

Library neutrality as radical practice

By Anita Brooks Kirkland

Snapshot

Using examples from both the Canadian and Australian landscape Anita Brooks Kirkland explores the nature of library neutrality, librarians as activists and ethics and standards. Brooks Kirkland considers how our views and understandings impact on the services we provide and the challenging role we play in education.

I've always regarded the library as a radical place.

The ethical foundations of librarianship are based on advancing principles of democracy and human rights, by making information and learning accessible to all. It is one of the concepts that makes librarianship so appealing to me. It comes as no surprise, then, when school librarians respond to significant world, national, and social events with honest self-reflection and assertive action. This has never been as evident as now, as society deals with the ongoing realities of systemic racism, the dramatic uncovering of the colonial brutality of Canada's residential school system, hate-motivated violence, and the social disruption of the pandemic. If ever there was a time to be a library activist, that time is now.

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Professional discourse in 2021 focuses prominently on equity and inclusion, cultural competence and anti-racism, and supporting diversity in all aspects of school library practice. School library activists are taking a critical look at diversity in collection development. They are dramatically shifting understandings of the library as a safe space, and being active, anti-racist educators. We understand that there is so much to be done.

Canada and Australia are both constitutional democracies. Our respective constitutions protect human rights and draw on our shared history of constitutional monarchy. Our countries also share the devastating impact that colonialism has had on our Indigenous peoples, and the dichotomy of dedication to human rights on the one hand and embedded, systemic racism on the other. In these respective social, cultural, and political contexts, the ethics of librarianship also shared by our countries guide our practice. Our ethical foundation calls us to defend freedom of opinion, expression, and access to information for all human beings.

Both of our national library associations have adopted the International Federation of Library Associations' (IFLA) Code of Ethics, which says that the core mission of librarians and other information workers is to ensure access to information for everyone.

In order to promote inclusion and eradicate discrimination, librarians and other information workers ensure that the right of accessing information is not denied and that equitable services are provided for everyone whatever their age, citizenship, political belief, physical or mental ability, gender identity, heritage, education, income, immigration and asylum-seeking status, marital status, origin, race, religion or sexual orientation. (IFLA, 2012)

Clearly our professional ethics demand courageous leadership in tumultuous times.

Our national codes of ethics also incorporate IFLA's stance on neutrality.

Librarians and other information workers are strictly committed to neutrality and an unbiased stance regarding collection, access and service. Neutrality results in the most balanced collection and the most balanced access to information achievable.

But how can we be neutral, given our radical mission?

The neutrality debate

To many library professionals and scholars, the principle of neutrality in librarianship seems contrary to the larger ethic of promoting inclusion and eradicating discrimination to ensure access to information for everyone. They argue that actively promoting social justice, as the core ethics of librarianship demand, is not a neutral act. Being proactive about developing inclusive, diverse collections is not a neutral act. Actively promoting resources on potentially controversial

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topics is not a neutral act. Moving from the notion of the school library as a safe space for students who have no other place to seek refuge to a space that makes the full diversity of the student population feel welcome and engaged is not a neutral act. Being an anti-racist educator is not a neutral act. Neutrality cannot be achieved when varying perspectives and cultures continue to be underrepresented or have been historically misrepresented. 'To truly support intellectual freedom, libraries cannot remain neutral, they must actively work to support the voices of the underrepresented folks in their communities.'
(Elizabeth, 2020)

The case against neutrality continues with an examination of our own institutional history. The very system that we use to organize information, Dewey Decimal Classification, has a blatant western and Christian bias. Decolonizing libraries, actively diversifying collections, and breaking down patriarchal structures in our own institutions are not neutral acts, but are critical to the greater mission of promoting inclusion and eradicating discrimination.

The fear is also that the notion of neutrality may be used regressively by institutions in order to avoid controversy. 'Though the concept of neutrality works to provide fair and equitable

treatment to people of all social, economic, religious and philosophical variants, it also attempts to silence those who are working within the system from rocking the boat and creating radical change.' (Branum, 2008).

Neutrality as a radical act

Of course, I cannot disagree with these arguments. If neutrality in librarianship really means not being intellectual freedom activists, then it has no place. But I contend that the notion of neutrality does have its place in library ethics. Understanding where that place resides is key.

The Canadian Federation of Library Association's Code of Ethics (2018) clearly associates the notion of neutrality with personal integrity. An unbiased stance is required regarding collections, access and services. 'Librarians and other information workers distinguish between their personal convictions and professional duties. They do not advance private interests or personal beliefs at the expense of neutrality.'

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The code does not clearly define neutrality, and that is where I think some work must be done. However, it does associate neutrality as essential to specific practices, defending the core values of equity of access and intellectual freedom.

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Libraries and school districts should have published criteria for the selection of resources, and those criteria should be guided by the rights and freedoms guaranteed in our national constitutions and human rights codes. Neutrality means selecting according to these criteria, unbiased by personal beliefs. Likewise information should be organized to ensure rather than impede access. Whether or not you think students should be reading certain books, if they were selected according to the library's selection criteria, it is unethical to restrict access. Libraries and school districts should also have established procedures to defend against censorship and challenges. Taking a neutral stance when helping kids pick reading materials – avoiding any value statements about the quality of the book or ability of the reader – is an act of radical neutrality, defending the core value of freedom of choice. Neutrality is also essential when teaching skills of inquiry and research. Our goal is that students are able to develop an informed opinion, based on deep critical questioning, thorough research, and critical assessment of information sources. We are teaching thinking skills, not telling our students what to think. As I used to tell my own students, you can have any opinion you want, as long as you can back it up.

So why the urgency?

Neutrality is a hot topic in librarianship. Some public libraries in particular have found themselves under intense pressure about room bookings in particular. In 2019 the Toronto Public Library refused to reverse its decision to allow a third-party room booking for a speaker who was widely criticized for her transphobic rhetoric. Many citizens and library workers found her stance to be offensive, and contrary to the human rights stance defended by the library. The library responded that they were bound to maintain neutrality, even when the presenter's ideas were widely considered to be offensive. The city librarian maintained that since the speaker had never been found guilty of violating Canada's hate speech laws, there were no grounds to prevent her from speaking (Beattie, 2019). The issue is clearly not closed, however, and a larger conversation about library ethics, particularly neutrality, continues.

The related threat is when calls for neutrality are used not to defend free speech but to repress it. A great debate is currently raging in the United States about critical race theory. Critical race theory (CRT) is a theoretical framework for investigating how discrimination and inequity are embedded in law, shaping outcomes in society, the economy, culture, and politics. Formerly discussed only in the rarified air of post-graduate and legal study, it has emerged as a framework for making sense of issues arising from the Black Lives Matter movement (Zurcher, 2021). In the turbulent political reality of the United States, the concept has become politicized, inflamed with allegations from the right that CRT is just a way to label white people as oppressors and racial minorities as the oppressed. The chill is spreading, with many jurisdictions banning any teaching about racism in schools (Ray & Gibbons 2021). Being an anti-racist educator or librarian in many states is now basically against the law.

Should we in Canada and Australia be worried? Arguably our societies are less divided than that of the United States, and there is a more unified public will to address systemic racism. Having said that, there are several concrete examples that should give us pause. The province of Alberta released a new, draft elementary curriculum last spring. The curriculum has been heavily criticized, particularly for its Eurocentric lens in social studies and history, and its antiquated approach to dealing with race, colonialism, and Indigenous history. Several major school districts in the province are so concerned that they have refused to pilot the new curriculum in the new school year (Fieber, 2021). Despite the courageous stance of these school districts, this still presents a huge threat and a potential chill to addressing racism and social injustice in all aspects of librarianship and education in the province.

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A similar curriculum renewal from the Australian Curriculum, Assessment, and Reporting Authority has done a much better job of integrating Indigenous perspectives into the proposed revised curriculum. Nevertheless there has been a conservative political outcry about the use of the word *invasion* to describe European colonialism (Hradsky, 2021). It will take dedication and fortitude on the part of educators and librarians to resist potential attempts to neutralize their practices in a misguided attempt to avoid controversy.

Standards and ethics

Neutrality as a radical act is part of school librarianship, and the ethical foundations of librarianship are important to school library practice. Interestingly, the words neutral or neutrality do not appear in Canadian School Libraries' *Leading Learning: Standards of Practice for School Library Learning Commons in Canada*, nor in the Australian Library and Information Association / Australian School Library Association's *Standards of professional excellence for teacher librarians*. In the chapter dealing with human resources for a school library, IFLA's *School Library Guidelines* do address ethical standards.

3.8 Ethical standards

Everyone who works in the school library, including volunteers, have the responsibility to observe high ethical standards in their dealings with each other and with all members of the school community. They must endeavour to put the rights of the library users before their own comfort and convenience and avoid being biased by their personal attitudes and beliefs in providing library service. All children, youth, and adults should be dealt with on an equal basis regardless of their abilities and background: Their rights to privacy and their right to know must be maintained.

Everyone who works in the school library, including volunteers, should endeavour to embody the core values of librarianship: stewardship, service, intellectual freedom, rationalism, literacy and learning, equity of access to recorded knowledge and information, privacy, and democracy. The core values of equity of access to recorded knowledge and information and intellectual freedom are embodied in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in the values of IFLA.

IFLA School Library Guidelines (2nd revised edition, 2015)

Awareness of library ethical standards is spotty at best amongst Canadian teacher-librarians, for a variety of reasons, most importantly because there is no requirement to have a library degree to be a teacher-librarian. It is, rather, an additional teaching qualification. The emphasis in professional training tends to be on the ethics of the teaching profession rather than on the ethics of librarianship. Clearly these frameworks intersect quite heavily. Perhaps it is time to consider how to integrate deeper knowledge of library ethics into school library practice, particularly in light of current events and the impact on broader library practice.

Be a Library Activist

The ethical foundations of librarianship are extremely important to school librarians, especially in current social and political contexts. Librarianship is indeed a radical profession, and no more so than within the context of public education. In the library, we have the capacity to effect radical,

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positive change for equity, diversity, representation, and access to information and learning. Discussions around library ethics and the role of neutrality are important to our practice, particularly in the face of compelling need and the unfortunate realities of potential constraints. A solid foundation in both library and education ethics validates our practice, and elevates the critical importance of the school library program. Be a library activist. Our future depends on your active voice.

To be a librarian is not to be neutral, or passive, or waiting for a question. It is to be a radical positive change agent within your community.

~ R. David Lankes

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*As a writer, presenter and consultant, **Anita Brooks Kirkland** specializes in the areas of information and digital literacy and the role of the school library learning commons. She draws on her extensive experience as a teacher educator, both as an instructor in teacher-librarianship for the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto, and in her previous role as the Consultant for K-12 Libraries at the Waterloo Region District School Board. Anita was a contributing writer to Together for Learning, Ontario's guideline document for the school library learning commons. Anita is very active in professional organizations, currently serving as chair of Canadian School Libraries. She was the 2014 president of the Ontario Library Association and has also served as president of the Ontario School Library Association (2005) and co-chaired The Association of Library Consultants and Coordinators of Ontario (2011-13). Anita shares an extensive collection of program resources, articles, and presentations on her website and blog, www.bythebrooks.ca*