Report on the workshop "Beyond Politically Correct: Diversity and Multiculturalism in the Library Workspace"

1. Introduction and background

Part of the library's identity as an open space and source for information for everyone is diversity. To this end, it is important for library staff and supporters to be aware of what diversity means and moreover, how to be sensitive and affirming of those who are different from them. The workshop "Beyond Politically Correct: Diversity and Multiculturalism in the Library Workspace" at the 8th annual BID Bibliothekskongress Leipzig 2022 was aimed to address forms of diversity in the ways that are most broadly applicable. The second equally important goal was to challenge and inspire library workers to appreciate and understand the factors contributing to diversity.

The workshop was prepared through professional development materials for work in the educational and non-profit sectors in the United States. As the moderator of the workshop, I also drew from my personal experience with poverty, racism, and immigration both for myself and through my work in the social services in the United States and Europe. In the United States and in the Czech Republic I worked as an interpreter and social worker in immigrant communities, as an educational advisor for youth in a non-profit educational association, and in a non-profit organization for victims of domestic violence and human trafficking. Furthermore, I immigrated to the Czech Republic, and experienced life as a foreigner for myself.

A disclaimer was given at the beginning of the workshop that, given the author's American identity, all reflections would bear some degree of an American worldview. Given that many of my sources were also American, the same disclaimer applies to them. The content and activities for this workshop were derived from a number of sources; the full list can be found in Appendix 2.

2. Structure

The workshop was designed to be a combination of discussion and interactive activities to analyse three major contributing factors in diversity, namely poverty, race, and nationality. As foundation and background, the ten participants were presented with a way to understand culture in general, specifically, how aspects of culture contribute to human behaviour on an individual and collective scale. Firstly, the audience as a whole was asked to provide individual definitions of culture. It was acknowledged that there are aspects of culture that are visible, empirical, observable, but that is not all. Culture is deeper, the way that people view themselves and their world. It is connected to all aspects of mind and reason, including the subconscious and the parts of the brain that control involuntary fight, flight, or freeze reactions. It is a combination of someone's culture, corner, and colour. To elicit this reaction and reflection, the participants were asked to define themselves in terms of these "three C's." Given that there was a small number of participants, these questions were first presented to the whole group, and individual answers were encouraged. Had there been more participants, the group would have been divided into smaller groups.

The first aspect of diversity that was addressed was poverty. While poverty is defined and addressed differently in different geographical regions based on demographics and current events, every culture and creed has degrees of wealth and at least a working collective understanding of poverty. It is therefore the most universal amongst the three factors of diversity. Again, the audience members were asked to give their reflections and definitions of poverty. From there, the various categories of poverty[1] were presented to the audience for analysis. After eliciting audience reflections, the group examined four case studies.[2] The group analysed the resources available to each protagonist of the case studies, and offered subjective reflections on the degree of poverty presented by each fictitious case.

The following activity required a greater degree of self-examination. The group was provided with two poverty inventories,[3] to experiment with how each would survive poverty, and to analyse reactions to behaviours commonly observed in and amongst communities and individuals facing generational poverty (people who were born into poverty to parents and grandparents who were also born into poverty). Free discussion took place on what behaviours could be categorized as toxic traits that are harmful for human interactions in general, as distinct from behaviours that may be a result of upbringing and thereby understood and managed in conflict resolution, for example in the workplace. Multiple audience members reflected that their analysis of certain behaviours was affected based on whether there were dependents involved in the situation. For example, if a life partner's spending on gifts for children in the family impacted the rest of the family budget, the audience members reflected that the presence of these dependents caused them to evaluate the behaviour differently than if they were a childless couple.

As part of the discussion of poverty, the workshop participants discussed registers of language, from fixed to casual, and how their use is a cause and effect of certain misunderstandings and prejudices in human interactions. Additionally, the group addressed the aspects of the maturity continuum, a manner of relating an individual's maturity and dependence on other members in the group. By understanding how humans express themselves, and thereby form bonds to other members of their culture, successes and failures in communication can be understood and addressed.

Upon completion of the poverty inventories, the next topic to be addressed was racism. The group initially discussed how racism obviously looks different amongst the countries of origin represented by participants, but everyone had experienced racism to some extent and to some degree. This section of the presentation featured quotations by anonymous black American educators. From there, the group analysed the difference between personally mediated racism and institutional racism. In order to better understand the differences, comparisons were drawn between feminism, ableism, and institutional racism. Institutional racism – the same as for feminism, ableism, and many other "-isms" – refers to ways in which the structure of society is such that certain groups are benefited

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1   Cf. Payne, Ruby K.: A framework for understanding poverty, Highlands, Tx. 1996.
2   The case studies were adapted from Payne, Ruby K.; DeVol, Philip; Smith, Terie: Bridges out of poverty. Strategies for professionals and communities, Moorabbin 2001. They can be found in appendix 1.
3   Adapted from Payne, Bridges out of poverty, 2001.

more than others. For example, companies wanting to maximize profit are not helped in their efforts to increase profit margins by hiring people who may request maternity leave at some point in the future. This is a risk borne by people with uteruses, the vast majority of whom are women, so men have a disproportionate advantage in being hired by companies looking to maximize profit margins. It does not matter whether individuals on the human resources staff are misogynists or feminists, hiring policies and structures are as they are independent of who enacts and enforces them. It is the same way with, for example, access to education, which is related to poverty. Both of these systemic disadvantages disproportionately affect different races. As the workshop only lasted 90 minutes, there was not enough time to discuss sources supporting these claims in detail, but participants were encouraged to continue to study this on their own.

After discussing racism, the final component of diversity looked at were differences in immigration status, or country of origin, as distinct from race. Connections were drawn between differential immigration status and Payne's different types of poverty. This was the aspect of diversity that had the most personal relevance to me, and I supplemented the activities and discussions with anecdotes from my personal experiences as an immigrant getting settled in the Czech Republic. After demonstrating how institutional structures, the maturity spectrum, and registers of language all combine to put unique pressures on immigrants, space was given for free discussion. Each participant was able to offer anecdotes about their own personal experiences, given that everyone present had experienced being a foreigner in some capacity.

The workshop concluded with practical ways that libraries and their librarians can support the integration of foreigners, and people of different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. Several examples were offered of unintentional faux pas commonly committed in attempts at cultural sensitivity. Participants were presented with alternatives to aid them in their efforts to reach diverse populations. To this end, the presentation also opened a discussion about representation and its importance in welcoming diverse readers to the library. In this context, representation means that the staff of the library must have people who are identifiable for the target group of library patrons. For example, if an immigrant woman who wears a hijab does not see someone at the library who wears a hijab or speaks the same language as she does, that is an additional barrier to inclusion that she will face at the library. Several examples of successful library projects working to destroy interpersonal barriers were presented for inspiration, and participants were encouraged to discuss and ponder how they could adapt them to their own contexts.

3. Further development

Due to time constraints, the Privilege Walk activity could not be completed during the workshop. As half of the audience reported that they had participated in a privilege walk in the past, it was deemed a more prudent use of time to focus on other aspects of the presentation and different activities. Additionally, given that many of the sources were American, it would be appropriate to adapt certain details in the examples for the activities to a more European context. Despite these limitations, the participants gave positive verbal feedback at the end of the workshop, and posted positive messages on Twitter as part of the larger congress. It is clear that there is desire to make

libraries more accessible for all, and that this desire is passionate, enthusiastic, and fuelled by a positive, collaborative, international spirit.

Appendix 1: Case Studies for Analysis with the Poverty Inventory (adapted from Payne 1996)

Case Study 1: John and Adele

Adele married her husband when they were very young and worked to support him. During medical school, she found out that a drink or two in the evening helped her deal with the stress. The couple was overjoyed when their son John was born, and a couple of years later when their daughter was born handicapped, the stress level increased. When the kids were three and seven, Adele's husband announced that he no longer loved her, that her drinking was causing too much strain on the relationship, and he was leaving her for a younger woman. Her parents are dead, and her sister lives on the other side of the country.

You are Adele. Your income weekly, including child support, is 300 euros before taxes. Today, you were late to work for the third time this month, because your car broke down. The repair costs 400 euros to fix, and your boss says if you are late one more time, you will be fired. As you see it, you can 1) get a new car, 2) send the car to the mechanic and worry about the money later, 3) try to flirt with the mechanic, 4) get mad and quit your job, 5) call your ex and threaten to take him to court for more child support money.

John comes home from school announcing that the school is hosting a reading contest, and each book you read with him earns him one point. He also asks if you can come to parent teacher conferences this week, because the children receive pencils if the parents come. But John is not old enough to watch your handicapped daughter. Your ex has threatened to call you an unfit mother if you try to get more child support money from him.

Case Study 2: Sally and SueAnn

Sally is the mother and SueAnn is the daughter. Sally has been married twice and divorced twice, she is now on husband number 3. SueAnn has two stepbrothers and one stepsister, but she doesn't have any full siblings. Sally is working two jobs at the moment because her current husband has been laid off. Sally's parents are divorced and live in the same town as she does. She had her first child at age 15, and Sally is the second oldest. The girls cook and clean while Sally works. She brings home about 400 euros per week, and may have to move again soon because she is behind on her bills.

You are Sally. You get a call at work that your husband is in jail. He was borrowing your car when he picked up a friend who was fleeing a crime scene, and he didn't have his driver's license with him. The car has been towed, which costs 80 euros plus another 40 euros each day it is in the impound lot, but the car won't be released to you without proof of insurance, which you don't have. Your oldest daughter is pregnant and wants to keep the baby, but needs to go to the free clinic across town

to be seen. She misses half a day of school to make it there, and she needs to be picked up by car because it is not safe to wait for the bus. The bill collector calls you at work, and says he will take you to court for your unpaid bills. You were ok with making payments until your husband got laid off. You are also out of birth control pills, but to get a prescription you need to go back to the doctor and wait three or four hours, and you can't take that much time off work. Plus they cost another 20 euros. Lately your husband has been looking at Sally in ways that you don't like, but you are so tired.

Case Study 3: Otis and Vangie

Otis is a 9-year-old boy, and his mother Vangie conceived him at age 14, dropped out of school and is on welfare (government support for people in poverty). Otis has two younger siblings.

You are Vangie. You are 24 years old, your mother lives down the street; your current boyfriend comes around often and works sometimes. You dropped out of school when you got pregnant with Otis, and since reading was always hard for you, you never really minded it. Your current income, including food stamps (government allowance for food), is 215 euros. You move a lot because there are always more bills than money at the end of the month.

Your sister calls and says her boyfriend has beaten her again; can she come stay with you? The last time she came, she stayed for two weeks and her 12-year-old handicapped son would not leave your 5-year-old daughter alone.

Otis comes home and says there is a reading contest at school. For every 5 books you read to him, he gets a coupon for 2 euros off a pizza. You aren't sure you are good enough at reading to read to him, plus to get books you have to walk to the library, and you don't have a car, plus there have been two drive-by shootings in the past week. Otis brings home a note for parent-teacher conferences to you, that you can't read.

Rent is due for the month, and it is 300 euros for three bedrooms. Your sister is coming, meaning extra food because she never has any money. Your boyfriend calls and asks you to bail him out of jail (where he is after getting arrested for assaulting your ex-boyfriend, who should have known better than to come around), bail is 500 euros. Your boyfriend's money is the main thing that keeps you all from going hungry.

The teacher calls you and says that Otis has been misbehaving again. When he comes home from school, you beat him with a belt and tell him he better behave, then that night you fix his favourite dinner, while complaining to anyone who will listen about what a problem he is being.

Case Study 4: Opie and Oprah

Opie is a 12-year-old girl, the oldest of 5. She runs the household because her mother is a domestic worker and works long hours. Her 80-year-old senile grandmother lives with them too, as does an out-of-work uncle.

You are Oprah, the mother. You are 32 years old; you were married to your husband for 10 years until he was killed in a car accident on the way to work two years ago. You go to the Missionary Baptist Church every week and there you lead the choir. Your employer treats you well and you bring home about 300 euros every week. You ride public transit every day to and from work and the church bus on Sunday. You want your children to go to college because you never got that chance.

You get a 400-euro Christmas bonus from your employer and thank God that Sunday at church. That same day, three different people approach you asking for help: one asks for 50 euros, one for 100 euros, and one for 60 euros. You wanted to save the bonus for an emergency. Opie gets selected to be in a regional contest, but it requires after-school practices. You want her to do that, but you need her at home to watch the family and take care of the house after school.

Appendix 2: Sources for the workshop

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