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## Practicing Librarianship around the World

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### INTRODUCTION

While librarians from around the world gathered in Washington D.C. for the 2007 American Library Association Annual Conference, I embarked on my sixth journey to China. However, this trip was much different than my previous visits; this time my travels took me to the Guilin Children's Library to practice librarianship as a representative of the non-profit Apple Tree Library Foundation (<http://www.appletrreelibrary.org/>). My research there involved investigating the impacts and challenges of English language juvenile collections in China's public libraries. Methods used to collect my data included interviewing librarians and observing the use of the English language collection. The librarians and I also engaged in sharing best practice ideas for children's programming, and I concluded my visit by conducting a story-time program for a local elementary class. This article explores locating other collaborative work opportunities in foreign countries and offers advice for traveling overseas. By exploring ideas on sharing librarians' expertise with counterparts from around the world, this paper serves to motivate librarians to travel beyond our 50 states -- and to have a little fun along the way. As the ancient Theologian Saint Augustine once remarked, "The World is a book, and those who do not travel read only a page."

## LOCATING OPPORTUNITIES

A good place to begin searching for opportunities for international travel and projects is the American Library Association (ALA) International Relations Round Table (IRRT) website (<http://www.ala.org/ala/irrt/irrt.htm>). While membership is encouraged, one need not pay dues to visit and use the resources on this web page. Nested within the IRRT site and produced by the International Exchanges Committee is the International Job Exchange: Bibliography (<http://www.ala.org/ala/irrt/irrtcommittees/irrintlexc/internationaljob.htm#R>). The list is organized by continents and gives insight into how librarians are active in regions around the world. Another ALA web site to consider is the International Awards, Grants and Exchanges page (<http://www.ala.org/ala/iro/awardsactivities/awardsgrants.htm>) maintained by the International Relations Office. An alternative approach for opportunities abroad is to look for announcements posted on the various library-oriented listservs. A general listing is found on the Internet Library for Librarians web page (<http://www.itcompany.com/inforetriever/email.htm>). Also, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) website (<http://www.ifla.org/index.htm>) houses a plethora of information that can be used to locate international opportunities, including, but not limited to, discussion groups and mailing lists. The ALA International Relations Office also offers a useful listing of discussion groups and listservs (<http://www.ala.org/ala/iro/iroactivities/discussionlists.htm#R>). Lastly, do not discount word of mouth – I discovered the Apple Tree Library Foundation, for example, while standing in line for a book signing at the American Library Association conference in New Orleans.

## EXAMPLES OF OPPORTUNITIES

The following examples represent a sampling of the broad spectrum of opportunities available to librarians interested in pursuing international experiences. Four types of international engagement will be discussed: non-profit group, established library, invited guest, and paid position.

### Non-profit Group

One way to become involved internationally with a non-profit agency is to build a relationship at home first. For example, Andy Lagassé served as a volunteer during a fundraising reception for CODE, a Canadian non-profit agency for the education and literacy needs of people around the world (Johnson 99-100). This involvement eventually led him to a seat on the fundraising board; feeling the need to better understand CODE's mission, Lagassé traveled to Ségou in Mali, West Africa, in order to attend the grand opening of a new library sponsored by CODE and to see firsthand the results of the non-profit agencies work (Johnson 99). While Lagassé was responsible for his own travel costs, he was richly rewarded as he witnessed over 1,000 people chanting "Canada" during the opening ceremony in Ségou's newest library (Johnson 100).

### Established Library

Volunteering her services within an established library is just what Juliet Morefield was looking for when she decided on a topic in a library school independent study class. Unusual as it might seem, she chose to travel to Cambodia to assist in the managing and organizing of a library collection in an all-girls school (Krake 11). Morefield spent three weeks working alongside the staff and was able not only to fulfill her class requirements but also improve the quality of the school library.

### Invited Guest

Most librarians would be honored to be asked to work on a special project outside their library, but to be asked to travel to another part of the world for one's expertise is even better. Such was the case for Liz Pegoraro, who not only worked in an Argentina library, but also one in Cuba. Working in conjunction with the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology (NAIT) and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), Pegoraro and a team of librarians traveled to Buenos Aires where they transformed the paper-based library catalog of the Instituto Argentino del Petroleo y del Gas (IAPG) into an online version (Pegoraro 216). They also laid the groundwork for digitizing documents to be added to the new database and provided training to staff. Traveling to Cuba on another joint NAIT/CIDA project, Pegoraro again helped to create an online library catalog at the National Industrial Certification Centre (CNCI) of the Cuban Ministry of Basic Industry (MINBAS) in Cienfuegos, but this time the team created records directly from books as there was no pre-existing paper catalog available (Pegoraro 217). Often working with frequent power outages and a poor telecommunications system, the team persevered and accomplished the task of adding 3,000 minimal records into a catalog accessible both inside and outside the library (Pegoraro 217).

### Paid Position

Compensation through a salary or stipend is an important consideration when deciding to work with an international library. While volunteer positions normally do not include monetary awards or travel costs, they often do provide housing. However, the chances of finding an opportunity with money attached increases if an extended stay is feasible.

Ashley Bonnette found such an opportunity when she was hired as an assistant librarian for the Semester at Sea program managed by the Institute for Shipboard Education and the University of Pittsburgh (Bonnette 9). Exotic locations and sailing around the world are enticing qualities for any job, but Bonnette took her job seriously and provided circulation and reference services just as she would on dry land. Albeit, she was able to participate in port-of-call excursions, so the job was not without perks (Bonnette 11).

## TRAVELING OVERSEAS

Once a project is identified and a plan in place for working in a different part of the world, some thought should be given to the practical side of traveling. Etiquette and good manners are greatly appreciated no matter the destination. Below are listed eight general recommendations that have served me well during my past travels and will make a librarian's trip to an international library more pleasurable.

### DO

- Do apply for your passport early. Due to recent regulation changes, the wait time can be as long as 6-8 weeks before you receive your passport in the mail. Check the United States State Department web page on passports for updated information ([http://travel.state.gov/passport/passport\\_1738.html](http://travel.state.gov/passport/passport_1738.html)).
- Do investigate your destination. Do not wait until you board the plane to look into all aspects of your new surroundings. At the very least you should consider the following: 1) Know a little about the language(s) that are spoken and understood in the region where you will be working. Even if English is widely understood, it is still a good idea to bring along a language dictionary in case you find yourself

off the beaten path; 2) Find out the types and style of food familiar to where you will be living. If you are vegan, will you be able to sustain your lifestyle? Can you tolerate very spicy food – even for breakfast? How do you feel about eating insects? In many cultures food is the center of socializing. Be prepared to not insult your host by refusing to at least try new foods; 3) Know the weather conditions common in the region during the time of your visit. Is there a rainy or dry season where you are going? How hot or cold can you expect the weather to be during the day time as well as at night? and 4) Be aware of the level of modesty that will be expected of you during your visit. Are short pants worn by adults in the community? Take inventory of the clothing you will be packing to ensure you do not unintentionally embarrass or insult your host.

- Do be flexible. So, you miss your connecting plane in Cairo; re-book the next available flight then relax and have a coffee. Do not panic when you arrive to discover you are expected to give a one-day seminar when your original agreement was to speak for one hour; divide the day in half and do some hands-on activities in the afternoon – or take lots of breaks throughout the day!
- Do embrace local people and local customs. Get out of your hotel and walk the streets, assuming they are safe. The best way to learn about different cultures is to experience them firsthand.

#### DON'T

- Don't be rude. Jet lag can trigger short tempers – keep yours in check. Be patient and keep in mind that *you* are the guest in their country so be grateful for the opportunity to visit and learn.

- Don't be pushy. Remember your way is not the only way. Be open-minded to new methods. Even if you know a quicker, easier way to accomplish a task; that way may not be the quickest or easiest for your host.
- Don't travel with expectations. Know and understand the pace of life; speed up or slow down accordingly, and your trip will be much more pleasant.

## CONCLUSIONS

One of the best ways to discover new opportunities, local or on the other side of the World, is to stay current and active in the field of librarianship. If the thought of traveling to faraway places in order to exchange knowledge and ideas or to assist in a project is appealing, then seek out the opportunity and make it a reality. Do not have the attitude that one day it would be nice to practice librarianship around the world – be proactive and do it now. Finally, while it is always a treat to be hosted by a librarian in a new and exciting location, it can be just as exciting and rewarding to extend them an invitation to visit you in your library.

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