

The Increasingly Active role of Libraries as Multicultural Agents: from Information Providers to Dynamic Players. The case of the Special Library of the Foundation Three Cultures of the Mediterranean

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to offer a general background about the special library of the Foundation Three Cultures of the Mediterranean, highlighting the role that librarians specialised in the field of Mediterranean cultures can play in this multicultural society and to show how a model of special library with a social dimension can help to the development of the users both personally and professionally.

Keywords: special libraries, Mediterranean, special librarians, seminars and activities addressing multiculturalism.

1. INTRODUCTION

The promotion of dialogue, peace and tolerance among the Mediterranean people and its cultures is the main guiding principle of the activities carried out at the Fundación Tres Culturas del Mediterráneo (Foundation Three Cultures of the Mediterranean, hereafter referred to as Foundation or Three Cultures).

The three main priorities in its day-to-day activity and cultural schedule are: cooperation within the Mediterranean region and among Andalusia and Morocco, the Middle East and the European Union and the Mediterranean countries.

Thus, our special library was created in 2007 with the purpose of supporting the Foundation's mission and goals by providing access to information in accordance with the Foundation's interests. Our guiding principle is a belief in culture as the best medium to promote dialogue in the highly complex Euro-Mediterranean social and political context.

1.1. Building a new model of special library: the role of the special librarians

The traditional role of libraries as information providers has been particularly relevant in the case of special libraries as the professionals working in this environment need to acquire a specific knowledge in most cases far removed from their area of expertise. The spread of information technologies and the increased cultural sophistication of our societies have added to this traditional difficulty turning the task of remaining relevant into a bigger challenge.

In this context, the special library of the Foundation aims to reinvent the concept of special library by being an active agent in promoting the understanding and dialogue between peoples and cultures in the

Mediterranean. To carry out its function, our special library is committed to becoming a resource centre for learning, research, leisure and entertainment and we have specialized facilities, services, specialised personnel and a collection of documents.

The main areas of concern for our Foundation are the Mediterranean and the Arab world, international relations, Euro-Mediterranean relations, Spain-Morocco relations, Spain-Israel relations, and the Jewish world. As cross-questions we pay special attention to 'women and gender', 'cooperation in development', 'migration', 'dialogue between religious groups', 'human rights and democracy', 'security and terrorism' and 'solutions to conflicts and peaces studies'.

New challenges have arisen in recent years as library users become more sophisticated and it is increasingly easy to find information not previously available to specialists or field professionals thanks to the rapid spread of information technologies and tools. Information literacy and intercultural understanding become key elements of personal development and the role of the librarian turns increasingly into a more specialized one.

Libraries specialized in the field of Mediterranean cultures thus become more than ever dynamic players which must quickly adapt not only to the requirements of a sophisticated audience but also to the speedy changes taking place in their societies.

Information technology, multicultural societies, more advanced users, the abundance of information, mean specialized librarians can contribute to these developments by participating in information and intercultural literacy understanding and providing added value services, thus becoming an essential profession for the development of society.

1.2. Special librarians: the social commitment to an ever changing profession

In order to continue with our training and build a relationship with other professionals with an interest in our areas of expertise we are working with two groups to provide encounters through *Facebook* and meetings throughout the year. Our purpose is to use the social network *Facebook* as a tool for communication and collaboration between professionals in the world of librarianship.

The groups are:

- Working group "Libraries and Cooperation in development"¹ (Grupo de trabajo: "Cooperación para el Desarrollo y Bibliotecas", a working Group on Development Cooperation from the Libraries and Documentation Centers. This group had its first reunion last May in

¹ For more information about this working group can be found at this web address: <http://www.facebook.com/home.php#/group.php?gid=37549764221> (Facebook subscription required) [Date accessed: August 8, 2009]

the Spanish Documentation Seminar held in Zaragoza². This group aims to share experiences and projects in development cooperation and the role of libraries; and promotes the creation of a network of centres.

The special library of Three Cultures wants to work with libraries in the north of Morocco and exchange experiences and activities to promote development and cooperation.

- Working Group: Libraries for Inter-Cultural Dialogue³ (Grupo de trabajo "Cooperación para el desarrollo y Bibliotecas"). This group was established to facilitate communication and the sharing of information among members. The *Facebook* group mirrors an actual working group, aimed at putting together seminars on the issue of the role of libraries in inter-cultural dialogues. The group works combining real meetings and *Facebook* has a virtual team throughout the year, regardless of where you work from.

To continue working for the benefit of professional librarians we joined the the 32 Standing Committee of IFLA "Library Services to Multicultural Populations" as a new member for the period 2009-2013. We are also a member of the Spanish Association of Documentation and Information (SEDIC) and of the board of Andalusian Association of Professionals in Information and Documentation.

Finally, our special library belongs to the Network of Documentation Centers and Special Libraries of Andalusia⁴ (the organized set of documentation centres and special libraries of the Andalusian regional government, Junta de Andalucía, and other public and private institutions that are integrated by agreement), other public and private institutions that are integrated by agreement. It will soon be part of a union catalog that encompasses all the libraries. The participation in this network is vital as the optimization of resources enables us to offer more and better librarian services.

2. THE SPECIAL LIBRARY OF THREE CULTURES, A DYNAMIC PLAYER

The special library of Three Cultures, as an open-ended vehicle of knowledge of the Mediterranean cultures, aims to become an essential support for ongoing education and expertise in these matters, for the cultural development of the individual, and for social groups within a particular environment.

The Foundation in its attempt to create new venues for promoting dialogue, wanted to highlight the role of libraries and library professionals in facing

² The program is available at: <http://www.fesabid.org/zaragoza2009/wp-content/uploads/FORO1_COOPERACIONDESARROLLO.pdf> [Date accessed: August 8, 2009]

³ For more information about this working group can be found at this web address: <<http://www.facebook.com/home.php#/group.php?gid=63794462848>> (Facebook subscription required) [Date accessed: August 8, 2009]

⁴ For more information about this Network can be found in this web address: <<http://www.juntadeandalucia.es/cultura/Redcendocybe/menuAction.do?opcion=inicio&tam=>> [Date accessed: August 8, 2009]

the challenges of a socially responsible global society; therefore, it has developed since 2006 a series of seminars which have served as a forum for discussion and exchange of experiences.

2.1. Seminars addressing multiculturalism: a contribution to the development and specialization of librarians

In April 2006 we presented an international seminar on *The Information Society in Development Cooperation: A New Challenge for Libraries and Librarians*. The seminar highlighted the role of public libraries as democratizing agents of culture, and a commitment made to the development of information technologies as a means to combat social inequities.

Three Cultures was one of the institutions selected by the Spanish Ministry of Culture to develop projects for the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue 2008, declared by the European Commission. To this end, the Foundation developed a program named *Biblio-Dialogue in Europe: Intercultural Libraries, New Technologies and Youth* that was held at two different venues, one in Berlin and another in Seville. Focusing on young people who will be the protagonists of intercultural dialogue in the near future, *Biblio-Dialogue* aspired to promote and enhance the role of libraries as catalysts for intercultural dialogue and facilitators of mutual understanding, especially with the use of new technologies. Participants to this seminar included IFLA president Claudia Lux and other IFLA members, among them Clara M. Chu, Carmen Madrid, Kay Raseroka, Fred Gitner and Kirsten Leth Nielsen.

In October 2008, the Foundation collaborated with UNESCO and the Library of Andalusia (Spain) in the *Training the Trainers Workshop on Information Literacy* within the series of workshops in the *Information for All Program* that UNESCO is developing in various countries around the world. The Foundation was responsible for the "trainer participants" from North Africa and ensured that they had the opportunity to expand and deepen their knowledge, with special emphasis on the use of Web 2.0 tools and the development of materials for specific segments of the population.

In 2009 we organized the *International Workshop on The Role of Libraries in the Social Participation of Minorities*, in collaboration with the U.S. Embassy, the Goethe Institute and the French Institute of Madrid with the aim of highlighting the idea that all types of libraries - from public to special - should strive to address the challenges posed by the current information and knowledge society, such as reducing the digital divide, working towards a globalization of culture, and fostering a new intercultural society.

2.2. Presentation of books: to promote the knowledge of authors within the Mediterranean and encourage reading

Throughout 2009, the special library for the Three Cultures Foundation organized a series of book presentations related to our core areas of interest. Our aim is to create a space to share with the community the latest editorial trends about the Mediterranean and the contemporary Arabic

world, Euro-Mediterranean relations, Spain-Morocco relations and Israel, and the Sephardic Jewish world.

The presentations are structured in the form of roundtables, with the presence of authors and other specialists who bring a different and enriching vision of their own work. Thus, Three Cultures offers attendees the opportunity to enjoy a first hand experience of authors and discuss not only their works but also the context of creating it, its purpose, and the influence of other cultures or other authors.

Among the presentations of books held at the Foundation we can name:

- *Sunníes y chiíes: los dos brazos de Alá* (Sunni and Shia, the two arms of Allah), by Javier Martín.
- *Mi nombre es nadie: el viaje más antiguo del mundo* (My name is nobody: the oldest journey in the World by Carla Fibla García-Sala y Nicolás Castellano Flores.

These presentations were held at the library itself with the idea of promoting the knowledge of the library so at the same time they serve as a marketing tool.

2.3. New service, Book Club: "Tres con libros"

This book club intends both to disseminate the literature produced in the Mediterranean basin and raise awareness about its cultures and peoples.

The book club "Tres con libros" aims to encourage and promote reading and to offer users a new service with which to explore the reading experience as a group, an experience which is even more enriching if shared with people from different countries. Meetings to exchange views are held periodically at the special library, which is responsible for delivering a copy of the book chosen for reading to each member of the club.

The first encounter of club members was organized with the collaboration of Casa Africa, and addressed the issue of immigration; exile and identity problems suffered by immigrants when moving to a new country, acquiring a different culture and living a reality that is far from the image broadcast by the media. The title of the book is "En un lugar del Atlántico" (A place in the Atlantic), written by Fatou Diome.

In the second gathering, we were very fortunate to have the Egyptian writer, Khaled Al-Khamissi and his book "Taxi", one of the greatest successes of the current narrative of the Arab world. The book deals with the social and political transformations that have occurred in Egypt during the last five decades, providing a realistic and accurate image of Arab society through the eyes of some privileged observers: taxi drivers in Cairo.

For our latest reunion, we held a literary lunch with Antonio Lozano, author of the book *Las cenizas de Bagdad* (The ashes of Baghdad) and the book's

main character Waleeh Saleh. It's a story of exile and takes place in Iran, Morocco and Spain.

2.4. Activities to reach a wider spectrum of users

Three Cultures is also committed to the universal values that enable dialogue and equality among peoples. This is made possible not only through oral and written expression, but also through music. With this in mind, in May 2008, the guide *Fonoteca Civica de Ritmos Étnicos* (Civic Fonoteca of Ethnic Rhythms) was presented at our centre. The *Civica Fonoteca* is a guide that brings together 600 discs representing more than thirty years of musical production from around the world.

Another activity directed to the general public and designed to promote the role of that books and libraries have played throughout history in pursuit of dialogue and rapprochement between peoples and cultures of the Mediterranean is the *The Intercultural Week "Books and libraries: agents of the dialogue between cultures"*. The objective of the program is for individuals and social groups alike to access culture through reading, film, theatre and other artistic expressions⁵.

The special library helps design and organizes the participation of Three Cultures in the Book Fair in Seville (Spain) and Cairo (Egypt). This forum serves as a useful marketing tool to open to a wider audience.

3. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE COMMITMENTS

I will conclude by highlighting some of the challenges we face at the special library of the Three Cultures Foundation:

- Application of emerging technologies, services and Web 2.0 applications to enhance and optimize library services and to create new ones.
- Providing services to the Google generation, those born with digital technology know-how and understanding the changes in their consumption habits and their relationship with the library.
- For this reason, our services must add value and our online catalogues should be more proactive and provide access to more information and contribute to the visibility of the library.
- Adapt to the environment and learn to reinvent.
- Make the librarian work visible and turn the library into the soul of the institution.
- Anticipate users' needs and offer them a warm welcome to the library.

⁵ This programme is available at:

<<http://www.tresculturas.org/secciones/actividades/otras%20actividades/docs/semanainterculturalbiblio.pdf>> [Date accessed: August 8, 2009]

- Encourage them to participate in the activities promoted by the special library.
- Promote and collaborate in the development of networks of special libraries in the Mediterranean and Arab world.
- The importance of belonging to associations and working groups as a way to collaborate and share ideas that affect the daily work. Forums are essential contacts for seminars and to be up to date with the latest developments.

The special library of the Three Cultures Foundation will continue to face the challenges of a global society and will serve to support the goals and objectives of the Foundation, providing another space for the exchange of knowledge and dialogue among the diverse cultures, peoples and languages of the Mediterranean basin.

These new developments might add to the previously mentioned challenge but they also present a unique opportunity for special libraries to become a real added value service by offering increasingly sophisticated products and engaging in a wider spectrum of activities.

Links of Interest

Access to the site of the Special Library of Three Cultures:
<http://www.tresculturas.org/ciclos.asp?f3cs=-12097636> [Date accessed: August 8, 2009]

International Workshop on The Role of Libraries in the Social Participation of Minorities.

Programme available:

<http://www.tresculturas.org/secciones/actividades/otras%20actividades/docs/tallerbiblioteca.pdf>

Summaries of the roundtables:

<http://www.tresculturas.org/secciones/actividades/otras%20actividades/docs/mesastallerbiblioteca.pdf>

Summaries of the hands-on workshop:

<http://www.tresculturas.org/secciones/actividades/otras%20actividades/docs/tallerestallerbiblioteca.pdf>

Book club "Tres con libros", access the blog:
<http://biblioteca3culturas.blogspot.com/> [Date accessed: August 8, 2009]

