

iWorld Forum: Literacy, ESL and World Languages Librarian Panel

February 28, 2008

University of Washington Information School

iWorld Student Group <http://depts.washington.edu/iworlduw/>

Panelists:

Marcela Calderon-Vodall, Spanish Language, Senior Librarian, Seattle Public Library

Leszek Chudzinski, Slavic Languages, Senior Librarian, Seattle Public Library

Thom Probst, Literacy and Outreach Coordinator, Seattle Public Library

The Panelists for this iWorld forum all work in the Literacy, ESL and World Languages (LEW) Department of Seattle Public Library. They addressed questions submitted in advance.

1. The concept of “libraries” may be understood differently in other countries. Perhaps new immigrants or refugees don’t have the same concept of what a public library is as those who grew up in this country. Do you have any personal experience with this? How does SPL address this challenge?

Marcela, who grew up in Lima, Peru, introduced herself by explaining the many hats she wears at the library: she conducts reference help in Spanish, teaches computer skills in Spanish, facilitates book talks in Spanish, and does any Spanish translation for the library. She explained that concepts of libraries can be very different in different countries. There was no library in her school in Lima and the closest library was 15 miles away. There the stacks were closed and you couldn’t take books home. Later, she discovered a library in a nice neighborhood of Lima but it was open only to those who lived in that neighborhood. She explained that the annual budget for public libraries in Peru averages 40,000 soles which is approximately \$13,000 for 4,637 libraries in the country.

Leszek works mostly with the Russian population in Seattle, though he is from Poland. Russians know libraries pretty well, he said. However, they are amazed by U.S. libraries and treasure them. The concept of a library being open access to all was pioneered by the U.S. Public libraries in Europe tend to be closed stacked and one has to pack his belongings in a locker before going through airport-style security.

Thom, who comes with an educator background, runs the ESL and outreach programs. He spends a lot of his time in the community introducing the library to communities who may not speak English at home. He conducts “library lessons” as part of his outreach where he teaches library terms such as “check out” and “renew” in schools or community centers. At these events, ESL materials and books on life skills, such as cooking or car repair, are in high demand. He often issues library cards and checks out books on the spot.

2. What skills do you find that you use on a day-to-day basis in your work? Did you learn these skills in school or on the job? What skills are employers looking for when they hire

LEW librarians? What can UW students do now to acquire the skills necessary for working with cultural communities?

Leszek said that after working for 21 years in the library, it was hard to separate what was learned in school versus on the job. He emphasized that his role is to help people. So you must have good reference skills, but that they get polished on the job. You also need the right attitude and always be ready to help someone, even if there's a bit of a language barrier. If you succeed in doing a good job, it will be apparent and users will know.

To be a LEW librarian, you need strong reference skills as well as language and culture knowledge. Since this is community service, it is helpful to know the community. He noted that 23 percent of Seattle speaks a language other than English at home.

3. What sort of access to technology is there for non-English speakers at SPL? Is there access in other languages?

SPL offers Computers for English (CFE), which is a program to help gain language skills, citizenship information, and typing skills. SPL's Central library also has an audiovisual room with literacy and citizenship materials. There are also computer classes in Russian, Spanish, Chinese, and Vietnamese. English-speaking senior citizens sometimes like these classes since they move at a slow pace. You also have the ability to set computer terminals to a different language.

4. How about for people who are not literate? Are there similar issues? Is there non-text based information?

For people who are not literate, there are fewer resources. Thom suggested last year's Caldecott winner "Flotsam" which is all pictorial. As for non-text materials, there are many that are both text and non-text. Not many purely non-text based. For example, Rosetta Stone presents language in with both texts and images.

5. How do librarians "add value" to their non-English or illiterate patrons?

The library is more than merely books – it represents the sum of everything that many people work at providing. There's added value in all the events holds as well as services such as the bookmobile. Providing informational materials in other languages adds value. As does having tax help at the library.

6. How is the non-English language collection development balance determined? Does it relate to usage? Population distribution?

Thom noted that East Africans are the fastest growing immigrant population in Seattle currently. And many of them are not literate in their own languages so English will be the first language they are literate in. It is challenging finding materials to grow the collection in their languages though both for budgetary reasons as well as lack of materials in languages such as Amharic. Collection development is done in response to what patrons are requesting. For the Russian population it tends to be works of poetry, on art, or literature. For Spanish communities, life skills materials are important.

7. How are the librarians who work with non-English speakers distributed? Do they work in more than one library? Are they consultants to other libraries who have smaller Russian- or Spanish-speaking populations? How do they communicate with each other about best practices?

The LEW librarians, including the Russian-speaking, Spanish-speaking, and Chinese-speaking librarians are all at Central. They do spend some time each month at branches and consult with branches on whatever they need help with. They help with computer classes in the branches and train branch librarians on multilingual materials.

The LEW department has 5 people to staff 62 hours of reference desk time so scheduling becomes challenging. Plus, the department is on the first floor so it gets a lot of traffic.

8. Do you do any collaboration or consultation with community organizations outside of the library to determine the needs of LEW patrons? Are there any formal or regular relationships or partnerships and outreach services? Also, do you feel that you are “insiders” in the community you serve? If yes, what advantages has this had? If not, does this hinder your ability to serve a population?

Yes – there are several organizations in the community that SPL partners with, including the Refugee Women’s Alliance and Literacy Source. SPL also provides space and access to collections to organizations that need space to teach. LEW librarians also attend cultural events to promote SPL services. The librarians very much see themselves as insiders and part of the communities they serve.

9. What are the common issues that each of the language librarians deals with? What are interesting ones unique to a particular librarian/patron language group?

Marcela noted that many of her Spanish patrons call the library “libreria” instead of “biblioteca” and frequently ask her how much they must pay for a service or a book. This speaks to the difference in understanding what a library is. She also explained that some of her patrons are exceedingly shy and she has found that coming out from behind the desk puts these people more at ease. Leszek also spoke about this responsibility of the librarian to create a welcoming environment and establish rapport with the patron, who in turn will help you help them and thank you in the end.

10. Are there any patron populations you feel are underserved? For example, do you wish you had an East African languages librarian? Can and does SPL send employees somewhere to learn languages?

Yes! They would all love to have an East African languages librarian. The other underserved population is native English speakers with low literacy. The challenge with this group is that they don't self-identify. Instead, they may ask for materials for their son or daughter who is having trouble with reading. As to whether SPL helps with language learning, some coursework might be provided.

Leszek ended the panel discussion by explaining that the key to service is to see another human as human and treat them as you would want to be treated.