

STEPPING BACK 1000 YEARS

Recently Fiona Blackburn deliberately accepted the challenge of professional isolation to develop core skills. She transferred from Libraries ACT, the library service for the free citizens of Canberra, to the ACT prison library for six months.

The ACT prison library is a one-person operation; I am surrounded by colleagues – teachers, program staff, corrections officers – and detainees, but essentially I perform the task on my own.

I wasn't looking to become proficient in social media or learn about emerging styles of librarianship – I have my substantive position and further study for that. I was motivated partly because the incumbent is so enthusiastic about the job, partly to work in a different environment and mainly to consolidate conventional skills, including cataloguing, collection management and service provision.

'You'll be stepping back 1000 years,' Sue Lavery warned before she went on leave, referring to the information technology environment which means access to information is via the oldest communication technology, the book, and loans and statistical data are recorded on paper. This transfer might seem an odd development opportunity. Actually, the opportunities are more numerous and more diverse in this scenario than in my substantive position in a bigger organisation.

Demand is the big challenge. The prison is accommodating double its planned capacity and the pace was initially so dizzying that I often laughed helplessly, hoping desperately that the paper and books accreting on my desk and other office surfaces would ebb over time.

Library user requirements are complex – some detainees are big readers, some are reading recreationally for the first time, some are looking to improve their literacy, others are autodidacts. Some want material that supports their formal learning – and concentrated – they all have nowhere else to go. So my readers' advisory has improved dramatically, as has the vigour of my collection management, acquiring, cataloguing, weeding and removing items to 'the stacks' (those various surfaces in my office).

If I could just wrench more time from the day, there are unanticipated possibilities: policy development, technology upgrades, service expansion and development, increasing staffing. Managing an assistant detainee has sharpened my

supervision skills. I won't be able to grasp all or even many possibilities but I can get them started.

While consolidating core skills was my primary aim, any environment has its own culture/s to be identified and negotiated and the numerous cultures in a prison mean I continue to acquire cultural competence. I am a peripheral part of one prison culture, remain outside another, straddle others and interact with most. Professional isolation actually serves to maintain, if not build, the library culture Sue has established.

Cross-ethnic situations requiring cultural competence also occur in prison. I recommended *The Land Where the Blues Began* to a West Indian man and I remarked the following day that a white woman recommending to a man of colour a book written by a white man about the oppression of African-Americans felt a bit odd. His reply: 'If I was a black American, I would probably be offended. Seeing as I'm not, I'll take it as an opportunity to learn,' was a graceful response to our difference.

To the best of my ability, detainees are reading and hopefully establishing a habit that will give them an alternative activity when they leave. I am benefitting far more than they. I will leave the prison far behind and I will progress (hopefully) from the experience. All the reasons why people are imprisoned notwithstanding, it behoves us to remember our teachers.

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