

EEI: LET'S NOT CHICKEN OUT WHEN IT COMES TO DEALING WITH OUR ASSUMPTIONS



As library workers we're aware of a number of commonly held assumptions about what we do and why we do it. KATIE MILES-BARNES tells us that libraries are widely praised but often misunderstood, cherished but usually under-resourced, and although generally regarded as important, they're deemed completely obsolete with predictable regularity.

We're used to addressing misconceptions, so with this in mind, I'd like to reflect on extending this to include our own assumptions too.

Most of us can recall an instance when an assumption caused a problem. I still cringe thinking of a time early in my career when I enthusiastically fielded a reference inquiry about 'Australian poultry'. I had a glossy pair of Australorps scratching around at home and so immediately began gathering chicken nonfiction, delighted to have an opportunity for Chicken Talk in the workplace. But as it turned out, my borrower was not so impressed – she looked at the stack of books I'd retrieved and said that she was quite certain that Banjo Paterson didn't write any of these.

While I attribute some blame to the poorly located air-conditioning vent that was loudly humming away over the reference desk, I made this mistake because I didn't ask enough questions and because I operated on the series of assumptions I brought with me from my own chicken-centric life.

This is a benign example – for the most part chooks are uncontroversial – and my error was easy to describe, so the borrower pointed out my mistake and we moved on. But the ease with which we addressed the problem is also why it sticks in my mind. If I'd assumed something that was hurtful to her, would she still have corrected me? My poultry/poetry mistake is an easy one to spot, but what if the assumption was more oblique and harder to pinpoint? Would she continue to use the reference service? Would she still feel welcome in the library?

This in turn led me to ask a bigger question: Have I already done this to a borrower?

Have I used a word that was loaded in ways I didn't appreciate? Have I made decisions about someone's needs based on questionable information? Have I presumed to know what's best for someone, without consulting them, or questioned why I consider myself such an authority? Regardless of my intentions, the answer is certainly 'Yes'. Once I asked these questions of myself, I started to wonder if my library does the same. If so, why and how can I act to address them?

While I believe our whole profession benefits from this kind of self-reflection, it is of particular importance in public libraries. Our users are highly diverse and, while the library is not a neutral space, it is often perceived as one. The unexamined assumptions we bring to work have the potential to directly affect our borrowers in a way that is all the more insidious because of the perceived authority and impartiality of the library as an institution.

We already recognise the need to reflect our communities when making decisions regarding things like collection development, programs and services, and when seeking out community partners. By extending this reflection to include ourselves and our institutions, we can build a greater understanding of the nature of our interactions with our community. And although the process of examining our assumptions can sometimes be confronting, as library workers we already understand intimately the value inherent in an ongoing process of examining, exposing and contextualising our knowledge. Let's make a misconceived assumption as rare as hen's teeth.

KATIE MILES-BARNES
katiemilesbarnes@gmail.com

Katie Miles-Barnes is a public librarian, a recent graduate and a member of the New Graduates Advisory Group, and she would dearly love to hear lots of stories about controversial chickens. Say hello on Twitter @melbrarian.