

Equity and Excellence

I would like to begin by saying that Bob Usherwood has always been one of my very few library gurus and heroes. He has been an inspiration to me throughout my career, both as editor of a very radical Assistant Librarian, and as a consistent champion of public library values. Bob was still teaching race and class when these concepts were deemed to be long past their sell by date. I like to think that professionally we have a very similar genetic make-up – a 99.9% DNA match - and many of our differences are of nuance rather than substance, of emphasis rather than outcomes, of journey rather than destination. When I became a Fellow of the Library Association I had the additional honour of this being conferred on me by Bob who was President of the LA at that time. I regard Bob as not just a fellow traveller (if you will excuse the pun) but a comrade.

Another comrade is John Vincent who manages the Social Exclusion Network. John, like Bob, was at one time the Lambeth chief librarian – there must be something in the water in south London which produces progressive librarians. As a result of my review in CILIP Update of Bob's important and well argued book, *Equity and Excellence in the Public Library* (1), I was approached by Ashgate Publishing to write a book with John Vincent about libraries and social justice. My presentation tonight is a good opportunity to rehearse some of the arguments which we will be presenting in our book.

Boom and Bust

One of the themes which we will be exploring is that of Boom and Bust, which is very topical in the current economic climate. We want to understand why there have been waves of progressive librarianship which have not been sustainable. For example, the Boom of community librarianship in the 1970's was followed by the Bust of Thatcherite library policies in the 1980s. Since 1997 we have seen a Boom of activity around libraries and social exclusion, but this looks likely to be followed by the Bust of a Cameronite government. Like Gordon Brown and Alistair Darling, we want to understand how this cycle of Boom and Bust works and attempt to break it, if possible.

One thing is for sure, adherence to high professional standards (which is my definition of Excellence in this debate) did not prevent this cycle of Boom and Bust, and may even have contributed to it. Equity on the other hand (which I define as social justice), offers a better chance of breaking the cycle, or at least of future proofing the service when the going gets tough. Excellence, in the form of outdated professional practices, attitudes and behaviour has contributed to the steady decline in the use of public libraries, and a new approach based on Equity is needed to halt and reverse this decline. Being Excellent for a dwindling number of traditional library users will not safeguard our future. Instead we need to develop new audiences, widen access and participation, and become more relevant and, dare I say it, more popular, by which I mean more relevant to the lives of local communities. Populism does not have to be the enemy of Excellence; but Excellence can be the enemy of Equity. High professional standards can be received and perceived as cultural elitism.

The problem with the Boom and Bust of progressive librarianship is that the Booms are never very high or long lasting; while the Busts are very low, and go on for years,

with 1979-97 being the most recent and painful example. One reason for this is that lip service is paid to Equity when it is expedient to do so, and then it is dropped when it is no longer necessary. Equity is not embedded in our professional culture and sometimes Excellence and professional standards are used as an excuse or smoke screen for not pursuing social justice objectives and outcomes. One of the main reasons why Equity is not mainstreamed in our profession is that we do not employ the right man (or woman) for the job, which leads me into my second theme.

The right 'man' for the job

The right 'man' for the job? The role of empathy in community librarianship (2) was a research project carried out by Kerry Wilson and Briony Birdi at the University of Sheffield. Like many other very important pieces of research, this report was launched in a blaze of publicity, articles were written in the professional press, but it has now disappeared without trace. No doubt it is collecting dust on the shelves of many librarians who are themselves are not the right man for the job.

Every Chief Librarian in the country should read this report and implement its recommendations immediately. But it does not make for comfortable reading. It points out that library staff are strikingly homogenous in terms of gender, age, ethnicity and social class and yet the communities they serve are increasingly diverse. The older, female, white, middle class librarian is a reality and not a stereotype. To compound this there is a strain between the traditional skill set of the librarian and the more generic skills which are required to meet community needs. To quote the research, this mismatch in skills has 'raised some debate over the role and value of accredited library qualifications and professional status for library staff working in community based and social inclusion roles...a library qualification is not a prerequisite for effective community based library services.'

The research also found that 'those who wish to preserve professional status at all levels of public library service, and within all aspects of service provision, feel that within a social inclusion context, libraries are starting to provide too many 'non library' services, and that the service is going too far in destabilising traditional roles and concepts of the profession.' In other words they see Equity as an enemy of Excellence. Wilson and Birdi point out that 'such perceptions could be very damaging to the social inclusion offer from public libraries within modern society.'

Library staff do not show empathy to library users who do not reflect their background and values. The evidence suggests that there is strong resistance to cultural change in libraries, to certain traditionally excluded groups, and to the social inclusion agenda as a whole amongst public library staff. Older librarians in particular are more likely to be resistant to cultural change and objectionable towards the targeting of excluded groups and communities. This lack of motivation to develop Equitable services is also reflected in their lack of knowledge and interest in social inclusion and community librarianship.

Social exclusion has become a common expression and concept since it was first introduced from France by New Labour in 1997. The term is used widely in the media and there have been a raft of reports written about the subject, most notably *Open to All? Public Libraries and Social Exclusion (3)* which was published in 2000. Yet when Wilson and Birdi carried out their research in 2006, over 50% of library staff claimed to be only partly aware of national social exclusion policy and debate, and the

qualitative data suggests that awareness is considerably lower than this. Lack of appropriate training is partly to blame for this and another factor is the 'tick box' approach to equality and diversity which demonstrates lip service to these issues and engenders cynicism among staff. Social inclusion services are regarded as add-ons rather than part of the core library offer.

One of the recommendations proposed by Wilson and Birdi is that less emphasis should be placed on professional skills and more stress should be put on communication skills, listening skills, influencing relationships, reflective practice, improved confidence and assertiveness, negotiation skills and dealing with conflict. I would argue that this is an Equity skill set and that it should replace those skills traditionally associated with professional Excellence. But in the last resort staff can only be enabled to show higher levels of empathy towards members of all communities if they are willing – and have some natural capacity – to do so. As Wilson and Birdi conclude 'the future recruitment of the right man for the job will be intrinsic to the effectiveness of public libraries contribution to the social inclusion agenda, and should be an absolute priority for the future of community librarianship.' But having the right workforce in itself is not enough if Equity is to triumph over Excellence. We also need the right strategies, structures, systems and cultures and this takes me onto the third theme, Developing a Needs Based Library Service.

Developing a Needs Based Library Service

In 2003 I wrote a book called *Developing a Needs Based Library Service* (4) which was published by NIACE (National Institute of Adult Continuing Education) in their 'lifelines in adult learning' series. It is interesting to note that this book was commissioned by the adult learning sector rather than the public library sector. However, since I became Head of Libraries and Adult Education in Lincolnshire I have realised that the same debate about Equity and Excellence is raging within the professional world of Adult Education.

Put quite simply a Needs Based Library Service is based on that good Marxist principle of 'from each according to their ability, and to each according to their needs.' In practical terms this means developing a library service which has the strategies, structures, systems and culture which enable it to identify, prioritise and meet community needs. In order to identify these needs all sections of the local community have to be actively engaged in the planning, design, delivery and assessment of library services.

As Wilson and Birdi have demonstrated, issues of Equity tend to exist at the margins of professional practice and are rarely mainstreamed. The starting point for developing a Needs Based Library Service would be a vision and strategy which has Equity as its core value. This strategy should itself be developed by using an inclusive approach which engages all key stakeholders in the process. A typical community is made up of 20% active library users, 20% passive / lapsed users and 60% non users. Traditionally most effort is put into engaging active users, some effort is put into engaging passive or lapsed users and little or no effort is put into engaging non users, yet they are the majority of our communities.

Once an Equity based strategy has been developed the staffing and service structures need to be aligned with this strategy to ensure that they are fit for purpose and able to deliver the new strategic objectives. Staffing structures need to be made

flatter, less hierarchical and less professionalised. As Wilson and Birdi observed, professional skill sets need to be replaced with more people and community focused skills.

The service structure also needs to be aligned with the Equity based strategy and this means putting library services where people can access them easily and conveniently. The age of the standard alone library is over and we now need to collocate public libraries with other services and adopt the multi use and one stop shop approach. I am no fan of the private sector but we have much to learn from bookshops and other retail operations in terms of creating a quality library experience. In doing this we should not adopt the transactional / customer based approach of the High Street, but build on our greatest strength which is that public libraries are democratic and accountable.

Similarly, systems and procedures need to be aligned with the Equity based strategy and this will require the ditching of many professional practices which do not meet any community needs but which provide safe and secure comfort zones for librarians. Many of these procedures are barriers to access and in my view every public library service should scrap the following processes tomorrow: the requirement to show proof of address and identity before joining a library; fines and charges; overdue notices; fixed issue periods; limits to the amount of books which can be borrowed; and library counters and desks.

Finally, the organisational culture needs to be aligned with the Equity based strategy. Culture has been defined as 'the way we do things around here' and it is manifested in the attitude, behaviour and values of library staff. An Equity based strategy requires an inclusive culture and this takes us back to having the right man for the job. Culture change can be accelerated by service planning, performance management and workforce development. But ultimately, as Tom Peters once said, 'if you cannot change the people, then you have to change the people.' And that takes me onto my final theme of Co-Production.

Co-Production

My definition of Co-Production is 'handing over the keys of the public library to the local community.' It is sometimes said that public libraries should return to their historical roots of helping the 'deserving poor'. Setting aside for this evening the social change or social control debate which goes with this notion of the 'deserving poor', I would argue that we should go even further back in history to the time when local communities ran their own libraries. Some communities continued to do this right up until the Public Libraries Act was passed in 1964. In these communities all aspects of library provision, including staffing and stock selection, were managed by local people.

At some point public libraries were hijacked by the middle classes who came to dominate both the running and the use of public libraries. We need to give public libraries back to local communities by actively engaging them in the planning, design, delivery and assessment of library services. To date this has been mostly in the form of using volunteers, but this approach is much too limited. Volunteers tend to be middle class and part of the problem rather than the solution. Also, volunteers have no power, which remains in the hands of middle class professionals. For Equity

to assert itself over Excellence this power has to be shifted from librarians to the community.

This should not mean that cash strapped local authorities simply dump the libraries which they cannot afford to run on the local community. Instead the transfer of power should be in keeping with the principles of Co-production. Good examples of Co-production are patients' self help groups and time banks, where members swap free services that can range from baby-sitting to legal advice. The word was coined in the 1970s and the application to public libraries is obvious. A central concept is 'the core economy' – the vast fund of goodwill and bright ideas at grass roots level, which in reality is what keeps services, families and communities going.

Co-production is supported by a wide range of organisations including UNISON, the Cabinet Office, the New Economic Foundation (NEF) and Compass. As Lucie Stephens from the NEF explains 'Co-production is not more passive choice. Co – production is action taken. We need to re-focus on the relationships between individual people at the frontline, working as facilitators to release huge assets in the community – skills, talents, networks, social capital, reciprocity. One-way transactions create dependency' (5). In other words, we must stop treating library users as mere consumers of 'choices' provided from above by library professionals. Instead we must share power and resources with local communities.

UNISON point out the need 'for people to have meaningful control over their lives and the services they receive' (6) and Compass believe that it is the 'alliance between public servants and members of the public that will provide the strongest and most durable basis for effective, responsive and popular public services' (7). The NEF are clear that local communities must be encouraged to 'use the human skills and experience they have to help deliver public services, broadening and deepening those services so that they are no longer the preserve of professionals, but shared responsibility. This is a challenge to the way professionals are expected to work. By shifting professional practice in this way, the basic objective shifts as well. Delivering public services ceases to be merely about tackling symptoms and immediate needs. It depends on reaching out into surrounding neighbourhoods to build the social networks that can tackle the underlying causes and increase the capacity of the core economy' (8)

I would like to end with some dictionary definitions of Equity and Excellence because language is the basis of culture and if we change the professional language which we use then we can also start to change the professional culture. The dominant paradigm for a long time has been Excellence which one dictionary defines as 'cleverness' and 'superiority.' Equity, on the other hand, is defined as 'acting fairly or justly'. In my view it is time for cleverness and superiority to be replaced by fairness and justice. The age of Excellence should end and a new era of Equity should begin.

References

- (1) Bob Usherwood (2007) *Equity and Excellence in the Public Library*, Ashgate Publishing
- (2) Kerry Wilson and Brony Birdi (2008) *The right 'man' for the job? The role of empathy in community librarianship*, Arts & Humanities Research Council

- (3) Dave Muddiman et al (2000) *Open to All? Public Libraries and Social Exclusion*, LIC Research Report 84
- (4) John Pateman (2003) *Developing a Needs Based Library Service*, NIACE
- (5) Laura Swaffield (2008) *Users and staff together can revive public life*, Library and Information Update
- (6) *Shaping the future: Unison's vision for public services* (2008), UNISON
- (7) Zoe Gannon and Neal Lawson (2008) *Co-production: the modernisation of public services by staff and users*, Compass
- (8) *Co-production: a manifesto for growing the core economy* (2008), New Economics Foundation