, we have the Tivs, Igalas, etc and in the West, we have the Yorubas with various dialects. In the East, we have the Ibos, and in the South, we have many cultures and languages, some of them are: Edo, Urobo, Ijaw, Ibibio, Itsekiri, Efik. Each tribe is further broken down to smaller units with specific culture and languages. The only thing that is usually common to all the members of a particular tribe is their belief in God. The languages spoken by all the people we call the Igbos are not the same.

The cultural implication in Nigeria is so much that there is always a thought of partiality in the services rendered to users in the library, especially when it is discovered that the users and the staff are not of the same tribe. There is also a sense of belonging if the staff that is attending to a particular user is from his/her tribe, the user usually feels at home and is always highly expectant.

This write-up is based on several principles of culture and the use of library, the importance of knowing the users' home cultures and using that knowledge as a resource to enhance library service. Therefore, the following questions will be answered:

- ✓ What is cultural identity?
- ✓ How does cultural identity affect users' patronage of the library?
- ✓ How does cultural identity affect users' attitude to library services?
- ✓ How can the library staff overcome/reduce the effects of cultural identity on library service?
- ✓ How does valuing users' culture support their effective use of library?
- ✓ How can librarians learn about users home cultures?

✓ How can librarians use their understanding of users' home cultures to serve in culturally relevant ways?

What is cultural identity?

In your discussion with colleagues it is likely that both of you had different ideas about what constitutes culture. Anthropologists and other scholars continue to debate the meaning of this term. Garcia (1994) refers to culture as the system of understanding characteristics of that individual's society or of some subgroup within that society. This system of understanding includes values, beliefs, notions about acceptable and unacceptable behaviour and other socially constructed ideas that members of the society are taught are "true".

Geertz (1973) asserts that members of cultures go about their daily lives within shared webs of meaning. If we link Garcia and Geertz's definitions, we can imagine culture as invisible webs composed of values, beliefs, ideas about appropriate behaviour and socially constructed truths. One may ask, why is culture made up of invisible webs? Most of the time, our own cultures are invisible to us (Philips, 1983), yet they are the context within which we operate and make sense of the world. When we encounter a culture that is different from our own, one of the things we are faced with is a set of beliefs that manifest themselves in behaviour that differ from our own. In this way, we often talk about other people's cultures and we frequently describe them as 'the way things are'. Nonetheless, one's beliefs and actions are not any more natural or biologically predetermined than any other group's set of beliefs and actions; they have emerged from the ways one's own group has dealt with and interpreted the particular conditions it has faced. As conditions change, so do cultures; thus, cultures are considered to be dynamic.

Individual cultural identity presents yet another layer of complexity. Members of the same culture vary widely in their beliefs and actions. How can we explain this phenomenon? The argument for a distributive model of culture addresses the relationship between culture and personality (Garcia, 1994; Schwartz, 1978). This argument posits that individual select beliefs, values and ideas that guide their actions from a larger set of cultural beliefs, values and ideas. In most cases, we do not consciously pick and choose the attributes from the total set; rather, the conditions and events in our individual lives lead

us to favour some over others. In summarising Spiro's concept of cultural heritage, Garcia (1994) draws a distinction between cultural heritage and cultural inheritance. Cultural heritage refers to what society as a whole possesses. In other words, each individual inherits some (but not all) of the cultural heritage of the group.

We all have unique identities that we develop within our cultures, but these identities are not fixed or static. This is the reason that stereotypes do not hold up: no two individuals from any culture are exactly alike. While living inside a culture allows members to become familiar with the total cultural heritage of that society, no individual actually internalises the entire cultural heritage. In fact, it would be impossible for one person to possess a society's entire cultural heritage; there are inevitably complex and contradictory values, beliefs and ideas within that heritage, a result of conditions and events that individuals and groups experience. For example, arranged marriage has long been a cultural practice in India based on the belief that the families of potential spouse best know who could make a desirable match. More and more frequently, however, individuals reject the practice of arranged marriage; this is partly due to the sense of independence from family brought on by both men and women's participation in a rapidly developing job market. The changing experience of work is shifting cultural attitudes towards family and marriage. These different experiences and the new values, beliefs and ideas they produce contribute to the dynamic nature of culture.

One of the most basic types of identity is ethnic identity, which entails an awareness of one's membership in a social group that has a common culture. The common culture may be marked by a shared language, history, geography and (frequently) physical characteristics (Fishman, 1989; Sheets, 1999a). Children begin to develop a sense of identity as individuals and as members of groups from their earliest interactions with others (Sheets, 1999a).

How does cultural identity affect users' patronage of the library?
Nigeria, being a multi-cultural nation, has always been faced with the problem of having unhealthy interaction between the users and the library staff. What some cultures see as insults does not matter to some. Therefore, library services cannot be effectively rendered if the cultural identity is not put into consideration. The users of the academic

libraries are from various cultural backgrounds where different things are thought and believed. The knowledge of various cultures in the nation where the library is located or the world at large will go a long way to help the staff to deliver a meaningful service to the users. This also may imply that the users are to be studied individually.

The study of various cultural identities will make the library staff to understand the various approaches to the use of library by the users and handle each case accordingly. No two individuals from any culture are exactly alike. Because individual differences within cultural groups are far greater than differences between cultural groups, it is both particularly crucial and particularly challenging to operationalise understandings of culture and avoid stereotyping in diverse libraries.

How does cultural identity affect users' attitude to library services?
When a user and a librarian share the same culture, the instructional interaction is simple; an adult or more skilled peer helps a user manage a task through what Rogoff (1990) calls guided participation. McLaughlin and McLeod (1996) posit similarly that participation in cultural activities with the guidance of more skilled partners enables children to internalise the tools for thinking and for taking more mature approach to problem solving that are appropriate in their culture. Individual development is mediated by interactions with people who are more skilled in the use of the culture's tools. The development of young children into skilled participation is seen in ongoing cultural activities that they observe and participate with others in culturally organised practices.

Users who are not members of the dominant group may have difficulty developing their own identity because they are pressured in the library (and often also in public) to suppress behaviours that mark them as different. A sense of individual and group identity is related to normal emotional and cognitive development, so when this process is interfered with, users are more likely to abstain from the use of the library (Sheets, 1999b). Identity is not a neat and tidy concept, nor is it something one person can assign to another (though social attribution of a person's identity can affect him or her as when people make assumptions about what ethnic group another person belongs to and treat him according to preset expectations). Members of the dominant culture have identity developed for users from minority or mixed ethnic

backgrounds. When such a user enters the library his/her feelings may depicts his identify because of his/her ethnic background.

The above illustrates some of the complexity of interrelationships among users' backgrounds and sense of self, librarian's attitudes and instructional approaches in the library. Operating a library in this way seems risky and most librarians may not feel that they have the skills to manage potential conflicts based on race and ethnicity. Some wouldn't be comfortable with the way users segregated themselves and would regard that outcome as a failure. Yet, there were many positive outcomes in this situation. What became clear was that using users' cultural identities as the point of departure for instructional strategies and management design transforms their effective use of library.

There are some ethnic groups where the younger ones kneel to greet the older ones. If it happens that a user from a culture where one stands to greet comes across a library staff from where one will have to kneel (as a female) and prostrate (as a male), when the user greets according to his/her culture, the staff will feel insulted and this will affect the service that will be rendered.

How can the library staff overcome/reduce the effect of cultural identity on library service?
To learn about the cultural and individual experiences of users, Hollins (1960)'s suggestion for teachers could also be used by the librarians, which implies that: librarians observe and record individual user responses to library use or situations, develop and administer questionnaire about users' beliefs and expectations, conduct formal and informal interviews and request life histories and biographies. Vygotsky observed that cognitive development is embedded in the context of social relationships (Goldstein, 1999). Thus, interactions between people are the vehicle for intellectual growth. Use of library cannot occur in isolation, it is socially mediated.

Goldstein (1999) explains Vygotsky's notion of socially mediated knowledge: every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first on the social level and later on the individual level; first between people (inter-psychological) and then inside the user (intra-psychological). All the higher functions originate as actual relations between human individuals. (p649). As Moll (1992) notes,

from a Vygotskian perspective… a major role of the library is to create social contexts for the mastery of and conscious awareness in the use of cultural tools, such as oral language, literacy and Mathematics (p213). Library tasks and activity contains both the culture and the individual; that is, the individual mental processes must grapple with use of library concepts or skills the culture deems important. Because social interactions are culturally defined, socio-cultural interaction can either facilitate or hinder the use of the library.

This dynamic, as Vygotsky notes, is immensely powerful developmentally. But what happens when the librarian and the users bring different cultural frames of reference and communication styles to their interaction? Rather than a dialogue or activity that draws users into the zone of proximal development, there can be a disconnection between the librarian's and the users' ways of forming and displaying knowledge. As a result, user-librarian interactions in the library can fail to advance users in the use of the library. Users can in effect be stranded developmentally and librarians can experience frustration when their attempts to engage users in developmental dialogue or activity break down. Cultural differences then must be bridged in order to activate powerful developmental dynamics like the ZDP. Librarians who have users from many cultural backgrounds may wonder how they can adjust their interactions to align with the cultural background of all of the users. While this is not an easy task, providing instruction that draws on users' way of knowing will have a positive impact on users.

How does valuing users' culture support their effective use of library?
Cultural value orientations have an enormous impact on effective use of the libraries, (Greenfield, et al 1996; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch and Greenfield, 2000. Trumbull et al 2001) explain that the continuum of individualism-collectivism represents the degree to which a culture emphasizes Individual fulfilment and choice versus interdependent relationships, social responsibility and the well being of the group. Individualism makes the former the priority collectivism the later. (p19). Users should learn appropriate social behaviours and skills, as well as intellectual skills and education as upbringing. Users should be quiet and respectful in the library because he will learn more this way. Library has primary authority for managing behaviour, but expects peers to

guide each other's behaviour. Parents believe that it is the librarians' role to provide academic instruction to users.

How can librarians learn about users home cultures?
It stands to reason that librarians need to know the values, practices and use of library styles of the cultural groups from which their users come. However, Zeichner (1996) warns that generalised studies about cultures can lead to stereotypes. Thus, it is best not to engage solely in text-based research about users' cultures. The alternative is to engage the amateur ethnographic inquiry about one's own users (Heath, 1983)

Briefly, ethnography refers to the systematic inquiry into how members of a group make meaning of the world. What constitutes a good job, an important tradition, the responsibilities of a daughter or even the value of the use of library as a course in user's domestic priorities can all be investigated ethnographically. Ethnography conducted in sufficient detail should illustrate not only cultural trends but also intercultural differences. That is, not every one within a culture has the same views on a given topic or has exactly the same habits. Villegas (1993) offers these methods of collecting information:
1. Home visit;
2. Conversations with community members;
3. Consultations with other librarians;
4. Observations of users in and out of the library.

In addition, an ethnographic investigation would also include conversations with the users. One source of better understanding the users' culture is house hold funds of knowledge.
Funds of knowledge is the term researchers use to include:
  ✓   Information
  ✓   Processes of thinking and the use of library
  ✓   Useful skills associated with a community's normal life.

These three of these elements must be understood in relation to specific funds of knowledge, researchers and their colleagues helped Arizona Librarians make connections between these users' library and homes. These connections resulted in librarians gaining access to information that helped them make academic material more relevant to users (Moll, 1992). Their work had two goals:

i.   To form relationships among home, librarians and library by tapping into the family's strengths; and

ii.   To allow the librarian to learn about the family's funds of knowledge so that the information could be used as a resource.

Funds of knowledge express the belief that users bring valuable home knowledge to the use of library environment. In addition, what users bring may differ according to their cultural and linguistic backgrounds and their individual circumstances. This gives librarians the opportunity to consider how users learn to construct knowledge in social contexts. In many instances, librarians are not aware of the abundant knowledge that families have or that this discovering users' funds of knowledge entails finding out and understanding the social history of the households, their sources, evolution and most important, their work history. For example, some children from migrant families might possess knowledge about farming or agriculture (a domain of knowledge) because that is what their parents do for a living. These users would have knowledge of crop planting and harvesting. Moll (1992) observed that families had material scientific knowledge about carpentry, masonry, electrical writing, fencing and building codes, just to name a few areas.

How can librarians use their understanding of users' home cultures to serve in culturally relevant ways?
Curriculum and instruction that attempt to build on users' cultural knowledge are part of what is called culturally responsive pedagogy (Bartolome, 1995; Villegas, 1991). When culturally responsive teaching occurs, users' home cultures and experiences are drawn upon as resources for effective use of library instead of being viewed as barriers to use of library. The importance of understanding users' particular cultural backgrounds and skills was elaborated upon in our discussion about funds of knowledge. Ladson-Billings (1995) extends the concept of culturally responsive teaching to culturally relating teaching. A next step for positing effective pedagogical practice is a theoretical model that not only addresses user achievement but also helps users to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that librarians (and other institutions) perpetuate. This pedagogy is termed culturally relevant pedagogy.

Three criteria for culturally relevant service are:
1. An ability to develop users academically: this means effectively helping users solve their problem, by making resources and services available to them.
2. A willingness to nurture and support cultural competence in both home and library cultures; the key is for librarians to value and build on skills those users bring from the home culture. For example, librarians of Nigeria can use traditional songs of various dialects to pass message on the use of library across to the user.
3. The development of socio-political or critical consciousness; librarians help users recognise, understand and critique current social inequities.

Nieto (1999) gave five principles of learning which are very relevant for our discussion; these are:
   i. Library service is actively constructed: this challenges banking concept of education, in which library service is conceived of as a process of receiving, filling and storing deposits of information. This principle acknowledges learner agency and works against the reproduction of socially sanctioned knowledge. It presupposes that all users have the ability to think and reason and that library service is more than rote memorization of facts.
   ii. Library service emerges from and builds on experience: everyone has important experiences, attitudes and behaviours to bring to the process of education. Some bring oral stories instead of written ones; while some experiences appear to possess more cultural capital, they are not inherently more valuable
   iii. Library service is influenced by cultural differences: some cultural psychologists have demonstrated the cultural basis of library service. Work on collectivism and Individualism, which refers to the degree to which a society values individual versus collective library service.
   iv. Library service is influenced in the context in which it occurs: social, political and economic contexts all affect library service in significant, though not always obvious or

predictable ways. Proposition that cognition is always interactive with the environment and those schools are never ideology-free zones.

v. Library service is socially mediated and develops within a culture and community: schools organise themselves in ways that are welcoming of particular groups and individuals, based on theories about what human development looks like, what is worth knowing and what it means to be educated. Librarians act as socio-cultural mediators, responsible for assisting their users through their zones of proximal development. Nieto (1999) cites Cummins' work on identity, affective development and power relationships as issues that are involved in helping users move through their ZDP's to become successful learners.

In general, to get users actively involved in effective use of the library, librarians need to use community information to motivate them. Diaz, et al (1986) suggest using strategies such as prewriting discussions to explore a topic that is of importance to the community.

Conclusion

Cultural identity of wars is essential in library service, hence librarians need to understand the culture of the community. Effective library service can only be given in a country like Nigeria if the cultural background of the users is taken into consideration. To design effective instruction, the cultural background of the learners must be understood. Villegas (1993) suggests that librarians can build bridges between homes and schools by selecting meaningful instructional materials, using examples and analogies to clarify new concepts and using varied teaching strategies that connect cultural experiences and academic content. Cultural differences in approaches to formal library service can be accommodated in the library as well. For example, librarians who are able to distinguish individualist cultural values and independence are more deliberate in providing flexible instructional activities that give users from various cultural backgrounds opportunities to work in groups and on independent tasks (Greenfield et al., 1996). When librarians use the skills, that users have developed in the home and draw upon those skills to engage users in effective

library use, they are effectively linking the home and users' prior knowledge with library.

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