

## Language Matters

### Unpacking Professional Discourses Using Critical Theory

by **Siobhan Stevenson**

#### What's in a Word?

The release of the Ontario Ministry of Culture's *Third Generation Public Libraries* in January 2009 provided this researcher with an ideal opportunity to apply critical theory to an analysis of provincial planning documents from the 1950s. The focus of critical research and a key source of evidence is discourse. Thus the language we use to talk about our profession, our work, our institutions, and our users can tell us a lot about social struggles over what it means to be a public service within today's political and economic landscape. My job as a researcher is to analyze the real world implications – the discursive effects – of the choices we make around the language we use. The remainder of this column will consider one significant shift in the vocabulary of public librarians, namely the transformation of the library user or patron into a customer.

#### A Rose by Any Other Name? Not Quite.

Although calls for the reinvention of the public library and the public librarian date from the mid-1970s, it wasn't until the release in 1990 of *One Place to Look: The Ontario Public Library Strategic Plan* that the marketization of our discourse began in earnest. Fast forward to 2010. Today, the customer identity is firmly embedded within a public library discourse that effectively mirrors the vocabulary of the corporate sector. Inspired by the success of the mega-bookstore,<sup>1</sup> professional literatures abound with examples of emerging service trends promoting a public

library experience increasingly indistinguishable from that of the retail sector. Consider, for instance, "floating" librarians. These are library workers who come out from behind the reference desk and walk through the building, meeting customers where they are, ready to ask, "are you being served?"<sup>2</sup>

Elsewhere, library spaces are being reconfigured to reflect this new service ideal: "We dismantled our fortress that was the reference desk ... and our citadel known as the circulation desk."<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the utilitarian appearance of the stacks is being replaced by the more aesthetically pleasing aspect of shelving units that are lower and allow books to be merchandised with their covers facing out. New inventory technologies keep collection sizes down by closely tracking book activity and facilitating the weeding of little-used materials. With respect to the organization of collections, the use of Dewey for shelving non-fiction materials has competition as the more customer-friendly bookshop arrangement gains acceptance.<sup>4</sup> In the virtual world, new social networking technologies have revolutionized readers' advisory services as customers contribute their own tags, write reviews, and recommend materials for like-minded readers.

Finally, in the push for alternative sources of funding, public libraries have leased space to coffee franchises and gift shops for the sale of library-themed merchandise.

## Critical Incisions

Critical approaches are not about evaluating whether the transformation of the user into a customer is a good thing or a bad thing; rather they are about unpacking the often hidden assumptions which accompany the language we use and its impact on how we function in our world. For instance, customers are not citizens, thus one question we need to answer is what happens to the citizen identity in all of this and, by extension, the role of the public library in fulfilling its democratic mandate? Similarly, when taking a page “out of the playbook of the mega bookstore”<sup>5</sup> becomes the order of the day, what impact does this have on the public librarian who continues to be trained within a model of the library firmly entrenched in the language of the public sphere? Also, there is an underside to the new information and communication technologies when applied to customer service delivery – namely, the elimination of workers, or at least the ability to do more with less expensive, less skilled staff.

Here, we might want to ask: what impact is the adoption of these ICT-enabled self-servicing models having on library work, including historically valued skills like cataloguing, classification, and reference work?

Recognizing the extreme political and economic pressures within which public libraries operate, the purpose of critical research is not to criticize, but rather to lay bare those instances where public librarians may be inadvertently contributing to a political and economic system at odds with their traditional values and, in some cases, writing the profession of public librarianship, as we know it, out of history.

## NOTES

- 1 Woodward, Jeannette, *Creating the Customer-Driven Library: Building on the Bookstore Model* (Chicago, IL: ALA, 2004).
- 2 Hilyard, Nann Blaine, “Making Changes and Staying Happy,” *Public Libraries* 46(3): May/June 2007, pp.17-24.
3. Blaine, “Making Changes and Staying Happy,” p. 23.
- 4 Hopkins, Sarah, “Decimating Dewey: Introducing a Bookshop Arrangement for Shelving the Nonfiction Collection,” *Australasian Public Libraries and Information Services*, 20(1): March 2007, pp. 8-13.
- 5 Woodward, *Creating the Customer-Driven Library: Building on the Bookstore Model*.

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