

Multilingualism at the reference desk

Keeping students connected

by Sandra Marcus

In order to foster reference desk cooperation and efficiency, a clearly articulated reference policy is vital. This is especially true in a public community college such as the Queensborough Community College CUNY, with nine adjunct librarians supplementing a full-time faculty of seven, serving a student body of over 10,000 (including part-time students). However, the specifics of such a policy are not always easy to determine.

This became apparent recently when a disagreement took place between two librarians at the reference desk. The source of the dispute was the appropriateness of a conversation in Spanish between a librarian and a student. Since we are not an official "bilingual school," one of the librarians strongly expressed her belief that when faculty members speak native languages to foreign students, "We are not doing them any favors!"

Both the nature and the intensity of this attitude surprised me. My philosophy is that the primary role of the reference librarian in an academic library is that of user education and assistance. I have sought help from a bilingual faculty or staff member on more than one occasion with a stymied attempt at communication with a student.

The viewpoint of the chief librarian is that speaking a language other than English to a patron

is acceptable, as long as English is tried first. However, many educators seem to align themselves with the "English only" position, and are often vehement in the expression of their opinions. As reference and information literacy coordinator in a multicultural environment, I was faced with the need for a definitive and explicit policy on this issue. The question required some thought and study.

With students from over 120 countries, speaking more than 100 languages, our college provides several levels of ESL (English as a Second Language) instruction, as well as a comprehensive language immersion program. Our library faculty and staff include speakers of Spanish, Russian, Mandarin, Korean, Greek, French, and Singhalese.

An informal survey of a random sample of 100 students resulted in 81 percent supporting native language communication. Interestingly, the majority of the 19 percent opposed were non-native English speakers. Nevertheless, after carefully weighing both sides of the question, I have reached the conclusion that in speaking native languages along with English to non-native speakers, we *are* doing them a favor.

The most cogent argument against my conclusion is that gratuitous opportunities to use native languages would abort chances to practice English. This would be ultimately harmful, by delay-

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ing both a student's learning of English language skills and his or her psychological adjustment to American society. However, I contend that a few moments of native language conversation will do little to detract from the hours of English practice required for classroom lectures and discussions, text and research readings, and writing assignments. Yet such conversation could add a great deal to the student's school experience in the establishment of faculty relationship.

As computers have become ubiquitous in homes and campus departments, and more and more digitized material has become available, the role of the library itself has been called into question. In my view, the library of a commuter college is, and always has been, a source of human contact, providing a sense of connection to the school. Perhaps this aspect of our responsibilities will become even more significant as we continue to progress into the computer age. The academic library can provide sympathetic authority figures available for help, as well as a comfortable environment where educational values are reinforced and the promise of success is invoked.

Many of our students are nontraditional, older, and struggling with job and family responsibilities while trying to attend classes and study. Feelings of isolation and alienation can interfere with college success; one of the factors in the establish-

ment of learning communities, so prevalent on campuses today, is this very issue.

In the informal survey described earlier, 25 percent of the students questioned could not name all of their teachers. When trust and human connections are established, feelings of anxiety can be diminished, motivation can be increased, and many educational obstructions can be overcome. I contend that a few minutes of casual conversation in a native language can do more to help some foreign students—enhancing their self-esteem and sense of belonging and strengthening their possibilities of success—than hours of subject instruction in English.

Moreover, other aspects of library policy have addressed the needs of foreign students. We have provided special computers with Chinese, Japanese, Russian, and Korean language characters so that students who wish to e-mail letters home may do so in their native languages. Why not provide the same kind of accommodation in our conversations with them, if we can?

Unfortunately, we are not all multilingual, and we cannot communicate in all the languages spoken by our students. Inferring a specialized injustice from this is illogical. We also cannot buy every book that every student needs. This does not mean

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7. Does the budget support an appropriate level of staffing and compensation?

8. How is the adequacy and availability of funding for other library resources (e.g., Archives and Special Collections) determined?

9. Does the library budget reflect the library's responsibility for acquiring, processing, servicing, and providing access to media and computer resources?

10. To what extent does the library director/dean have authority to apportion funds and initiate expenditures within the library budget and in accordance with institutional policy?

11. How does the library monitor its encumbrances and the payment of its invoices? How does the library determine its choices and schedule its expenditures?

12. Does the budget include adequate support for extended campus programs?

Notes

1. ACRL Task Force on Academic Library Outcomes Assessment, 27 June 1998, <http://www.ala.org/acrl/>, go to "Publications," then "White Papers & Reports."

2. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

3. For a further discussion of space requirements, refer to: Metcalf, Keyes D. *Planning Academic and Research Library Buildings*, 3rd ed. Philip D. Leighton and David C. Weber, eds. Chicago: American Library Association, 1999, c2000. Appendices B and C.

4. Regional and subject-based accrediting association guidelines can help direct the institution in its planning and assessment.

5. ACRL Guidelines for Instruction Programs in Academic Libraries, <http://www.ala.org/acrl/>, go to "Standards and Guidelines." ■

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we are being unfair in providing for some students and not for others. All we can do is attempt the best assistance we can for as many students as we are able to reach. This is true for every aspect of library service.

Furthermore, I believe that native language conversation is of value to the college and the librarian, as well as to the student. The connected student does not drop out. This improves the retention rate for the college, but, more important, it enhances the librarian's sense of accomplish-

ment. The moments that provide the greatest rewards in my job do not come from looking at my paycheck, completing a needed project, examining new books, or even succeeding with a difficult search (although this comes close). The moments that provide the greatest rewards appear when a student comes into the library, eyes shining with joy, saying, "I got an A on my paper! Thank you for your help!"

Such moments enrich the lives of both student and teacher, no matter in what language the words are expressed. ■

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