International Librarianship

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Published by State University of New York Press

Schlesinger, Kenneth, et al.
International Librarianship: Developing Professional, Intercultural, and Educational Leadership.


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Professional associations offer librarians opportunities to strengthen their competencies, including leadership, while building beneficial networks. These professional networks may range from specific librarianship interests to multitype library cooperation, and from local system groups to international organizations. Furthermore, professional organizations can link with other library entities such as librarian preparation programs to offer seamless professional development.

International professional library associations serve as a catalyst for international librarianship. In this instance, I will examine my partnership with the University of Hong Kong and its extensions, facilitated through participation in the International Association of School Librarianship (IASL), specifically in terms of information literacy.

As librarians work in cross-cultural settings, or with learners from different cultures, they should strive for cultural competence. Cultures are well-defined, sustained groups of people with common norms, expectations, and values, which can be distinguished from other culture groups. Thus, cultures might emerge from shared physical traits, interests, or attitudes: from Girl Scouts to knitters, from the Amish to terrorist cells (Cutler, 2005). In the globalized community, cultures are more likely to encounter one another, which can lead to misunderstandings and conflict due to inaccurate and preconceived attitudes (Hofstede, 1980). On the other hand, cultural interaction may result in increased tolerance and enriched knowledge (Nair, Norman, Tucker, & Burkert, 2012).
Cultural competence may be defined as a congruent set of knowledge, behaviors, and dispositions that enable one to work effectively in cross-cultural situations, interacting respectfully and valuing differences (National Association of Social Workers, 2001). It entails knowledge of other cultures, professional values of providing culturally competent service, fostering an atmosphere of inclusion, and encouraging proactive processes that increase diversity.

Cross-cultural competence begins with self-knowledge (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999). Librarians need to examine their own cultural values, assumptions, expectations, and norms. Everyone has cultural prejudices, which color personal perceptions about the surrounding world. Identifying and owning up to these prejudices can help librarians do personal emotional work to improve their own mindsets, interact more authentically with their clientele, and avoid possible misunderstandings (Craig, 1996). These practices can help them understand how culture influences perspectives and strategize about means to change detrimental behavior and embrace difference.

In their 2012 diversity standards, the Association of College and Research Libraries identified behaviors of cross-cultural library leaders: sensitivity to and curiosity about other worldviews, cross-cultural knowledge and communication skills, support for a diverse workforce, and the ability to deal with ambiguity.

My partnership with Hong Kong followed a long and winding path. Rapaport (2008) asserted that participation in international programs can increase educators’ repertoires of instructional strategies, expand their cultural sensitivity and perceptions, and influence their interpersonal relations in education. My own international education began in graduate school when I participated in a summer international exchange of social workers and youth leaders in France. After working as a professional librarian for a few years, I joined the Peace Corps, where I taught library science in Tunisia.

This experience motivated me to pursue a doctorate in adult education. My mentor recruited me to serve as an assistant editor for the IASL, which led to my attending and presenting at this organization. In 2004, then–vice president for association relations James Henri invited me to head the Information Literacy Special Interest Group. I developed site links to other information literacy resources and worked with IASL members to provide professional development.

Further, James Henri directed the Teacher Librarian Diploma Program at the University of Hong Kong (UHK). As coordinator of the California State University Long Beach Teacher Librarian program, I
served in a counterpart position. Due to my professional expertise and experience with IASL, Henri asked me to serve as the UHK program’s external evaluator, under the auspices of its School of Professional and Continuing Education (SPACE). This connection led to several projects and activities in Hong Kong.

Hong Kong’s educational system reflects long occupation by the United Kingdom. The system is basically British in nature, and consists of six primary forms and seven secondary forms. Since its reversion to China, Hong Kong’s curriculum has become more Chinese-oriented. The main strands of the curriculum include reading and literacy, science, technology, and moral education. Students must meet both English and Cantonese language requirements. The associate degree and diploma program usually require two years to complete, and the bachelor’s program is set up as a three-year process. The master’s degree typically requires an additional two-year commitment.

Under the direction of the Hong Kong Education and Manpower Bureau, every primary and secondary school is mandated to hire a qualified full-time teacher librarian. These teacher librarians need to be credentialed teachers and teacher librarians. In some cases, a classroom teacher takes the position for a year or two, but others find teacher librarianship to be their real niche. Much of their time is spent in collection management, but increasingly they work with teachers in reading promotion, information literacy, and technology competency efforts. Teacher librarians need to have a bachelor’s degree, although most have already earned one for their first credential.

At one point, Education and Manpower Bureau in-house training provided the basis of academic preparation, but in 1999 a diploma program was established at UHK. UHK is the island’s oldest institution of higher education, having begun in 1910 as a medical training center. Now it offers bachelor’s through doctoral degrees in many subjects and serves almost 20,000 students. It offers Hong Kong’s only master’s degree in library and information management and its only diploma in the teacher librarian program.

In 1999, the diploma of teacher librarianship program consisted of ten modules with thirty-six credits total. For each module, classes were usually held weekly for eight to ten weeks, followed by the next module. Subjects included collection development and organization, technology, information sources and technology, information literacy, and collaboration. A field experience was built into each year’s program. This approach blended theory and practice and stressed cataloging and instruction.
As external examiner of this program, I found the culminating tasks to be synthesizing readings, discussion, and site application. Although most classes were conducted face to face, all courses were mounted on UHK’s interactive learning network, so students could retrieve presentations and readings online and post work digitally to the group. About eighty students were in the diploma program, and half that many were master’s degree candidates. Most students worked full-time and travelled some distance to attend class, even though there are six instructional sites scattered throughout Hong Kong for the diploma program. To accommodate their needs further, courses tended to be held in the evenings and on Saturdays, and most documents were posted online. Several classes were outfitted with laptops for each student to facilitate interactive participation. Most full-time faculty were not native to Hong Kong (including Tasmania-born James Henri), though most part-time faculty were local teacher-librarian practitioners. Thus, library science students received a truly international education.

In reviewing the program, I thought that overall it prepared students for entrance-level teacher-librarian positions in Hong Kong primary and secondary schools. Both years provided a good mix of technical skills and foundational concepts. Having mentorship experiences in both years offered students and instructors a chance to benchmark their knowledge and skills in order to make timely adjustments. In a few modules, however, content did not adequately address current and future trends (the basis for ensuing course modifications). Management issues appeared to be the area with the greatest need for preparation.

I was required to visit the campus. Based on my preliminary report and prior library science teaching, I was asked by UHK to combine this visit with teaching that summer (2005) in their master’s degree program in library and information management. I taught two courses in research methods and inquiry and initiated a collection management course. The students were all local residents, and ranged in age from early twenties to midfifties. Their interests and work settings reflected the full spectrum of librarianship: public, academic, school, and special. Courses ran for ten weeks, two evenings a week. Most students worked in libraries, and some had to travel two hours to attend class, making for extremely long days. In addition, I presented two professional development workshops for library science faculty.

In early August, 1999, IASL held its annual conference at UHK, the first time IASL had met in China. The local planning committee worked hard to make this conference special, down to the sequined conference bags. Given my SIG leadership skills, I was asked to help with
last-minute preparations. This consisted largely of editing their program proceedings. Over 600 delegates from about thirty countries attended. At the opening meeting, Hong Kong teacher librarians and administrators were honored for their efforts, which drew much local attention. The conference was highlighted by children’s performances and excellent food. Delegates had a chance to visit exemplary local school libraries. Over a hundred sessions addressed current issues of resources, instruction, collaboration, research, and technology. Even more learning occurred in hallways and at meals as teacher librarians from around the world shared their experiences.

Carol Kuhlthau, another active IASL member and an internationally known information literacy expert, arrived a week early to offer a professional development workshop for library science faculty. She and I also devised an information literacy workshop as a preconference offering. Not surprisingly, we had a full room for this interactive session.

I had received a research award from IASL on comparative preparation of teacher librarians. I was able to interview teacher librarians

Figure 2.1. IASL conference information literacy workshop (Credit: Lesley S. J. Farmer)
from around the world at the conference. The study was subsequently published in 2008 as a peer-reviewed chapter in *Educational Media and Technology Annual*.

The Hong Kong visit also established the foundation for a co-authored book on information literacy assessment. James Henri suggested writing this volume together. Three months in Hong Kong provided extensive opportunities for us to discuss possible content and strategy and draft sections of the book. UHK has a sizeable library collection, so I was able to cull it for sources not available at my home campus.

Prior IASL activities, as well as related professional work and international travel, prepared me for success. Certainly experiencing a different culture while sharing common values of librarianship provided a rich learning environment. My experience was both fascinating and challenging. Because I was teaching as a paid professor, I needed to obtain a work visa, which required extensive documentation. I had to list my family background, as did my Hong Kong sponsor, along with transcripts and letters of recommendation. Once I arrived in Hong Kong, I needed to open a local bank account and set up university details such as keys, office, and meal plans. Even transportation was something I had to negotiate from scratch, since I was not welcomed on arrival or given much guidance when starting work.

I tried to learn a few Cantonese expressions before arriving, and printed out pages of phrases, but I was not understood when I spoke these words. Locals answered in English. Fortunately, most public areas had signs in English and kanji, so I navigated well. I ran into language problems only when I observed an off-campus class, because that neighborhood had limited tourist traffic.

On a positive note, the rest of the faculty accepted me as an equal—and local—teacher, and let me have full control of the course and teaching duties. On the other hand, only one of them, a kind Chinese American female, showed me around the area. Later in the summer, another visiting teacher from New Zealand arrived and we did a bit of tourist activity together. Even though my sponsoring colleague stayed in the same faculty residence, we seldom ate together, and he did not set up my worksite details, and no faculty visited my classes or asked me about American library science education.

The SPACE director discussed administration with me, and introduced me to influential local librarians, including one who showed me the impressive main public library. On my part, I asked extensively about Hong Kong education, observed UHK library science classes, and visited local school libraries. Hong Kong had more religious-affiliated libraries
than I expected, and some of the settings were interesting, including a newspaper library, a women’s club recreational library, and several private universities and schools.

My conversations with James Henri about information literacy and assessment were thought-provoking and enriching, even though we made little writing headway that summer. The library was a fine source of learning, and I read extensively from its collection. Several librarians provided inside perspectives about Hong Kong professional experience, as well as insights about local information literacy instruction.

My main joy was the students: eager, hard-working, and appreciative learners. Their English was surprisingly good, though they tended to downplay their abilities. They stated that they were accustomed to lecture methods of instruction and were not used to class discussion,
which echoed the research findings of Zhang (2000). Nevertheless, they came to enjoy and participate enthusiastically in class interaction. By the end of the course, students were comfortable sharing critical analysis and independent viewpoints. I had them undertake more service-learning than they had previously experienced, and they had to write more than usual. I also gave them timely, specific feedback, which guided their work and facilitated learning. They were not accustomed to this approach, but greatly appreciated it. On the last day, they hugged me, gave me presents, and sincerely wanted me to stay or return to teach them more. A few continued their correspondence, and some are still Facebook friends.

On a personal note, I had never been away from my family for such a long time. However, I had good Internet connectivity, so I corresponded with them daily. International phone calls from Hong Kong are surprisingly inexpensive, so we conducted weekly calls. Midway during the summer, my husband and son visited me in Hong Kong for a week.

As a result of my work, the UHK teacher-librarian and library science programs changed. The Teacher Librarian Diploma Program

Figure 2.3. University of Hong Kong students in class computer lab (Credit: Lesley S. J. Farmer)
introduced management courses and strengthened their technology and instructional courses. The master’s program continues to offer the collection development course.

Unfortunately, my main contacts at UHK changed jobs—and countries—and one retired. While a number of us keep in contact occasionally, we have not worked on projects together since 2005 except for presenting at some virtual conferences developed by two UHK library science faculty. Sustaining efforts at long distance is challenging, particularly if individual professional agendas change. Moreover, my colleagues stopped being active in IASL, so professional networking was less supported.

I am not certain who learned more in my instructional role, Hong Kong students or myself—probably the latter. I encourage more library educators to cross-fertilize their profession. Back home at California State University Long Beach (CSULB), I shared my experience with my students through photographs and information gleaned from the IASL conference at UHK. I also had my UHK and CSULB colleagues exchange their perspectives and practices about teacher librarianship. I presented my experiences at a CSULB librarianship program gala and a conference of the California School Library Association. Further, I developed a comparative school librarianship course, which was awarded funding. The course includes an option for students to attend the IASL conference in Moscow.

My travel experiences gave me more sensitivity to visiting scholars’ situations, as predicted by Rapaport (2008). I presented a session about sponsoring visiting scholars at a conference of the Association of Library and Information Science Educators. I initiated a visiting scholars program sponsored by the Goethe Institute. Locally, I joined the CSULB International Committee and have contributed to documents about visiting scholar programs.

Professionally, on the national and international levels, I was elected IASL vice president of association relations, with the support of Hong Kong and affiliated votes. This position has led to other international initiatives and partnerships, which continue to inform my students and myself. I also helped establish an international task force within the American Association of School Librarians, and founded the international subcommittee for the Media Specialist SIG of International Society for Technology in Education.

I serve on a joint committee between IASL and the International Federation of Library Associations, which has developed satellite meetings to which I have given presentations. We are developing advocacy
training, for which I wrote the manual. My continued work in IASL led to a Fulbright experience in Brazil, collaboration with school library associations in Nepal, and my editing a book on library services for youth in Japan, Russia, and the United States.

I have discovered that an intercultural skill set should include mutual academic domain knowledge and practice, mutual professional values, flexibility and openness, active listening skills, negotiation skills, politeness and patience, resourcefulness, dependability, authentic interest in and care for clientele, and research and interviewing skills. Those who present, and especially those who teach abroad, need to be self-sufficient. International experiences, even if challenging, should be sought and leveraged to gain knowledge about librarianship perspectives and practices in other cultures, and to understand the extent to which implementation of school library programs is culturally defined. Such learning helps librarians more effectively serve a diverse clientele.

Lastly, I acknowledge the significance of professional associations as the major means of continuing professional development, networking, and initiatives that can have international impact and sustainability. It is amazing to observe the universality of school librarianship values, and to understand how those values are culturally contextualized in daily operations. Librarians need to be aware of the social dynamics of information literacy. They should serve as change agents, providing appropriate leadership via cross-cultural professional development, communities of practice, and educational reform efforts. Supporting these efforts requires initiative, professional expertise, and networking skills sustained over time.

Moreover, librarians need to instruct preservice librarians and mentor emerging professionals both locally and abroad. They should encourage new librarians to become involved in international professional associations and provide leadership opportunities to sustain and improve them, thereby furthering these educational dialogues and actions.

REFERENCES


**RECOMMENDED READING**


