

ACRL 2009 Poster Session

The Audacity of Hope: Community Organizing for Information Literacy

Victoria Beatty, vlbeatty@gmail.com

Diné College (2004-2008)

Background

In Fall 2004, I took the post of Instruction/Distance Services Librarian at Diné College, the Navajo tribal college. Serving the Navajo Nation, which is approximately the size of West Virginia and spans portions of Arizona, Utah, and New Mexico, Diné College has two campuses in New Mexico as well as a main campus and five teaching centers in Arizona. As a European American librarian, I arrived with almost no knowledge of Navajo culture. My challenge was to lead a fledgling instruction program across the entire system and spread it to five widely separated satellite campuses in Arizona.

Several years later, I ran across Saul Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals* and realized that the communication techniques I had painfully worked out through trial and error were actually tried and true community organizing methods. More recently, Barack Obama's presidential campaign proved that hard won lessons of grassroots organizing can be successfully applied in other contexts. Listening and learning, gaining credibility and trust, building and nurturing relationships, and crafting messages that reach to people's centers are universal keys to empowering people to take action on behalf of their community.

Barack Obama has pointed out that communities must be "created, fought for, tended like gardens," and that they have a tendency to expand or contract "with the dreams of men." Our students at Diné College have taught us the power of information literacy as a transformative pedagogy of hope.

Community Organizing 101

Look Out Your Window

Consider the library in its neighborhood. How does it contribute to the wider campus community (and beyond)? What else could it be doing? If information literacy is your brief, try thinking of the library as a whole and seeing how information literacy fits into the bigger picture.

Soon after I arrived at Diné College, I took part in a conference call that included the College Librarian, the director of the College's Tuba City center, and an irate Navajo language instructor from that center. The instructor launched into a long rant, entirely in Navajo, but the gist of it was clear even to me. She and her students had needs that were not being met by the library. Fortunately, my supervisor was able to tell her that my position had been created expressly to remedy this, and we both assured her that we were there to solve these kinds of problems.

Soon I began to understand the many ways in which the students, faculty, and staff at the College's centers felt neglected, underfunded, and isolated from the (comparatively) well-off campuses. The two professional librarians, who had their hands full managing three libraries in two different states, had nevertheless managed to build an online library presence and had created a courier system to deliver library materials to the centers. But they had been able to make only rare personal visits to the centers, which were hours away from the main campuses.

We all learned that there is no substitute for personal attention.

Talk to Someone – Anyone!

Forget about your information literacy agenda, and concentrate on beginning relationships. Be real; don't hide behind your professional mask. Listen and really hear everything people have to tell you, not just what they have to say about the library but also about their personal interests and concerns. Paolo Freire wrote that “faith in people is an a priori requirement for dialogue,” and Saul Alinsky pointed out that “relationships affect what people will hear.”

Build relationships with gatekeepers and information brokers, the go-to people that other people turn to for information. These are not always whom you might expect, based upon their position or role, and don't forget that many students serve as information brokers for their peers. Keep building relationships and you will discover who the true information gatekeepers are. They will widen your network and serve as a vital source of referrals.

In the Navajo Nation, people introduce themselves formally by mentioning their maternal and paternal clans. In this way, people find family ties even in distant areas of the reservation. Having no clans nearer than medieval Scots whose histories are long forgotten in my family, I began introducing myself with little more than my name and position, as I had been accustomed to doing on the urban campuses where I had previously worked. This didn't seem to satisfy the people I was meeting, who would often bluntly ask me where I was from and why I was there. Students in my early classes suggested on the class evaluation forms that I tell them a little more about myself. It became clear that I needed to have a good answer to the question, “Who are you and what are you doing here,” and an equally good answer to the question, “What is the library and what is it doing here?”

As I began to let down my guard and reveal more of myself, I was amazed at the generosity with which people opened up and shared their thoughts on an astounding array of subjects, which included, but were not limited to, the library and its pluses and minuses. Through these dialogues, I learned an immense amount about Diné culture as well as about the issues that concerned people, and all of this helped me to make me a better librarian and a better teacher.

People Have to Make Their Own Decisions

When ideas emerge through dialogue, people take ownership of the ideas and are much more likely to act upon them. When people take action on behalf of their own interests and concerns, they gain power. Paolo Freire wrote “critical perception cannot be imposed,” and asserted that leaders who impose their ideas on people are not organizers, but manipulators.

Through listening to the students, faculty, staff, and community members, learning from them, and using my new knowledge to connect them with the information they needed, I gained credibility in the community. Saul Alinsky wrote: “It does not matter what you know about anything if you cannot communicate to your people. In that event you are not even a failure. You're just not there.” Gradually the library was moving from being “just not there” to being a learning center with definite possibilities.

It was difficult to connect with many of the adjunct faculty at the centers, but I was meeting more and more students. Although I was frustrated with my lack of progress with faculty, I decided that students represented the grassroots. If I could reach them, perhaps their demand for information literacy instruction would reach the ears of their instructors. Students were quick to figure out that I was knowledgeable and helpful, and soon my visits to the centers were marathon trips that started early and ended late, as students clamored to consult with me in between class sessions. As word got around, more and more faculty began inviting me to their classes.

Empowerment Through Information Literacy

“The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy.”
bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*

Paolo Freire has described the “banking model” of pedagogy, in which knowledge is imposed on passive students, and Saul Alinsky has noted that “people only understand things in terms of their own experience.” Yet information literacy offers the promise of a pedagogy of transformation and hope. If students are empowered to “locate themselves on their own histories,” as Henry Giroux has suggested, then information literacy becomes an integral part of “the task of learning the knowledge of skills they will need to shape the world in which they live.”

By addressing issues of ideology, knowledge, and power, students learn both the value and the limitations of information literacy skills as they become aware of “zones of silence” and learn to view information from a critical stance.

As I continued listening and learning, I found ways to stir the interest of both students and faculty. Whether giving mini-reviews of books or articles I was excited about, or challenging them to question why articles on Navajo or American Indian subjects either were, or were not, included in different databases, I allowed my own enthusiasms to show. Creating exhibits and book displays on subjects such as representation, decolonization, and sovereignty resulted in brisk circulation and an interesting shift to more challenging paper topics.

Later I witnessed a number of my students enthusiastically demonstrating online databases to other students, and faculty members incorporating my book recommendations into their curriculum.

Going Viral

Word of mouth and networking carries the buzz further and creates stronger attractions. It's *sticky*.

In a community composed of dense networks of clan relationships, I quickly learned to respect the power of word-of-mouth communication. Eventually, I came to realize that this power is everywhere, not just in indigenous communities. I started by doing everything I could to ensure that any word-of-mouth concerning me would be positive. Then, in an effort to personalize the distant, unknown library for patrons at the far-flung centers, I began introducing myself as their “personal librarian.”

I had introduced myself this way only at the centers, and not at the main campus where I was based, but soon students that I had not met were lining up outside my office for research consultations, saying that they had heard that I was “the personal librarian.” I was also surprised to hear faculty members on the main campus introducing me as “the personal librarian.” So I yielded to the stickiness of this message and began introducing myself to everyone in this way, and our IL statistics went through the roof.

We also produced spill-resistant coffee mugs to promote the library's website with its array of electronic information available at all hours. The mugs featured a graffiti-style message: Go to the Library ONLINE 24/7, along with the website's URL and the library's toll-free telephone number. We distributed these especially liberally at the centers.

At the main library, we had started a monthly coffeehouse that brought the community into the library for a potluck supper and an evening of open mic poetry readings, music, standup comedy, and storytelling. Although this had no direct link to information literacy, it did significantly raise the profile of the library. And, as one of the emcees, I had a bully pulpit for creating additional viral messages that rippled out to the broader community.

I found that this gained me even more credibility as people began to view me as someone who was getting involved with the larger community in meaningful ways. The following year, we received a grant to produce coffeehouse events at the College's Arizona centers, and this presented an opportunity for us to partner with other institutions, including the Navajo Nation Museum and Library and local high schools and businesses. A glowing review of one of these events in the *Navajo Times* increased the library's visibility even more.

Community begins with a single conversation!

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