

Serving BC's Multicultural Communities

Overview of the Diversity Committee's attempt to improve multilingual services in BC

The Beginning

In Dec. 2000 a report called *Survey of Multilingual Library Services in BC*, was produced as a professional experience project by Nicole Aerts as part of her course work at SLAIS and supervised by Barbara Greeniaus. This report said that the needs of the multilingual community were not being met in public libraries, and recommended the development of a Multilingual Library Services Program.

This report was presented and discussed at BCLA spring conference, where a sub-committee of the Diversity Committee was convened to look at the whole question of the provision of multilingual services in libraries throughout the province.

Sylvia Crooks agreed to chair this committee and she contacted librarians from the Interlink libraries, who were interested in multilingual services. This committee had its first meeting in August 2001. After lengthy and spirited discussion, we agreed that we would concentrate on providing multilingual browsing collections to public libraries, as our starting point.

Pilot Project

Our first goal was to set up a pilot project to provide multilingual materials to InterLINK member libraries who wanted to participate. It was envisioned that the project would:

- Be optional and only involve those member libraries wishing to participate
- Be coordinated through the InterLINK office
- Be done in cooperation with the Public Library Services Branch
- Focus mainly on the acquisition and the provision of collections in blocks
- Concentrate on no more than 4 languages most in demand
- Involve sharing of collections among participants
- Avoid dealing directly with issues of bibliographic control
- Attempt to provide resources for future use (contact lists, etc.)

Sound familiar? We were thinking along the lines of the old National Library Biblioservice.

InterLINK directors were supportive, but we knew we would have to find the funding, as the BC government was busy making cuts to all programs. At the same time a report came out from the National Library brought out a new plan for multilingual services and hired a Multilingual Services Librarian, Mijin Kim. She expressed enthusiasm for our ideas and offered her support.

So with great enthusiasm, we began.

Survey

Our initial survey went out in Oct. 2001 to the librarian responsible for multilingual collections in every InterLINK library. Assuming that our plan to build a circulating multilingual collection would work, we asked the libraries which were their 4 top language needs and how many blocks of 60 books they anticipated that they would require. We received responses from 16 library systems. Based on these surveys we found that the 4 most requested languages were Farsi, Chinese, Japanese and Spanish, and a total of 100 blocks were requested. So we could see there was a desire, at least on the part of the librarians for this project to happen.

Having settled on the 4 languages, we sent out a second survey to the libraries in December 2001, with more specific information about how the program would work and asked how much money each library was prepared to put in. The results of this questionnaire were very interesting. All the small libraries such as Sechelt, Bowen, Whistler, etc., decided to opt out either for lack of space or lack of funds. Surrey and Vancouver opted out because they were already buying in the chosen languages. Two libraries did not respond.

Budget

At the same time as we were sending out surveys, we also created a budget of \$40,000 to cover the cost of books and processing and began seeking for funding. Heritage Canada gave us a verbal promise that they would give us money to hire someone, and the Koerner Foundation supplied \$1000 for the collections. Funding requests were sent out to a wide variety of organizations over the next few months, but by Nov. 2002 it became obvious to us that we were not going to be able to fund the project as we had originally designed it.

Now What?

When it became evident that this project would not fly, we had three options:

1. Cancel the program altogether
2. Revise the funding formula
3. Try a different model of service.

Option 1 would be our last resort. There is still a need for some support for libraries in the area of multilingual collections.

Option 2 involved increasing the price of the blocks to the libraries, or decreasing the number of items in a block. Our preferred choice in this option was to price the blocks at \$600 and provide only 50 books. This was also contingent on getting \$3000 from BCLA, and receiving the Koerner grant.

Option 3 arose from a suggestion by Wendy that Richmond has always got more Chinese books than they need, because of generous donations. Was it possible that we could set up a different kind of system, whereby libraries send their good quality donations to a central clearing house (Interlink?) where they could be processed and sent out to libraries that would like them? If libraries were willing to pay less (e. \$200) per block for books that were not brand new, this might be a viable option.

A new letter went out to the libraries suggesting options 2 and 3 and asking for input. By and large the response to this was quite negative. People were not happy with the idea of sharing donated books, and none of the libraries wanted to put up the money involved. So with some disappointment we returned the Koerner grant.

Change of Focus

We had now arrived at the end of 2002, with still no useful program for multilingual collections. The time had come to change our focus. We met together in January of 2003 and talked about what other ways we could promote multilingual collections. We came up with the following initiatives.

1. *Encouraging use of the listserv:* An e-mail went out to all Interlink libraries reminding them of the existence of the listserv and encouraging them to make use of it. This has become the major tool for exchanging existing collections between libraries. And, at this time, the PLSB is still paying for the shipping of these blocks.
2. *List of people with language expertise:* Another e-mail was sent off asking for librarians around the province to volunteer to share their language expertise, either informally, or through formal arrangements between individual library systems. The list has been compiled and sent out to the libraries.
3. *Web Page:* Another idea was putting together a web page that is linked to the BCLA web page. We could mount the list of volunteers, as well as the VPL list of vendors and other information useful to librarians. This idea

ran into a road block since BCLA was redesigning its website, so it was put on hold for awhile.

4. *Book Lists*: The committee also contacted the multilingual librarian at the National Library about the possibility of them creating collection lists that the rest of us could use for building collections. This has not happened but the National Library has put together an excellent toolkit for building collections.

Shortly after this we discovered that PLSB was in the process of doing their strategic plan and was asking for input. So our committee went into action and drafted a submission on the need for improved multilingual services in the province.

Library and Archives Canada

During this time, members of the committee met several times with Mijin Kim who is the multilingual services librarian at the National Library. She has been very supportive and has listened to our ideas and pleas, with some good results. She has not been able to scare up any money for us, but she and her staff have put together an excellent website for multilingual services including a toolkit for librarians. This includes the vendors list from VPL, guidelines for developing collections and useful web resources. www.collectionscanada.ca

Restart

After this there was about a year in which we did not meet because people had other commitments and it didn't seem that we were getting anywhere. So we met again in May 2004 to revisit our list of initiatives and see what had been accomplished and where we were. The listserv was being used well; the list of people with language expertise was compiled. The web page was still on hold until we could arrange to get it up and running, but we put together a good list of things we wanted to include in it.

- A list of suppliers of multilingual materials
- A list of library staff with language expertise
- Bibliographies
- Links to BCLA web page and other useful sites
- InterLINK's multilingual holdings list
- Link to NLC toolkit

The title for our site would be BCLA Multilingual Services Committee.

We talked about hiring some one to actually do the work, as we felt there were still possibilities for funding in this area.

New Developments

Just recently there have been some encouraging new developments. Both InterLINK and PLSB have now completed their strategic plans, and multilingual services are a priority in both plans. InterLINK has stated that one of their top 4 priorities is access to multilingual collections. The provincial plan says it will provide “equity grants for new immigrant communities.” Library and Archives Canada is in the process of doing a study on multilingual services across the country. What the implications of any of this will be remains to be seen.

At the very least it has provided a new impetus to our committee to move forward. We have talked about the possibilities of providing cataloguing to all multilingual collections so that interlibrary loaning specific material becomes possible. This would help, but the libraries with the big collections are saying they are still barely covering the needs of their own users. We still need a way to help the smaller libraries meet the needs of small groups of users.

Another issue is the difficulty of providing materials in the less frequently requested languages, particularly when there may be not enough people to justify purchasing a collection in a requested language. We liked the possibility of perhaps providing pools of books in several centres of the province where different libraries could access them.

What are we doing now?

- We have written to the InterLINK Administrators Advisory Group suggesting that we would like to cooperate on any initiatives they are considering. We are waiting for a response from them.
- We are waiting until we can apply for the new money, but we want to be sure we are not duplicating efforts.
- Three members of the committee are going to be going to the BCLA office to train on their new website, so that we can get our page up and running.
- We have been surveying libraries again to discover what languages they were asked for but had no money to purchase in. The answers to this survey were revealing. The top language requested was French, which traditionally has not been considered one of the “multilingual” languages. I especially liked the list from the Okanagan, because it really shows up the difficulties. They are asking for Chinese, Dutch, German, Italian, Japanese, Polish, Punjabi, and Spanish. Hazelton is asking for books in the local First Nations languages.

What have we learned?

- That there is a huge need for multilingual collections but a lack of money and often a lack of will in individual libraries to support them.
- That everything we try to do takes a long time.

- That there is value in cooperation and being aware of what others are doing.
- That we can keep trying. If one thing doesn't work, something else will.

With the new money and the new strategic plans we are hopeful that a new project can be drafted and executed in such a way as to address many of the concerns of librarians and patrons.

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