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Impact of Cultural Intelligence within Special Libraries: Focus Group Findings and Results

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Abstract: The research study focused on those who currently worked in a specialized setting such as business, government or information centers around the world. This article focuses on findings from part two of the research related to the focus group responses and overall results of the research project. Three focus groups were conducted within two months after the survey completion with 11 participants that opted-in to provide additional input on this topic. The following selected questions were asked of participants: 1) How did you feel about cultural intelligence?, 2) What do you like best about the cultural intelligence model?, 3) What problems or challenges do you see with the application of cultural intelligence in special libraries?, 4) What has gone well due to cultural intelligence within your organization?, and 5) What is one change you would suggest to ensure cultural intelligence is embedded within your library? Participants from around the world who were members of the Special Libraries Association expressed rich responses within the focus groups. Problems and challenges of the application in special libraries were discussed further. Participants expressed examples of what went particularly well within their libraries when applying cultural intelligence. Participants also offered suggestions for changes they would make to ensure cultural intelligence is embedded and included within their organizations. These results are important as they offer insight into how special librarians can incorporate CQ into their daily practices and relevant application to diversity initiatives, inclusive excellence and continuing opportunities for understanding the diverse interactions we have daily.

Keywords: cultural intelligence, cultural competency, special libraries, special librarians, information professionals, international special librarians, diversity

1. Introduction

As the information profession shifts, special librarians need to adjust their way of doing business to stay competitive. The market is global, and this impacts the service levels that information professionals provide. Special librarians must be culturally intelligent in order to work effectively to meet their user's needs. How are special librarians embracing cultural intelligence and embedding cultural intelligence within their practices? Cultural intelligence (CQ) is the capability to function effectively across various cultural contexts.



In summer 2019, the researcher explored the phenomena of cultural intelligence within special libraries and with special librarians from around the world through an online survey. Focus groups followed which further explored in-depth aspects of cultural intelligence with survey participants that opted in to participate in a follow up. The overarching purpose of this research was to learn more about the phenomena of cultural intelligence within special librarians around the world. Information professionals who currently work in specialized settings with specialized clientele were the focus of the study. The information profession is vastly global with special librarians working in a wide variety of environments with very specialized clients. In fact, the very nature of working with diverse clients and in multicultural situations calls for use of cultural intelligence.

2. Cultural Intelligence

Cultural intelligence is an individual's capability to function effectively in a new environment across various cultural settings (Ang & Van Dyne, 2008; Ang et al., 2007; Earley & Ang, 2003; Earley et al., 2006). It was first defined in 2003 drawing from Sternberg's model of multidimensional perspectives of intelligence. Earley and Ang (2003) initially wanted to find out why some people can flourish in multicultural situations and others cannot. A framework, the cultural intelligence model, was developed to do just this; measure an individuals' metacognition, cognition, motivation and action. The cultural intelligence model was used within the study to measure these four facets of cultural intelligence.

The dimensions of cultural intelligence model include motivational (drive), cognitive (knowledge), metacognitive (strategy), and behavioral (action) as shown in a cyclical model below in figure 1. Each of the dimensions are interconnected and we each have a score for each dimension and an overall cultural intelligence level. When utilizing this model, we always begin with the motivational dimension. This is the model as shared with the focus group participants.

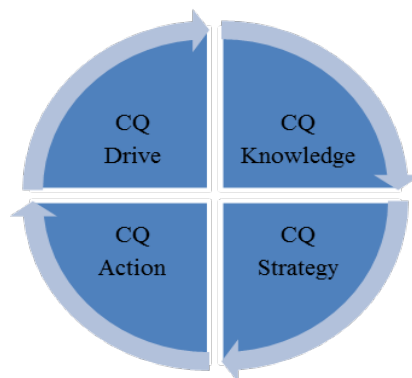


Figure 1: The four dimensions of cultural intelligence.

Cultural intelligence applies to various levels of diversity from the individual to team to organization (Earley & Ang, 2003). It helps ones to understand each other and what makes us both unique and similar. Our self-concept or self-awareness further help us to understand our position within an interaction and consider others' actions. If someone exhibits high cultural intelligence for example, that person is capable of working within various organizational cultures and understand the impact of others' interactions. This is extremely valuable within team environments and global interactions which may vary from what one is typically accustomed to in their own country.

There have been a lot of literature specific to the global world and the need for competent global leaders to engage and work within worldwide organizations (Harvey, Buckley, & Novicevic, 2000). Thomas and Inkson (2009) recognizes that the forces of globalization mean that there will be interactions between individuals who are culturally different. Therefore, this offers both an opportunity and a test. This is an opportunity to challenge ourselves to become more culturally competent in order to be able to have successful interactions. Yet, this presents many obstacles due to interpersonal skills, language barriers, differing systems, and communication differences to name a few. Many interactions often fail because we are unaware of our own biases of our own culture (p. 11). Thomson and Inkson (2009) suggest one approach to the problem is to become culturally intelligent (p. 16). This could be integrated into trainings in order to help combat or reduce some of the global issues we may face.

Earley & Ang (2003) found that there were several types of knowledge addressed within cultural trainings. The first type is cognitive knowledge which is knowledge about the culture and what it is. The second type is behavioral which relates to the actions in how one behaves. The third type is affective knowledge involving understanding why items occur within the culture. Culture shock is one aspect that is addressed in affective knowledge. They found that current cross-cultural programs lack in the motivation and metacognitive facets which is critical to involving foreign cultures (p. 293).

3. Methodology

The focus group qualitative data was collected in June 2019 from the Special Libraries Association membership. Of 148 initial survey respondents, there were 51 complete responses. Special librarians had the option to opt-in to a follow up focus group to further explore CQ. Thirty-three percent of survey respondents opted in to the focus group. Of these 35% are affiliated with international locations (outside the United States). Eleven completed the consent form to participate in the focus groups with six from Europe and five from the United States participating. Only current geographic location was captured in the data collection. Specific countries and states were not collected.

There were three focus group sessions total held on June 18 (in-person at the Special Libraries Association conference), and two on June 27 via Zoom online so the meetings were smaller to capture engaging feedback. The sessions were each recorded in order to transcribe the qualitative data. Each session began with the researcher as the facilitator opening the session by reminding participants of the consent details: purpose, description of the procedures, risks, benefits, confidentiality and participant rights. Five questions were asked of the focus group:

Question #	Focus Group Question
1	How did you feel about cultural intelligence?
2	What do you like best about the cultural intelligence model?
3	What problems or challenges do you see with the application of cultural intelligence in special libraries?
4	What has gone well due to cultural intelligence within your organization?
5	What is one change you would suggest to ensure cultural intelligence is embedded within your library?

4. Data Analysis

The researcher prepared the qualitative data in NVivo for examination of text. This included downloading the transcriptions into Notepad to clean up markings for a clean transcript of text comments only to upload to NVivo. The comments were rearranged so that the answers were together for each of the focus group protocol questions. Once uploaded within NVivo, the researcher identified main themes and subthemes found within each question. Some of the themes overlapped with multiple questions. The researcher examined the data for errors and merged it with the phase 1 qualitative data from the survey. The results reported here are exclusively about the phase 2 data from the focus groups. The discussion and conclusions are an overarching analysis based on triangulation of results due to merging of the data. The next section summarizes the themes recognized and offers an engaged consolidated narrative describing these themes with quotations from participants.

5. Findings & Discussion

Table 1 summarizes main themes and subthemes found from all focus groups.

Table 1. Themes and subthemes from comments

Overarching/Main Theme (subtheme)	Coding
Awareness	22

(cultural)	
(emotional)	
(self)	
Bias	10
(differences)	
Culture	69
(company)	
(curiosity)	
(ethnic)	
(generational)	
(multinational)	
(national)	
(government)	
Environment	30
(communication)	
(function)	
(work)	
Information	12
Intelligence	59
(emotional intelligence)	
(multiple intelligences)	
(social intelligence)	
(global intelligence)	
People	29
(communication)	
(hiring)	
(human resources)	
(native)	
(onboarding)	
(relationships)	
(wellness)	
Training	23
(hiring)	
(human resources)	
(onboarding)	
(professional development)	

5.1. *Feeling about cultural intelligence*

For question 1, *How do you feel about cultural intelligence?*, four themes were identified (*awareness, culture, curiosity, intelligence, and relationships*).

Participants were very curious about the term of cultural intelligence and the application within libraries. Drive resonated with participants because of the interest in learning about others. "Cultural intelligence impacts how we build relationships and the assumptions we make about others," comments one participant. Another respondent expressed, "culture influences behavior which comes from our self-awareness." Having now learned more about cultural intelligence has opened up the eyes of participants to learning more about the world around them, other people and learning more about themselves. "I feel cultural intelligence connects people" which is an opportunity for special librarians to connect with others --- learning from other international librarians.

Another respondent expressed "I have seen different cultures come together. Paying closer attention to cultural intelligence depends on the amount of interaction you have with other cultures." The knowledge gained may depend on the type of situation as well. Another respondent thought, "cultural intelligence is really a choice for me. I don't have the same level of experience as others and haven't lived in my birth nation. Cultural intelligence can help me with being more attentive with communities." Overall respondents felt that they needed to learn more about cultural intelligence and how we are using it. "I feel I have cultural awareness, but I'm not sure if I exhibit this through cultural intelligence," one respondent commented. While another agreed and wondered, "can we have multiple intelligences? Is cultural intelligence more important than emotional intelligence? I would think you need both with any type of interaction."

5.2. *Interest within cultural intelligence model*

For question 2, *What do you like best about the cultural intelligence model?*, five themes were identified (*awareness, culture, environment, intelligence, and people*).

One respondent stated, "I think cultural intelligence is a choice. The model helped me think about others and shared values we may have that we use in the workplace." Another commented similar sentiments with, "I have to understand myself first and how different I may be. I like to interact with other cultures, but I come from a very Anglo background." Majority of participants felt the model was easy to understand and that each knew where they needed to improve. "This model was extremely useful to me because it made explicit what I thought was implicit. We work with international organizations and clients all the time which makes a huge difference in understanding people, but I never thought of my own cultural intelligence having an impact in my interactions." Additionally, I can see where my growth is needed. Drive comes naturally to me, but I have to

consciously think about the terms I use or the strategy I may apply depending on who I have to interact with in the moment.”

Other participants felt the natural use of the model because it seemed like “common sense” or part of the “expertise” of being a special librarian working globally. “I don’t actually “think” of this on a day-to-day basis,...it seems like it comes due to my own natural interest. The environment I work in requires me to be culturally competent.” Another agreed in that, “I think this is a skill I have. I don’t know the intent behind the model, but it helps to start conversations with others....specifically, when we discuss intelligence and if we are being mindful in interactions.” Some did wonder about the definition and how it seems to be a catchy phrase now used in libraries.

5.3. Challenges

For question 3, *What problems or challenges do you see with the application of cultural intelligence in special libraries?*, five themes were identified (*bias, culture, differences, environment, and information*).

“The key is to be authentic and respectful of differences,” expressed one respondent. “It is about understanding the why, what, who of a particular situation which is difficult to do.” Keeping so many cultures straight is challenge, but with the model if one has knowledge or researched the cultures they may interact with regularly that may help. Two respondents felt that cultural intelligence could be used to hurt others. One explained, “for example, think of communication with our communities and how government plays a role in access and openness to information.” We have work to do in this area. Another thought, “there is always a problem with pigeon holing because there is always variance. My interactions with other cultures might not necessarily be a good judgment as I am still assimilating to the place I live and work,”

Another thought that bias could easily appear present if we don’t consider “emotions.” They state, “our emotions come from a different part of the brain and this leaves out instinct. There are feelings attached to experiences in my culturally diverse environment. I have to be more aware of this.” This corresponds with what another expressed in that, “I need to think about those that are not even there – meaning those that are just doing the job and get it done. I think I have evolved as a librarian because of how I’ve changed my behaviors to counter any biases.” This was an interesting point as before we even consider cultural intelligence, bias (particularly implicit biases) is usually examined as part of the awareness. Cultural intelligence is the “how to” or the action of addressing.

5.4. Positive examples

For question 4, *What has gone well due to cultural intelligence within your organization?*, five themes were identified (*communication, culture, information, intelligence, and people*).

Thinking back over the past year of the things that your organization and/or library did, participants were asked to share what has gone well due to cultural intelligence. The majority of the phrases were coded to themes of *culture* and *people*. One respondent discussed how her coworkers are very positive and curious in getting to know you if they do not understand where you come from. "There aren't any assumptions about interacting with others because we are open to communicating and getting to know each other," they stated. Another commented how information is shared. "We work very closely on policy decisions and ensure that all voices are listened to....We had a consultation in which over 600 responses were received. We learned that we needed to use more cultural awareness."

While another countered that their organization imposes its own culture over the national culture. "Our counterparts within the nation also have their own culture which impacts information resources, licensing and privacy....this has been a positive for us in that we are learning to understand cultural differences." It is important to take into consideration here the cultural value orientations of regional culture clusters. "There has been a long history which is interesting to understand," remarks one participant. "People are not as careful with student information in our country." If we were to compare the United States to anywhere else, the liability is licentious of the United States environment. There is a large difference in how cultures treat other places.

Other participants remarked how giving others a voice to share their viewpoint has worked for them. For example, states one respondent, "when someone comes into a foreign land with any attitude, giving the person permission to be themselves and voice their viewpoint is essential." "Communication is key,...our people trust the library when we communicate with them." Another has learned that, "being more up front of who you are helps with communications. It is the subtle aspects that make you unique." This organization has had more progress over the last year, where they are super aware and practicing cultural intelligence at work. Tensions have dissipated over time. One comment worth noting from a respondent is that, "librarians of color are not trusted with what is happening with diversity initiatives." The respondent wondered if this was cultural. This brings up other implications which should be examined but are outside the scope of this research.

5.5. Suggested Changes

For question 5, *What is one change you would suggest to ensure cultural intelligence is embedded within your library?*, four themes were identified (*culture, environment, people, and training*).

"Training and role modeling are necessary within my organization," comments on respondent. "If this was in front of everyone and overt, then we could try to

have sustaining behavior.” Several thought that in order for any change to take place, their environments would need to “adopt this as the way of doing business,” “ensure there is value behind it,” and that “it needs to be a collaborative and inclusive approach.” The environment needs to accept it. Respondents did question whether there would be an issue with motivation or what if someone didn’t improve? How much would our leaders do to encourage and step in? These respondents agreed that starting with smaller steps can help lead to smaller successes.

Five respondents were very interested in how cultural intelligence could be a part of the onboarding / hiring process. “I suggest our hiring managers learn about this, so they can raise awareness.” “I will refer this to our human resource for a training.” Another states, “ we could then talk more often and openly feeling more comfortable with one another.” One expressed how a massive merger has impact them, and that “cultures are clashing, maybe this could be the answer to some of our dysfunction-ness.” Another expressed that due to all the different time zones they work in, that “cultural intelligence may help with how we relate to our clients.” “The company culture, values and expectations overlay with individuals’ values, so it would be worth seeing how the diversity office or affinity groups could move forward with this.” This respondent would like to see it come from the diversity office. Additionally, “one cannot separate the way they feel, and so this could be a subset of the emotional intelligence model that we could integrate. The goal would be to have positive interactions relating to others.”

The environment was also seen to have a huge impact. From Brexit to Trump to families falling apart to academic research environments, there has to be some awareness of emotions and of culture. “We are all human,” concludes one respondent, “so why aren’t we considering this in our conversations with our leaders?”

6. Conclusions

In examining the key themes as identified above and shown in the visual word cloud for Figure 1, *culture*, is the theme most prominent within the research. Culture has many definitions and takes on many contexts depending on the situation. The participants within this study applied culture as a filter through which they interpreted their experiences. Our own culture typically makes us feel comfortable, however when placed in another culture or among another country, we may lose that security. Culture is the community which is felt as a special librarian and comes through in our interactions with others. Plum (2008) identifies two dimensions of culture: practice and forms of understanding. Both of these are exhibited within the participant answers.

Figure 1. Word cloud



This has implications because participants within this study felt it would take “practice” and “time” to learn about cultural intelligence in order to be able to apply it regularly. Cultural intelligence cannot be detached from emotions such as curiosity or fear. *Intelligence* was the second most noticeable theme among responses. In order to cultivate or even improve, we have to be motivated by our own intelligence and desire. We have to think intelligently about how we communicate with our global clients and coworkers. This has implications in the workplace as integrating within training programs or onboarding of librarians would help ensure hires are more prepared for working not only in global settings, but virtual environments and host countries. These results are important they share thoughts about how special librarians can incorporate cultural intelligence into their day-to-day work and help in understanding the diverse interactions we have daily in the global world.

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