

The Salzburg Curriculum

Transcript: Cultural Skills video by R. David Lankes

<http://vimeo.com/50805015>

Here's the thing: If all you do is sit in a building and maintain a collection, you have built a culture. And much of librarianship over the past hundred years has been about building a culture of librarianship. When you – I still do this – when you walk into a library you naturally lower your voice. In mean, isn't it amazing? You don't even notice it but you're quieter. Right? It's a cultural skill that we have learned that libraries over time have taught us. And, in fact, much of new librarianship is the idea of unlearning some of the ideas that, culturally, we put in place.

It's not easy. Cultural skills and cultural norms take a long time and a lot of effort to build up and maintain. But what we're talking about now when we move our focus from internal – *our* collection and *our* dissemination – to the community, what they need, their collection, how do we build upon *their* dreams and aspirations, you suddenly find yourself crossing lots of invisible lines. Invisible lines of gender, invisible lines of race, invisible lines of socioeconomic status, invisible lines of country of origin, religion. When you open up to a community that is at all diverse, you must understand culture at a very different level. You must understand a new set of cultural skills, which is not maintaining culture, but quickly learning and traversing cultures.

So in the Salzburg Curriculum, there are a couple of very specific skills that people need.

Communication. Communication is an important thing because if you have a great idea but you can't tell anyone about it, you don't have a great idea. It's not going to get anywhere. We must understand how to communicate, and when we communicate, understand that people use different language, different meaning, different things going on.

We must understand intercultural skills, that is the ability to analyze and function in micro and macro cultures, including age and gender. The ability to walk out the back

door and go through the Latino section, then to go over through the African American community and into the Italian community. When we do that within urban centers, we're moving through some rather interesting micro cultures very quickly. Or macro cultures: these people speak Spanish, these people speak Italian, and they don't communicate back and forth. Right? Micro cultures might be talking to teens, and teens from different schools and such. We need to understand how to navigate them.

So, for example, the Free Library of Philadelphia had an interesting problem, which was the downtown urban core central library was in the middle of a primarily African American community. And yet, the majority of the staff, particularly the professional library staff, were white. And so what they quickly realized is, "There's a trust gap here," which was based not on what the library was doing at the time, but simply the sort of environment that existed in the around them in Philadelphia. What they did, which was spectacular, was they hired volunteer coordinators who were African American. They hired staff that was that, and they got themselves out into the community on a regular basis, through setting up the friends bookstore. Whatever it is, they made it so that they could create moments of interaction. They would interact on many short-term basis, right? They'd do quick interaction, quick interaction, but over time, it led to a sense of trust. It led to a sense of values. It led to people knowing that that other culture was different, but bridgeable.

This oftentimes revolves around language and terminology. And language not in the macro sense of English versus Spanish versus Chinese, but also language in the sense of terminology, the language we use. Librarianship tends to be a pretty impenetrable field. I mean, I'm hoping these modules are helping folks who *don't* want to be librarians or *aren't* librarians understand what that is, but, you know, we've got our terms. We can use terms like, "We're going to use MARC to improve access to the catalog." Well, most people will read that as a guy named Mark is going to come in and give us more options to get to JC Penney's catalog, when in fact what it means is a technical format standard to get to an inventory system.

Language matters, and the more you are in a community, the more specialized your language becomes, not because you're trying to exclude people completely, but also

because it's faster and more efficient if you figure out specialized terminology. And this doesn't just happen between ethnic groups. It happens between age groups. I mean, I have a twelve-year-old son that I have to every so often ask for translation, primarily around Minecraft. When I grew up, the word was "awesome." Well, apparently, the word now is "epic." You know, these words mean different things to different cultures. So, figuring out if we're going to be *of* the community, *servicing* the community, *in* the community, taking *advantage* of the community, we need to understand the language that those communities are using and bridge to different languages across different groups.

And this doesn't just apply to how we speak, it applies to how we learn, so we must support multiple types of literacy. This is how people learn. Some people learn well in conversational or loud, free-form environments. Some people need a conversation, but with themselves in a quiet, reflective environment. Almost everyone needs both of those. You need to walk into sort of a foment of discussion and ideas and learning, and then you need to withdraw and think about it a while, which is to discuss with yourself.

So, how do we support visual learners, from those who learn well through text, from those who learn best in experiential settings like gaming, to those who really want a broader perspective that they might get in, say, reference book material. It's not enough for librarians to say, "yes, I communicate. Yes, I understand our culture." Librarians must be out in the community, learning from the community, working with the community to build, which means that they must *understand* the community at a much deeper level than their demographics. They must understand how they speak. They must understand what they need. They must understand the limitations *and* the opportunities afforded to them by a given culture, whether that's an ethnic culture, or a religious culture, or simply where they live. This idea of culture becomes very, very important when you talk about being community-centric.