Indigenous Knowledge in a Post-Apology Era: Steps Toward Healing and Bridge Building

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EDITOR’S SUMMARY

An important aspect of ASIS&T’s international outreach is service to indigenous populations, a need that has received greater recognition since Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s public apology in 2008 for past disruption of Native families. The emerging field of indigenous librarianship can contribute significantly to the process of reconciliation in Canada and other countries with similar colonial legacies. Indigenous librarianship requires reimagining the organization, classification and representation of library materials from a perspective free of culture- and language-based assumptions. Key themes in indigenous librarianship include removing barriers to access, providing culturally relevant materials and services and departing from widely used knowledge organization systems such as the Dewey Decimal System to create classifications that reflect the Native worldview and epistemology. Successful examples include Australia’s Pathways thesaurus project, the Māori Subject Headings from Aotearoa/New Zealand and the British Columbia First Nations Names Authority. Increased involvement by Indigenous people in information studies will enhance accurate representation of their cultures.

KEYWORDS

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S IG/III has been providing a forum for discussing international information issues for the past 30 years. As if to highlight further its global mission in an increasingly interconnected world, in 2013 ASIS&T formally changed its name to reflect its members’ “commitment to international cooperation and global efforts to increase the influence of information science education, research and applications” [1, p. 5]. The theme of connections is even central to the upcoming 2014 ASIS&T Annual Meeting (Connecting Collections, Cultures and Communities). We take advantage of these opportunities to reflect on the plethora of issues faced by information professionals and researchers, especially those whose work is concerned with community building, outreach, advocacy and social inclusion.

Specifically, we consider the role that the predominantly non-indigenous library community in Canada – and other countries with parallel histories – can play in realizing visions of equality and redress in a post-apology era.

On June 11, 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper delivered a public apology on behalf of the government of Canada for the Indian Residential School system, which led to the forcible removal of over 150,000 Native children from their families and communities. In other countries with parallel colonial histories and legacies, such as Australia and the United States, similar apologies have been made for assimilationist policies. For many across the country, Harper’s apology encouraged visions of a new reality of national reconciliation and equal partnership in a post-apology Canada. Canada’s Truth & Reconciliation Commission (TRC) called on Canadians to engage in reconciliation and healing work outside of the TRC, in workplaces, communities and neighborhoods [2]. The library community can make important contributions in this arena, drawing on the frameworks and approaches of the emerging field of indigenous librarianship.
Indigenous librarianship is a broad field of practice and scholarship that unites indigenous knowledge systems with the discipline of library and information science (LIS). Indigenous librarianship challenges the library community to take a fresh look at the ways materials by or about indigenous peoples are organized, classified and represented to library users. It acknowledges the critical role of indigenous cultural principles and the distinctiveness and value of indigenous knowledge systems. As a relatively recent field, scholars and professionals are currently in the midst of asking new questions of research and practice in order to further articulate critical and indigenous theoretical frameworks within LIS. They are developing scholarship and practice that speak to the need for new solutions to address the legacies of cultural and language disruption left by colonial policies and education systems.

Indigenous librarianship as a field of practice and scholarship emerged slowly in the 1960s and 1970s. In that period of decolonization and liberation movements indigenous peoples made great strides in affirming their rights. Indigenous individuals and their allies began advocating for and launching initiatives to address their concerns about the relative lack of appropriate library materials and services for indigenous people. Hence, the history of indigenous librarianship is inextricably tied to indigenous peoples’ social, cultural and political reassertion globally in the latter parts of the 20th century. In the United States, for example, library services to indigenous reservations were not available until the 1970s, when tribal libraries slowly began to emerge fostered by a convergence of indigenous-driven political and legal changes and the increased receptivity to self-determination efforts [3]. There is now more than ever international recognition of the value, vulnerability, distinctiveness and legitimacy of indigenous knowledge systems.

In Australia, key developments began after the 1972 Aboriginal Tent Embassy was established outside Parliament, signaling the revitalization of indigenous movements for sovereignty and self-determination [4]. By the 1990s, landmark initiatives were underway in that country. In 2002 the State Library of Queensland implemented a strategy that eventually led to the establishment in 2008 of 17 indigenous knowledge centers (IKCs). In Aotearoa/New Zealand [5], a permanent commission of enquiry known as the Waitangi Tribunal was established in 1975 to address ongoing infringements on Treaty of Waitangi provisions. Against this legal background, where access to documentary materials held in libraries and other institutions is crucial for settlement of Māori claims, a series of initiatives was launched. The Library and Information Association of New Zealand Aotearoa (LIANZA) initiated a landmark national research project, whose 1997 report played a key role in informing the development of programs and policies across the country. In 2003, the government passed a new National Library Act that acknowledged Māori library interests and views. Since then, further important work in this arena has taken place in the country.

In Canada, the emergence of indigenous librarianship is best contextualized within the history and ongoing legacy of the residential school system, which operated until the 1990s to forcibly assimilate indigenous peoples and dislocate indigenous families, communities, nations and cultures. The closing of the schools started in the 1960s, which, along with other landmark legal and political developments, led to new possibilities. Indigenous librarianship in Canada varies greatly from one province to another and between rural and urban areas. It tends to lag behind developments in Aotearoa/New Zealand and Australia. An important early initiative took place in 1966 when the education division of the federal Indian Affairs Branch developed a plan for indigenous bands to join in existing public library services. Since the 1980s, progress in the development of library services for indigenous people in Canada has accelerated steadily. Some important recent initiatives include the work of the Saskatchewan Ministry’s Advisory Committee on Library Service for Aboriginal people. This committee issued a 2001 report, Information Is for Everyone [6], which highlights universal access to library services for all indigenous people, including on-reserve and off-reserve services. In 2002, Library and Archives Canada (LAS) hired for the first time a coordinator of aboriginal resources and services, whose work is focused on developing, promoting and facilitating access to indigenous resources with indigenous partners. The LAS then held national consultations on library materials and services, and the subsequent report included important recommendations...
Yet to this day, in Canada and across North America, universal access to the public library is still not a reality for indigenous people. Even those who reside within library service catchment areas face a host of visible and invisible barriers presented through library practices, collections and services. Overall, whether in Canada or elsewhere, much work still has to be done to build on past successes in providing culturally appropriate and relevant library materials and services to indigenous people.

Several overarching themes that recur in indigenous librarianship pertain to establishing best practices in library development; removing barriers to access; providing culturally relevant materials and services; developing accurate knowledge organization and representation tools; protecting indigenous intellectual and cultural property rights; and developing local and national policies around literacy education, virtual or physical repatriation, or professional ethics and competencies. Information and communications technologies (ICTs) are also creating opportunities and challenges for indigenous services librarians. For example, the digitization of information for virtual repatriation allows indigenous peoples without sufficient infrastructure for physical repatriation to have access to their materials. Yet such digitization involves a range of issues, including conundrums regarding knowledge representation and issues of access. Below we briefly elaborate on knowledge organization as a means to illustrate what it means to bring an indigenous services librarian lens to such questions.

Within indigenous librarianship frameworks, the problem at a basic level is one of language and cultural bias, which makes it difficult to correctly incorporate most indigenous languages and epistemologies into the confines of any given schema. Librarians also often lack the required baseline of knowledge about indigenous topics, realities, histories, cultures and scholarship. Inaccuracies can also occur through lack of specificity, lack of relevance, lack of recognition of sovereign nations and the omission of the historical realities of colonization [8]. Scholar Nancy Carter provides an illustrative example in her discussion of the fact that U.S. librarians are often uninformed about the legal status and governmental powers of Native tribal governments, which she terms the third sovereign [9]. Methods for the classification of legal materials fail to reflect the sovereignty of tribal governments, with dire consequences for Native people looking to identify and access relevant library resources.

Omissions of the historical realities of colonialism are also an issue, since libraries and their knowledge organization systems play a crucial role in controlling interpretations of history. They do so through their selection of resources, their choice of language to provide access points (as with thesauri) and their approach to and use of subject headings. Through their practices in these arenas, critics contend, libraries have contributed to the “self-serving forgetfulness” that constructs a pervasive silence regarding the experiences of indigenous people in the history of any given area [10]. For this reason, incorporation of an indigenous perspective into the knowledge organization approaches of libraries is fundamental in fostering dialogue between Native and non-Native populations as part of national reconciliation and indigenous empowerment. On an international level, the development of indigenous knowledge organization approaches can be considered part of the ever increasing reassertion of indigenous self-determination globally and attendant efforts to realize the repatriation of indigenous cultural and intellectual property. Culturally relevant knowledge organization can also contribute to capacity building within local communities, and extend foundations for cross-cultural understandings between Native and non-Native populations [11].

In sum, when indigenous perspectives are not incorporated into knowledge organization tools, it creates barriers to access for indigenous peoples while also perpetuating inaccurate and culturally inappropriate representation for the general public. An illustrative example can be found in the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) approach to the organization of materials pertaining to Māori of Aotearoa/New Zealand. Materials about and by the Māori are scattered by the DDC approach: general information about the Māori is located under the General history of other areas – New Zealand (class number 993); information on the Māori language is under Miscellaneous languages (499.442); and Māori writings and literature are classed under Other literatures (899) [12]. This knowledge organization approach severs the possible relationships between historical works, linguistic works and Māori literature, distributing materials throughout the scheme and...
classing them under catchall facets lacking in specificity. Māori epistemology emphasizes that relationships are paramount, while the DDC is based on a very different framework that values the singular nature of an item [11]. By separating materials that would not naturally be separated within the Māori epistemological framework, the DDC exerts a very real measure of cultural authority. To some, it constitutes the continued cultural trespass of settler populations on indigenous peoples, who are struggling to realize the cultural autonomy so important to the ability of a group to present its own history and culture independently, without reference to outside forces. Indigenous librarianship challenges us to develop knowledge organization tools that affirm indigenous cultural autonomy, which entails welcoming and incorporating indigenous views and values into our knowledge organization and representation approaches. As researchers and librarians question the feasibility or desirability of a one-size-fits-all solution, in many countries national indigenous thesaurus projects have led to the development of more balanced, less Eurocentric representation tools and paradigms. Such tools also enhance the accessibility of materials to indigenous people, acknowledging and incorporating indigenous knowledge systems for management and access.

Successful examples of ambitious national indigenous thesaurus projects include the Pathways (Thesauri) online project of the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS); the Māori Subject Headings website from Aotearoa/New Zealand (both of which incorporated extensive consultation with the indigenous peoples of their respective countries). The B.C. First Nations Names Authority is another example of a localized thesaurus for describing indigenous library materials. It was developed by the University of British Columbia’s First Nations House of Learning and Xwi7xwa Library and speaks to the latter’s commitment to ensuring that its knowledge organization systems are congruent with indigenous worldviews as part of realizing its mandate to make the university’s vast resources more accessible to indigenous peoples [11]. These three local thesauri initiatives reflect the increasing consensus that cataloging practice for indigenous topics must recognize the names, relationships, places, histories, frameworks and concepts used by indigenous peoples [8]. They also reflect the view that a tool to meet the needs of any specific indigenous group or nation cannot be developed by inserting or incorporating elements of that group’s worldview into a system which approaches knowledge organization in fundamentally different ways. Rather, culturally based approaches along with culturally specific terminology are required.

So what does this all mean for information professionals and organizations? In Canada as elsewhere, there is clearly a lot of work still to be done in indigenous librarianship, which is an exciting challenge for LIS scholars and professionals.

While we are increasingly aware of the need to work with indigenous communities and materials in culturally appropriate ways, another key challenge is in making the information professions – and the field of information studies – attractive to individuals of indigenous backgrounds. Their recruitment into the field and their joining the information professions is critical indeed and well worth more development and attention.

**Resources Mentioned in the Article**


Minister’s Advisory Committee on Library Services for Aboriginal People (Saskatchewan). (October 2001). *Information is for everyone. Final report of the Minister’s Advisory Committee on Library Services for Aboriginal People.* Retrieved from www.lib.sk.ca/INFORMATION-IS-FOR-EVERYONE


