

Core Values and Cultural Context: Reflecting on the Fundamentals

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Consider assembling the Zayed University library staff of 33 individuals from 15 different countries and asking the question, “What is a library?” You get 33 perspectives, all culturally based and derived from personal experiences in countries as far-reaching as Australia, Egypt, Jordan, Sweden, Tanzania, and the United States.

Although 15 countries are represented in the Zayed University library staff, one-third of the staff are Emiratis with their rich tradition of storytelling in which stories are passed orally through generations and not preserved in print. A society that preserves its cultural heritage by oral tradition rather than in print is one with little need for libraries. And until recently there were few libraries in the Arabian Gulf region when compared with the number of libraries in many Western societies.

Zayed University was founded in 1998 by Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al Nahayan, President of the United Arab Emirates, to educate Emirati women whose families were reluctant to send them abroad for their higher education. Sheikh Zayed decided to bring some of the best higher education to his own country and chose the American curriculum and teaching methods for his new university. Developing an American-style academic library was part of the plan.

This essay discusses aspects of transplanting an American-style academic library into a culture where few libraries exist. The process is enriched by the multicultural dimensions of the expatriate staff. I discuss some of the challenges and rewards of the experience and reflect on my own core values in the new cross-cultural context.

In the first few months as library dean at Zayed University, I began to realize that the vision that served as my guide as a library manager for several decades was shared by less than a handful of staff. Why? Because their cultural context and exposure to libraries were different from mine and different from each other’s. A few of them had never set foot in a library before they began working in this one. Most never used a school or public library as they were growing up.

As a result of the multiple cultures and library backgrounds, there were equally diverse opinions and operational practices around certain services I consider core. Examples are customer service; reference desk service; consistent policies applied to friend and stranger; commitment to improving education for everyone without regard to her social status; sharing resources; and welcoming outside researchers to the library. These operations are seen by staff members through their own cultural lenses, which direct their service style and approach. Because the library frequently hires support staff with little experience in libraries as users, we develop in-depth training programs and offer guidance in every aspect of library work.

Zayed University library is a “teaching” library in the same way that some hospitals are “teaching” hospitals. Purposefully we teach staff as well as students to develop their own information literacy skills. Technical services staff are trained in all aspects of the operation. We cross-train between public and technical services staff, exposing them to various library activities and equipping them to understand the full picture of library functions and their interdependence.

To aid in creating an image of the diverse environment, imagine a visit to Zayed University libraries where you see staff dressed according to their cultures. All Emirati women, of which there are ten, wear long, black robes, or abayas, that flow from their shoulders to the floor with black shailas covering their hair and tucked under their chins. The abayas and shailas are often creatively decorated with embroidery, braid, and sometimes beads. Should the abaya open in front, you may get a glimpse of a beautiful skirt, jeans, or the latest designer gown. Purses and shoes are important accessories, always beautiful and often matching. Faces are carefully made up and nearly always smiling.

Emirati clothing demonstrates a commitment to modesty that the rest of us respect and display in our own Western-style dress, making sure our knees, shoulders, and upper arms are covered. We wear long skirts, slacks, and jackets and, in some cases, even bright African dresses. Some women who observe Islam and are not Emirati wear Western clothes and cover their hair with scarves. Male faculty and staff generally wear slacks, shirts, and ties.

In terms of the curricula, Zayed University provides look-alike academic programs on all campuses, two in Abu Dhabi and one in Dubai. Likewise, the library staff is one unit with most cross-function teams comprised of staff from both cities; consequently most meetings are conducted via video conferencing.

Occasionally staff members travel the 90 miles between Abu Dhabi and Dubai for meetings. However, in the Emirati culture, some women may be prevented from traveling unless they are accompanied by a brother, father, or husband. A few families observe this practice so stringently that the female staff member cannot travel even in a university-provided van with female colleagues or supervisors. Although a small minority, those staff never see the other campus library in operation and seldom participate in face-to-face gatherings on the other campus.

Library activities and services sometimes evolve differently on each campus and then staff have the option of choosing what works best. In this regard, we work in an environment of continuous professional development. We learn from one another through our teamwork and are constantly sharing best practices, improving library services and trying new things.

One challenge is the ideal of library service to everyone, whether they are members of the royal family or laborers from a construction site. The core value of egalitarian service to library users emerges from the democratic principle of equal treatment of all learners and equal access to information. I ask myself, “How to explain ‘service to everyone’ in cultures where the tradition of extending hospitality to strangers does not include the Western notion of treating everyone equally?”

The concept of service to everyone is a concept that runs contrary to many cultures that do not share the democratic principles so deeply entrenched in North America. It's easier to pay lip service to the core value "service to all library users" than to bring it into practice when you view society as appropriately stratified. And even more basic is the question, "How to explain 'service' when the concept is interpreted as something provided by a servant?"

Despite coming from a culture of few libraries, students at Zayed University are frequently in the library. They come to develop their English, math, and information technology skills, and they tell us the library provides a valuable study environment. They all own laptops and acquire strong information technology skills. Many of them, mostly women, are first generation college educated whose mothers do not read or write.

What a shock it was to discover how much difficulty students have locating books on the shelf. As I queried a student seeking a book with its Library of Congress call number, I quickly saw her dilemma. The call number read K7025, but the range label cited J–L. Where are the Ks? Just what does J–L mean to someone who grew up learning a different alphabet? Not only do second-language learners struggle to search for a particular book in the catalog, but they have just as much difficulty deciphering a bibliographic record and then trying to track down the book on the shelf using a classification system based on an unfamiliar scheme.

For students whose first language is not English, the alphabet is not intuitive. Why, I wonder, are we not using Dewey, which is built on the much more widely known decimal system? Of course, I know the rationale for using the LC classification system in North American academic libraries, but in this context is it the preferred classification system? Are we doing our second-language learners a disservice?

Information literacy is so fundamental to the Zayed University curriculum that it forms one of the six learning outcomes for all undergraduates. It is an educational value espoused by everyone in the university and is uniformly promoted by the library, faculty, and administration as a key deliverable. The founding librarians worked closely with faculty in developing a curriculum that integrates information literacy skills development into general education and in specific courses in the majors. Information literacy at Zayed University serves as a model and is the envy of librarians working in many North American academic libraries.

Almost every conversation about libraries in the Middle East eventually touches on the issue of censorship. How can an academic library in the North American tradition deal with sensitive issues such as the human body as art, recognition of Israel as a country, and images of the Prophet? When Zayed University was founded, the rulers of the country emphasized that all subjects could be taught in the curriculum and that the Internet would be unfiltered. Nonetheless, not all students or parents desire to be exposed to sensitive issues, so the library has practices in place to respect cultural values and to avoid conflict if possible as we select materials for a collection to support the curriculum.

A few complaints arise every year concerning a book, periodical, or video that is objectionable to someone. The complaint goes before the Challenged Materials Committee, comprised of a faculty member, an Emirati staff member, an Arab administrator, and an

administrator in the office of student services. The library dean is a resource and facilitator of the committee.

After the complaint is reviewed, a decision is made regarding the objectionable item and the bibliographic record in the catalog is annotated to reflect the review. The item may be treated in one of four ways. Namely; it may be (1) withdrawn from the collection, which seldom happens; (2) returned to the collection with the offensive segment or illustration redacted; (3) returned to the collection in its current state; or (4) relocated to special collections.

In North America, *special collections* refers to a collection where rare or unique items are stored. At Zayed University, special collections is a locked room where items of a sensitive nature are placed and where they remain available to students if they sign a form accepting personal responsibility for viewing the material and if a faculty member signs permission for the student to use the materials.

During spring 2009, in a burst of creative energy, the newly formed Marketing Team decided to celebrate National Library Week in April and sponsor a series of special activities highlighting the library. Using the *@your library* theme, the library launched the week by introducing a library mascot, a camel, and encouraging students to enter the *Name the Camel @your library* competition. It was a huge success and generated lots of smiles and library traffic. Over 200 students entered, and the winning name was *Rahal*, meaning “traveler” in Arabic.

When the student who came up with the winning name was told she had won, she revealed that it was really her friend who submitted the suggestion in her name. And, when she was given the prize of a gift certificate to a bookstore of her choice, she admitted that she had never been in a bookstore before and she had no idea which bookstore to choose from the five or six names suggested.

Finding the right camel to serve as the mascot was a journey in itself. The Marketing Team chose an artistic statue of a camel and bought three, one for each library. But four days before the event, some Emirati staff reluctantly admitted that the statue did not represent an Emirati camel. It was too skinny, the neck was too long, and it was black. Emirati camels aren't black, they pointed out. So I asked if they could find an appropriate camel. They did. They found *Rahal*, who is four feet tall, more realistically proportioned, and brown.

The challenges of personnel management, of operating within an active parent university and complying with university policies and procedures, are present in every academic library. But questioning my basic assumptions and reflecting on core values of librarianship are part of my weekly meanderings in this cross-cultural context. This opportunity presented itself with less frequency and depth when I was managing an academic library in the United States. Working as part of a multinational staff enlivens and enriches my life in many dimensions.

What will be the outcome of this truly grand educational experiment of transplanting American-style libraries in the Middle East? I predict a hybrid library, incorporating many core values of American-style libraries but modified by the flavor of local customs and mingled with the best of many cultures. The library, like the university that it serves, must keep its mission in

focus yet remain agile to keep pace with the goals of the emerging knowledge society envisioned by the rulers of the United Arab Emirates.