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Getting Past "Approachability"

What Cultural Humility Brings to Library and Information Education

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PROVIDING LIBRARY SERVICE MEANS INTERACTING WITH PEOPLE IN particular ways. How do library workers *learn how to interact* with people? Just as important, how do library workers *learn how to think about* their interactions at work? As students, many begin to explore these questions in their programs of study, including (but not limited to) ALA-accredited master's degrees. Learning about interpersonal interactions in a service context is core for students, whether their program teaches "reference services" as traditionally understood, or "information services" more broadly. In this chapter, we argue that both students and instructors benefit when cultural humility is incorporated into learning about information services.

Learning about cultural humility is beneficial for two reasons. First, it problematizes narrow, conventional ideas about what makes good service, such as the amorphous quality of "approachability." And second, a cultural humility approach provides students with practical, engaging ways to think about interpersonal interactions in a service context. Discussing cultural humility in class is a way to discuss matters of power and privilege that are always functioning in information services, but are also largely absent from the most influential guiding documents often encountered by students. After providing some background to begin this chapter, we each share our experience of discussing cultural humility within the context of a first-year required graduate course on information services. Liliana writes from the point of view of a student, while Sarah writes as the course instructor.

From Kostelecky, Sara R., Lori Townsend, and David A. Hurley, eds.
Hopeful Visions, Practical Actions: Cultural Humility in Library Work. Chicago: ALA Editions, 2023.

"Approachability": Service Is Not as Straightforward as It May Seem

Certain qualities and practices—such as a welcoming tone and body language, and open-ended, nonjudgmental questioning—are traditional elements of good library service. These qualities are codified by professional bodies and in mainstream textbooks. We discuss them briefly here in order to contextualize cultural humility as an important intervention in, and alternative to, predominant articulations of good service. The most prominent example of a codification of good service is the Reference and User Services Association's *Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers* (2013). The RUSA *Guidelines*, as they are known, do not formally regulate service, but they do influence library workers' and administrators' notions of normal, good library service. This influence certainly extends beyond American borders into our Canadian context.

Whether in library technician programs or graduate information studies programs, instructors who teach about the *Guidelines* should offer opportunities for students to question, and not just absorb, RUSA's advice. An important example here is the concept of "approachability," enshrined in the first guideline, "Visibility/Approachability." The current *Guidelines*, like the previous version from 2004, are unequivocal on approachability's importance: "It is essential that the reference librarian be approachable" (para. 8). We are advised that "the librarian's first step in initiating the reference transaction is to make the patron feel comfortable in a situation that can be perceived as intimidating, confusing, or overwhelming" (para. 8). Approachability is framed as so important that it can make or break a reference conversation: as RUSA emphasizes, "the librarian's initial response in any reference situation sets the tone for the entire communication process and influences the depth and level of interaction" (para. 8).

Have you ever tried to define *approachability*? If we are to become approachable, we must know what this means. According to RUSA's *Guidelines* (2013), approachability is multiple things. First, it is a *quality* one can embody, emerging from library workers' placement ("highly visible"), posture ("poised"), and appearance ("easily identifiable"). This quality is also embodied through *action*, or, more precisely, a series of actions. RUSA reminds us that library workers must "make the patron feel comfortable," provide an appropriate "initial response in any reference situation," and "approach patrons and offer assistance." In other words, RUSA indicates that in order to *be approachable*,

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one must *approach patrons*. According to RUSA, approachability is something that we *do* as well as something that we *are*.

Similarly, approachability is emphasized in mainstream textbooks, such as *Reference and Information Services: An Introduction* (Bopp and Smith 2011; Wong and Saunders 2020). In this textbook's fourth-edition chapter on "The Reference Interview" (2011), the authors Kathleen Kern and Beth Woodard echo the RUSA *Guidelines*. They frame approachability as a matter of "first impressions" and "how the librarian first appears to users," which "will affect their attitude toward the librarian and may shape the phrasing of their questions; it may sway a user's decision to ask a question at all" (62). As with the RUSA *Guidelines*, approachability is framed as essential, but the resulting advice seems easy by comparison: make eye contact, and remember that "a smile goes a long way" (62). It would be understandable if this advice strikes you as not just easy, but perhaps *too easy*. Crucially, Kern and Woodard hint at the core issue with approachability, the one that cultural humility helps us discuss in the classroom—that is, approachability is not just about what we do and how we are, but how we are perceived. They rightly advise that approachability is not simply how we appear, but how we "first appear *to users*" (62; emphasis added).

This is a really important point, but Kern and Woodard do not unpack it, nor do they expand on their advice to "smile." Their straightforward advice does make sense in a basic operational way. As Laura Saunders (2020, 51) points out in the latest edition of this same textbook, "Most reference interactions begin with a patron approaching the reference librarian with a question." In other words, in order for patrons to receive service, they must (generally speaking) decide to approach a staff member. Therefore, library workers should do what they can to encourage and enable this moment of first contact. This is not a point of contention.

However, as Kern and Woodard hint at, what all this advice avoids is that approachability is determined not by staff, but by patrons. As a quality that library workers may embody, approachability exists only if it is perceived as such by other people. Related qualities, such as "visibility," are more objective: here we can ask (and answer), are library workers located in a physical or digital space where they can be found, or are they not? By contrast, when a patron is determining whether or not a library worker seems approachable, it is very unlikely that they're making this determination only on the basis of whether or not they receive a smile. Being approachable is like being intimidating—whether or not I am intimidating, regardless of my intent, depends

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on whether or not somebody else feels intimidated. By glossing over the central role and potential challenges of patron perceptions and biases, the advice of RUSA, and of related textbooks, is not only partial, but also reductive, in ways that are potentially harmful. It is one thing to advise students to "be approachable" and quite another to have a substantial, inclusive conversation about what it means *to be perceived as approachable* by patrons. For students, an unquestioning introduction to guidelines such as RUSA's, and strictures such as "approachability," leaves them less prepared than they should be to face interpersonal interactions with patrons. This is true for both racialized and white students.

This is where cultural humility comes in. Our experience in class is that cultural humility encourages sensitivity to power dynamics and to the diversity of people's experiences, including both staff and patrons. Incorporating cultural humility into a conversation about what it means to provide good information services leads to richer discussions and, for students, the beginning of an ongoing practice of reflecting on their own positionality and the partiality of their expertise.

Our Context: A Required Graduate Course, during the COVID-19 Pandemic

In the fall session 2020, Sarah, as professor for the course, proposed the reflection and discussion on cultural humility within the context of the course Information Resource Discovery in the University of Ottawa's School of Information Studies. This required core course provides a theoretical and practical basis for students to interact with different user communities, to identify and learn about information needs, and to search strategies and techniques, ethical issues, and evaluation methods. Within this frame, cultural humility was presented as a key resource in the information-mediation process and services to facilitate information access. Cultural humility was discussed in the first week devoted to information services, just after fundamentals of information searching (e.g., search techniques) and information behaviour* (e.g., concepts such as relevance and uncertainty) had been introduced. This course was offered online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Its structure was mainly asynchronous, with students partaking in activities and discussions most weeks.

*Canadian spelling has been retained in this chapter.

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The following sections offer, on the one hand, a student's perspective on the significance of learning about cultural humility for her professional practice. On the other hand, we also present the instructor's reflection on teaching about cultural humility and challenging students to incorporate this theoretical approach in their future information service interactions. By sharing these experiences, we aim to spark curiosity for other instructors and students who might have an interest in exploring cultural humility in their teaching and learning processes.

Liliana's Student Experience

When I enrolled in the class Information Resource Discovery, I assumed that the course content would be mainly learning about information search techniques and information topics focused on locating and using information and library resources. After glancing at the course's syllabus, I also thought we were going to discuss how to provide service by professionally engaging with patrons and showing credibility. As the course progressed, we started to have discussions about deeper ethical aspects involved in the information service interaction with patrons and the concept of cultural humility. I felt profoundly touched by how meaningful this concept was, since I am part of a minority and I have experienced situations where my cultural and linguistic backgrounds have influenced how others relate with me in biased ways.

The following paragraphs highlight three key elements that I have learned from cultural humility for my future professional practice. First, while the concept of cultural humility originated in healthcare, it is a relevant concept to be applied in the information studies field, given the diverse populations that we serve and the power imbalances that are potentially present in any service-providing interaction. Cultural humility has taught me to expect and appreciate diversity in my profession. We need to use a culturally humble approach to patrons' unique identities (e.g., race, class, culture, language, sexual orientation, immigration status) if we want to establish clear communication, pay close attention to their information needs, and cultivate respectful partnerships with them. It is unproductive to assume that we understand others' cultural backgrounds or experiences based on our prior knowledge, experience, or training.

Second, since cultural humility entails self-awareness and openness, it helps us look closely at our thoughts and behaviours and recognize how they

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can be related to our (sub)conscious learned values and attitudes. When these latter clash in some way with those of our patrons, we may have the tendency to limit our thoughts and interactions, still based on our biases and assumptions. Having discussions related to information service interaction in class, we had the opportunity to reflect on how often we tend to judge others when we do not agree with them or do not understand them, and, by doing so, we close opportunities for effective communication and partnership. Cultural humility allows one to be "flexible and humble enough to let go of the false sense of security that stereotyping brings" (Tervalon and Murray-García 1998, 119). Rather, approach the user with a sense of listening and openness; for example asking questions when uncertain, expressing curiosity and interest about their cultural worldview to help us understand their information needs and develop a strong working alliance with patrons who may be socioculturally different from us and have different personal experiences from ours.

Lastly, I learned that cultural humility represents a constant process with continual self-observation and reflection to grapple with our attitudes and prejudice. As the authors propose, cultural humility "incorporates a lifelong commitment to self-evaluation and critique, to redressing the power imbalances in a relationship, and to developing mutually beneficial and non-paternalistic partnerships with communities on behalf of individuals and defined populations" (Tervalon and Murray-García 1998, 123). Continually reviewing our internal thoughts in any service interaction, we may be able to acknowledge and work on putting aside our judgments and biases towards our patrons. Therefore, we can positively concentrate on assisting our patrons' information needs. As a student, discussing cultural humility helped me articulate theory, content, and practice to develop an ethical practice in my future service-providing career.

Sarah's Instructor Experience

Preparing to teach in fall 2020, the notions of good service that I learned as a student—"approachability" being a prominent example—seemed pointedly inadequate for 2020. I knew that there must be a fresher, more sophisticated way of thinking about the interpersonal interactions that form the basis of information services. Further, avoiding ubiquitous structural concerns such as power and privilege seemed impossible, or at least, unpalatable.

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Knowing that librarianship is still predominantly made up of white women, I wanted to introduce students to a heuristic that would give them a way to discuss the inherent partiality of expertise and the fact that people have very different life experiences and positionalities, and further, that acknowledging these facts makes our services better, in the sense that it becomes more sensitive, responsive, and responsible to our communities. No matter how virtuous and appealing we perceive librarianship to be as a profession, we must become comfortable with the fact that our expertise is inherently partial, and commit to developing and maintaining an interpersonal stance that is other-focused. This is important if we are to unlearn and interrupt ways of making assumptions and interpreting other people's words and actions in unhelpful and potentially harmful ways.

I assigned Hurley, Kostelecky, and Townsend's paper on cultural humility (2019) as a required reading in the same week that I assigned the RUSA *Guidelines*. This was our first week discussing information services, week five of a twelve-week course. I introduced the RUSA *Guidelines* as exemplifying current, mainstream thinking about what makes a person good at providing information services. I introduced cultural humility alongside the *Guidelines*. I framed a cultural humility mindset as preferable to the behavioural mindset apparent in the *Guidelines*, and as preferable to the idea of "cultural competence" that has been more prominent in libraries. As always, I asked students to think about the conceptual underpinnings of our readings—the assumptions, values, and worldviews reflected in them. The third element this week was a guest lecture from Kirk MacLeod, a colleague who spoke about his journey to librarianship and his experiences providing information services. Students completed these two readings and attended MacLeod's lecture. Next, following our usual process, I asked students to complete a creative activity, crafting a three-slide deck, on the question "What, in your view, is the most important lesson to take away from this week's readings and lecture, and why?" Students shared their slide decks online, perused one another's work, and discussed their observations and insights for the rest of the week.

Although I make a point of not "helicoptering" over asynchronous online class discussion, it did become immediately clear to me that this week's discussion was richer for the inclusion of cultural humility than it would have been without this concept. Some students—in particular, racialized students—spoke generously about their experiences of having been disempowered in the

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past, and they often voiced distinctive perspectives on cultural humility. The concept of cultural humility sensitized many students to the varying circulation of power within service interactions. Students noted that applying a cultural humility approach to information services may involve situations where they, as the librarian, are the more powerful person in the conversation, such as if they are working as a public librarian supporting members of the public in a downtown branch. However, students observed, they might also find themselves providing service in circumstances where they held less power than their patrons—working as a librarian in a law firm was mentioned as a context in which the distribution of power would tend to favour the patrons rather than the librarians. What role can cultural humility play in these different service contexts? Why and how should we enact cultural humility in contexts where we need to establish, rather than relinquish, our authority as experts? These thought-provoking questions fueled the week's discussion and enriched the rest of the course as well.

Benefits of a Cultural Humility Approach

Considering that new information professionals will interact with multicultural populations from diverse ethnicities, genders, religions, socioeconomic statuses, sexual orientations, and more, we foresee several distinctive benefits of implementing a cultural humility approach, including:

PROMOTES SELF-REFLECTION

Information service providers have opportunities to practice cultural humility in every interaction with the users. Learning about cultural humility prepares information professionals and students to engage in an active process of self-awareness and self-evaluation to recognize preconceived notions and ideas that we may hold. Rather than assuming we understand others' cultural backgrounds or experiences based on our prior knowledge, experience, or training, we should approach patrons with a full engagement to listening and openness. For instance, instead of jumping to conclusions of what we think we understand, we could ask questions when uncertain, express curiosity, and show interest in the client's cultural worldview to help us understand their information needs and develop a strong working alliance with them. Cultural humility encourages us to look inward to our own response when providing information service. We can then realize that cultural stereotyping will only

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hinder our goals in helping patrons find information and resources that meet their educational, professional, and recreational needs.

PROVIDES NEW WAYS TO THINK ABOUT SERVICE QUALITY AND IMPROVEMENT

Service is widely codified as a core value of librarianship. Library workers provide the "highest level of service [and] strive for excellence in the profession by maintaining and enhancing our own knowledge and skills" (ALA 2006). Practicing cultural humility allows emerging information professionals to think about good service as reflected in the presence of ethical relationships grounded in empathy, respect, and critical self-reflection. Cultural humility "involves the ability to maintain an interpersonal stance that is other-oriented (or open to the other) in relation to aspects of cultural identity that are most important to the [other]" (Hook et al. 2013, 354). By focusing on an attitude of openness and a willingness to listen, learn, collaborate, and negotiate with others, students can practice communicating and offering holistic services that are patron-centred. These values, in turn, can ground new perspectives in service assessment and improvement. Rather than solely counting interactions or documenting reference conversations in terms of information exchanged transactionally, a cultural humility approach encourages different metrics, such as adequate staffing (so staff are not rushed or endangered) and the quality of patron experiences across all groups and needs.

ENCOURAGES AWARENESS OF PARTIAL EXPERTISE

Acting with cultural humility allows information professionals to cultivate the awareness of having partial expertise when we interact with patrons. While the information service professional's mission is to help users in their information search, our perspective is not the only one we should consider, since the user is the expert in his own culture, values, and information needs. Recognizing partial expertise helps us put into perspective our mission: to be a resource for patrons not only in that moment, but also for their ongoing learning. It is essential to engage with the user with an interpersonal stance of humility and openness, rather than from a superior role as the expert. Lacking cultural humility can lead information professionals to make quick judgments on users' information needs, which, in turn, will affect our relationship with patrons. Asking questions to better understand and engage with the user, we

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can determine what is important to them; we can work on power imbalances and motivate them to feel they are equal participants in the interaction.

Conclusion

A discussion of cultural humility in a graduate information services course raises two more key issues: safety and expertise. It is important to note that, when introducing cultural humility to students, adopting a cultural humility approach to service does not mean that library staff should be so patron-focused as to neglect or compromise their fundamental workplace safety. For example, all library staff deserve to work free from patron-perpetrated sexual harassment, which is widespread but rarely documented (Oliphant et al. 2021). Similarly, a cultural humility view, with its focus on understanding others' perspectives, does not imply that library workers' professional expertise does not matter. In fact, awareness of cultural humility within class discussions enables more complex discussions about topics such as boundaries and authority. This is because any careful, honest discussion about cultural humility is in part a discussion about power and privilege.

In this chapter, we've argued for the enriching benefits of incorporating cultural humility into a required graduate course on information services. Cultural humility is a distinctly helpful approach because it provokes and centres our consideration of others, including ways of being and communicating during interactions where we may share little in common with our counterpart. Cultural humility is user-centredness in action, articulated in a way that does not reduce the complexities or challenges of this way of working. Even as cultural humility does focus on the work and relations of individual librarians, it remains very compatible with more structure-focused lenses, such as critical race theory, which some students did discuss and explore in this course. Even as students undertake important exploration and critique through approaches such as critical race theory, they still, simultaneously, need everyday ways to think about relating to others within their professional work. Cultural humility provides this. And it does so by enabling reflection, introspection, and other-focused insights, rather than by dispensing ambiguous behavioural prescriptions like "approachability." In other words, cultural humility represents, and enables, progress. It belongs in LIS curricula, now and in the future.

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Summary

- Cultural humility is an approach that should be introduced to LIS students learning about interpersonal interactions (stance) in the information services context.
- Cultural humility enables discussion among students about their varying subject positions and the diverse challenges they face in becoming a provider of information services.
- Cultural humility provides a bridge from inwardly, individually focused introspection toward sensitivity to larger structures as required and encouraged by other important approaches, such as critical race theory.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How does the process of embodying a cultural humility approach differ depending on one's identity, past experiences, and present context?

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2. How does the adoption of a cultural humility approach vary depending on how much power different people have within any given interaction?

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Resource

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For another reading on cultural humility that would work well as a basis for discussion with LIS students, we recommend this paper by Twanna Hodge.

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