What Africa's Lubuto Library Project Can Teach Us

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This year's Humphry/OCLC/Forest Press Award for International Librarianship was given to the president of Africa's Lubuto Library Project, Jane Meyers, at the American Library Association's 2012 annual conference in San Diego, for a lifetime of achievement. Presumably we confer awards because exemplary work inspires us to new heights. To what heights does Ms. Meyers' work, particularly with Lubuto, beckon us?

Meyers and the Lubuto Library Project deserve recognition because together they imagine a world nearly upside down from the one we commonly inhabit. The project's vision does not seek first to provide library service to impoverished African street youth. It seeks first to build community with and among them. Everything else comes second.

The Lubuto Library Project doesn't see or envision youth as skill-lacking, under-performing, creatures of our deficit discourses and measured pedagogies. The closest definition I can articulate for what it does envision, however, is youth-as-citizens. And these citizens exploit the library's resources to create, produce, and perform their own cultural meanings. This is what fully-entitled citizens do.

To begin with, the project builds a small staff around this citizen vision. Staff spend their meager budget hiring and valuing neighborhood staff for their close-up outreach knowledge and parlay "street walks" into personal connections. The international volunteer staff personally invite local youth to "come and visit me and read to me in the library." In turn, the kids ask staff to participate in their productions of dance, song, poetry, art, and computer programs. Citizens with power can be generous like that.

What are we in the West to learn from the people dedicated to serve in an institution like the Lubuto Library Project? We learn that they become energized to enroll in LIS masters programs. We learn that current masters LIS students want to serve as volunteers and innovative distance interns. We learn that multi-cultural, multi-talented, and global professionals want a place on staff to expand the project to many more locations. It's exciting and fulfilling to serve youth-as-citizens.

Admittedly, Lubuto and its two current Lusaka locations didn't begin with more conventional "service provision" model—one unfortunately taught still at too many of our library schools (i.e., youth-as-objects "in need of service"). The Lubuto staff began with a commitment to listening, observing, and responding to the actual daily lives of their audience. And they quickly arrived at the point where the users have become youth-as-subjects of their own experiences, meanings, and cultural forms. There are many "paths to literacy" as Lubuto says. Youth drive the service profile.

Such a service model can emerge only when the professional intervention is desperately dedicated to a vision of youth-as-citizens. It's a model where access to information is viewed and valued from the user's optic and not adult-centered agendas. And it emerges from an institutional vision in which libraries play an integral roles in building community.

This is a radical vision for library service. And we in the privileged West have much to learn from it. Under Jane's leadership Lubuto enacts a vision of an institution not simply "allowing" youth to participate in creating a service mission but in which their experiences and meanings define that vision.

One of the current staff members tells this story:

...there once was a little girl who went to the beach. She found thousands of starfish which had been washed up by the tide, and they were all dying. So she began to throw them back into the sea, one by one. Her parents came to find her and told her off: "Stop it! You can never help all of them, your work is pointless!" But the little girl replied "I am not counting the ones I can't help, I am counting the ones I can." I know that there will always be kids on the street, but I look at the people I work with, and I see how much of their lives they have dedicated to throwing the starfish back in the sea (however clichéd that may sound), and it gives me huge hope.

There is "huge hope" emanating from this Lubuto Library Project in poor, urban Africa. Indeed, and the hope should not be theirs alone.

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