

THE HISTORY QUESTION: LIBRARY CUSTOMER SERVICE IN MULTICULTURAL AUSTRALIA

Inga Clendinnen is a well-known Melbourne author and academic. In 2006 she wrote an article for the Quarterly Essay called, 'The history question' which was well-received by the Australian academic community.

The theme of her essay was that Australians do have a culture to be proud of. This is relevant to library workers, which I will explain in a minute.

Clendinnen uses 'Waltzing Matilda' as a symbol of the Australian culture (Clendinnen, 2006: p.3). She points to the swagman (a homeless person) and his anti-authoritarian tongue-in-cheek attitude towards the authorities. He was hungry. He stole a sheep. The squatter, now a substantial landowner had originally sequestered that land for himself. He thundered down to the billabong with troopers by his side to stop the swagman stealing his sheep. He did the same things to blacks when they stole sheep shooting them on sight. But the squatter had helped himself to land just like the swagman (and the natives before him) had helped themselves to sheep. And surely greed for land didn't fall into the same category as the basic human need of hunger?

Thus as Clendinnen points out, there are strong anti-colonial, anti-authoritarian principles tied up with Australia's favorite anthem (Clendinnen, 2006: p.6-7). The moral principles are quite convoluted but they form the basis of the egalitarianism we are known for today. This is a culture we can be proud of. It's a culture that valued the underdog and challenged the hypocrisy of some sections of mainstream society. Is this still the case? Possibly not!

From this point Clendinnen moves on to Gallipoli, another icon of Australian history. Clendinnen claims that everyone can identify with young men, called to a foreign war in a foreign country (in the name of the Motherland), and losing their lives prematurely on foreign battlefields. Many countries around the globe have had similar experiences, for example most of Europe, and parts of Asia. Colonialism is not peculiar to the British and neither is fighting for the Motherland. Gallipoli is a part of our history we can share with migrants and expect them to hold the same reverence for the needlessly dead as we do (Clendinnen, 2006: p.10-15).

For many venerating Gallipoli is anti-war; it is grieving for the needlessly dead, not celebrating war (Clendinnen, 2006: p.14). Like 'Waltzing Matilda' it is deeply embedded in an older pre-multicultural Australian history and in our Australian psyche. It is worth being proud of and worth sharing.

This is despite the fact that there was another history happening alongside white colonial imperialism. That is the history of Indigenous Australians which goes back thousands of years (Clendinnen, 2006: p.3) Sadly, it is a history of invasion. But perhaps it is safe to value both histories, as they have co-existed side by side, remembering that it was part of the Australian culture to value the underdog and to reject the sham authoritarianism of the powerful ruling classes such as the squattaucocracy.

About the same time as Inga Clendinnen's Quarterly Essay was published in 2006, a letter appeared in the Age from someone from an Indian background. The theme of his letter suggested that all Australians had roots in convicts, murderers and thieves. Like the Cronulla rioters, Anglo Australians had descended from convicts were still "rabble", he suggested (Pawar, 26 Sept. 2006).

As a library technician working in Information Delivery at a major Melbourne University, I instantly honed in on this letter. It contained the seeds of social and racial resentment.

Was it, I wondered, penned by someone who had come to Australia as an International student and could he have studied at the very university where I was working?

I instantly penned a reply, pointing out the type of things Clendinnen points to – the convict system was a harsh cruel system – Dr Pawar would know this if he had studied Australian history as we had – Australians are generous (at times) due to our harsh early background (Roberts, 27 Sept. 2006).

But his letter had a deep impact on me. As a frontline worker in a university library I am one of the faces of Australia that international students first come into contact with. I reflected about how crucial it was that the face I presented to these students was non-judgmental and friendly. My customer service skills were vital to the early impressions International students and potential immigrants obtained of Australia. As library workers we are at the coalface and we have a responsibility to generate sound early impressions of our country.

Carolyn McSwiney published a study on this very subject in 1995. Having taught for many years in India as a librarian, she was deeply interested in the emergence of international students on the Australian tertiary scene. As part of the study she surveyed International students studying at Swinburne and it is really interesting to read how these students describe their difficulties with the new language and the different culture. Coming here was a real culture shock for them!

International students in Britain were experiencing similar problems as Hurley's study confirmed (Hurley et al, 2006: p.304). Communication problems, settlement into new educational and library systems and new cultural dynamics were the major challenges in Britain – similar in nature to McSwiney's findings.

McSwiney notes that it is common for International students to spend long hours in the library and that many of both their academic and social needs are met there.

(McSwiney, 1995: 166, 177) She sees bonding amongst International students to be

crucial to their successful survival in the Australian tertiary scene. They were able to help and support each other through their language difficulties in this strange new environment.

To further elaborate on this, the Hurley study (Hurley et al, 2006: p.304) found that many international students are used to passive learning styles where rote learning and learning from one single resource are the norm – being lectured to but not participating in any form of research. To overcome these obvious barriers the Hurley study (Hurley et al, 2006: p.304) found that fostering an open learning environment helps. This is something we library staff can particularly apply to our customer service styles by turning open communication into an art form at the front desk and by practicing non-discrimination.

Furthermore the Hurley study points out that whilst most international students are highly literate with computer technologies many lack the ability to articulate successfully their information needs (Hurley et al, 2006: p. 308). Once again we as library staff can step in. Using reflective listening skills we need to be sensitive to the pregnant pauses and gaps – when international students can't find the words to explain their needs.

Of university services (including library services) McSwiney states, “cross cultural contact can be either a threatening or an enhancing experience ...” (McSwiney, 1995: 173). Intercultural communication can be the greatest way of achieving a positive experience; it is interesting to that McSwiney sees the International student body as an ongoing reality and that we must deal with this reality in the most appropriate ways we can. As a library worker herself McSwiney is looking for ways to enhance the student experience to make International students feel welcome and comfortable in this country.

In yet another study by Song (2004: p. 23-34) in America, she cites some vital statistics about international student's library use. Comparing domestic student's library usage to international student's library usage Song found that 72 per cent of domestic students used the library for research and 24 per cent for study. In comparison 54 per cent of

international student's major use of the library was for study and group meetings. Obviously the library had become a social focus for the international students.

In addition to these vital statistics Song (2004: p. 23-34) found that International students used Google or Yahoo for most of their Internet research whereas domestic students used web-based databases. This poses a computer literacy and communications challenge for Reference staff. The need is obvious. Can we meet this challenge? I believe communication is one of the most important tools we have to do this, and good communication skills, sound customer service skills from front line workers will encourage International students to open up and communicate their needs more freely; to develop the confidence to approach staff for assistance when they need it.

There is another side to the International student population and before going on any further let's explore the other side. A report in the Australian of 5th January 2007 notes that whilst there is a job boom in Australia, two thirds of these new jobs require a university degree. It goes without saying that whilst we are providing excellent educational opportunities for International students in our tertiary sector, it seems that perhaps our own students are missing out. Front-page news in the Age of 16th January declared that there were 8000+ fewer HECS-based places in Victorian universities this year than in 1996. To exacerbate this problem, according to one source, the number of students applying for HECS-based places in teaching and nursing has almost doubled (Morton, 2007, 4). These newspaper reports seemed to be expressing anxiety that Victoria's young people were missing out on important tertiary education opportunities whilst hard-working International students were filling the breach.

The newspaper reports also suggested that the current generation of Australian school leavers are losing their competitiveness in the job market and they are losing out to clever harder-working university educated international students, who have obtained permanent residency visas and are succeeding in well-paid professional jobs that Victorians are less able to compete for. If this situation is correct it is a problem. Now

that we have acknowledged that there might be a problem with current education policy let us move on.

Like a lot of policy directions Tertiary Education policy is a double-edged sword. One side-issue is that we now have a chance to improve our international relations. It is an opportunity to be ambassadors for our country.

But as customer service workers in libraries, how do we make these newcomers feel welcome? How do we share who we are and where we're coming from in our brief encounters over the counter? How do I play the welcoming role in this brief encounter? With their limited English skills on arrival, my experience of what they need is encouragement and a friendly smile.

I was discussing this with a friend recently. Her husband was a post-war refugee from Europe and that is going back a long way. She said to me, "People aren't interested in reading Australian history from books". "No", she said. "New arrivals absorb Australian culture from their work mates in the workplaces. It's the attitude of your fellow workers that teaches you about Australian culture."

Hmmmh, I thought. The university and specifically the university library are equivalent to the workplace for a new generation of temporary and permanent arrivals, the international students.

As library workers in the frontline, we can impart images of our culture to International students as we process their loans. It is quite easy really. A smile and a willingness to please all contribute to a good library experience.

But what else can we do? For me, with my avid interest in books and all forms of academic learning, my first thought is to make conversation about their books and the subjects contained therein. It is amazing what kind of interactions and smiles can result from an interested comment on their reading material.

It is an amazing experience to find someone who you originally saw as rather reserved, open up expansively with a huge grin when you ask them about their subject. This happens to me with the science subjects. Science is not my forte and a lot of international students study in this area. Imagine my glee when a normally terse (if I was using my communication skills lecture notes from two years ago, I could reframe terse as shy) international student breaks out in a huge grin. This is called “going the extra mile.” It is imparting the personal and the human into the customer service equation.

It goes without saying that as customer service providers we approach each customer with equal generosity. Our aim should be to be non-discriminatory and non-judgmental, and to show the face of friendliness.

Underlying this approach is the assumption that we are all Australian now. We all live here and we are all proud of our country. Yet we all have separate and diverse histories and differing points of view. We should value these histories and it is equally important that as an older Australian, I take the trouble to let people know the real me – where I am coming from, what my history is and why I am proud of it. That is equivalent to opening my arms to new arrivals and making them feel welcome.

This is my little contribution (and each and every one of us probably does this every day) towards overcoming racism and disharmony. It enhances cross-cultural understanding and communication. It is also nice to see ourselves as part of the global family and not just an English-speaking post-colonialist outpost. As such being a customer service worker in a university library is not an insignificant role.

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