

Building Communities of Readers and Writers
Closing Address - Parag Children's Library unConference 2017
Prof. Shailaja Menon (TISS, Hyderabad/Azim Premji University, Bangalore)
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Good afternoon, everybody!

Many interesting and important themes have come up in this afternoon's panel discussions, and some might suppose that the Closing Address is a place to tie up all loose ends and threads. I may be disappointing some, but I will not use this precious time to tie all the threads together, although, I will note some of the more important ones here – (a) the tug between providing basic literacy versus higher order skills through library services; (b) the dilemma of whether to aim for scale, or depth in library-based efforts in our country; (c) whether to focus on the availability of books or the usage of books; (d) whether libraries are central to curricular efforts, or peripheral to them; (e) whether to select books for their utility for instructional purposes, or for their literary qualities; (f) how to get readers interested and motivated in reading; (g) the vision of the library spaces as larger than that of accomplishing basic literacy; and more. Having noted these themes, I will respectfully set them aside for the duration of this talk – because I come here with an agenda of my own – to talk about the much neglected aspect of using libraries to build communities of readers and writers – which I believe is critical for library based efforts in our country.

In his keynote address at a conference for academic librarians, R. David Lankes, a professor of librarianship noted that, “*Bad libraries build collections, good libraries build services, great libraries build communities*” (R. David Lankes, 2012). I am encouraged to see that not a single organization here today is merely engaged in building collections of good literature. Every organization is making an effort to build high quality services to connect children to literature – and that is heartening to note. Today, I would like to push our thinking about good libraries a little further. I would like us to encourage us to continue to build good collections of books; to provide high quality services to children; but, also to start thinking about how we can begin to build engaged communities of readers and writers.

What does it mean to build “communities of readers and writers”? Why is this important? In order to understand why we need to build communities of readers, it is important to first

understand reading itself as a cultural practice. I begin my talk this afternoon by exploring the idea that reading is culturally located, and therefore, it is important that when we try to inculcate the reading “habit”, we also try to locate that habit also in the wider culture that the children are a part of. Once you’re convinced of the idea that reading is a cultural practice, we can then explore together what it might mean to build communities of readers. I will end by providing a few examples of work we’ve done at Azim Premji University, Bangalore, over the past few years, to build such a community.

Reading as a Cultural Practice

If we ask ourselves – why should people read? Why should children read? We will get varied answers even in this room. From a historical and cultural perspective, most cultures across the world have not necessarily valued reading, and in particular, reading for pleasure. Literacy, in fact, is a recent cultural entrant to many societies, especially in its modern guise – literacy for all. Literacy has historically been unevenly distributed in society. Even in relatively well developed societies that claim to have close to a 100% literacy rate, different classes of society have related to literacy differently, used it for different purposes and functions in life. It is possible to make the argument that the higher the class of society you belong to, or, the more “developed” the society you belong to -- the more access you have to the idea that people can read for leisure and pleasure. Even in societies that had access to literacy, not everyone read with this intent. Different classes or groups of people used literacy to fulfill different functions in their lives. For e.g, my own caste, the Menons of Kerala – were possibly scribes and accountants to the kings of Kerala – they used their literacy mainly for administrative purposes. Even amongst this caste, only men traditionally had access to literacy, while women became literate fairly late. When literacy is used for the purposes of recording, then accuracy is very important. What is valued is not how deep your interpretation is, but how accurate your recording is.

In other castes and religions, literacy might have been used to access scriptural knowledge – to read the holy books and scriptures. We can think of Brahmins in India receiving Vedic instruction, Muslims learning to read the Koran in madrasas, or Christians learning to read in order to access the Bible and other religious teachings. According to D. D. Hall (a historian of literacy in the US), in some of the books authored during the puritanical era in the West, authors often addressed readers in an opening statement, headed 'To the Reader.' These opening statements instructed the reader on how to understand and put to use the prose that follows. Since

for the most part these were religious texts that described the process of redemption, the instructions advised readers to model the act of reading on the practice of meditation: to ingest the written word, to 'chew' it, to read slowly and repeatedly (D. D. Hall, 1994). In other words, the ideal reader was one who understood the truth that resided in the text through re-reading and reflection. Once again, the reader's ability to read in order to derive pleasure from the text, to interpret it, to argue back with it, etc. – were not the main objectives.

The idea that people could read for leisure, personal development, for personal interpretation and response is one popularized by the European enlightenment and renaissance – and this – as I've noted, has been distributed differently across the globe and across different social classes within any given society at any given point in time. For example, in certain states of the US, literacy rates were at over 80% by 1790, yet a survey conducted in the 1920s showed that only a fourth of the population reported spending money on books. Only a third of working class families subscribed to magazines, while nearly all families from the business class subscribed to at least one magazine. Further, the kinds of magazines read by the two groups differed, and differences also existed in what was read by people in different age groups, and different genders. The idea of what was "good" reading was no doubt influenced (at least partially) by these variables – class, age, gender – pointing to the idea that reading is culturally located and based.

To further my argument about reading as a culturally located practice, I will also remind you of/introduce you to Shirley Brice Heath's classic ethnography of reading in different communities in the US in the late 1970s/early 1980s. Heath (1982) demonstrated through her work that families, homes, adults have a direct role to play in how children learn to interact with, or to "take from texts". She studied three communities – a relatively affluent, white, middle-class community; a working-class white community; and a black community – which she called, respectively, Maintown, Roadville and Trackton. She saw that children from each of these communities learned different ways of holding and attending to books, of retrieving content from books, and of talking about books after reading. In the middle-class community of Maintown, children learned from an early age to discuss books analytically with their parents through dialogue, and question-and-answer sessions. In contrast, in the white, working class community, adults signaled to the children that it was important to respect the status/content of the books – and to "learn" from them. Children were not encouraged to relate what they read in the texts to

their own lives, or to argue with texts. And finally, in the black working class community, the culture was largely oral. Books were incidental to a culture that thrived on the oral telling of stories, and book reading was not really a central part of adult-child interactions. Children in Heath's study, correspondingly displayed different kinds of behaviors around books – based on the cultural values that had shaped them.

If culture shapes ideas about who reads, for what purposes, and how – then, interventions designed to shape children into readers – whether through libraries or otherwise – need to address the issue of helping the surrounding culture to shift. From a cultural and critical standpoint, what we're attempting to do with the library movement cannot be described as an “educational intervention” – we're attempting to accomplish nothing short of cultural change – the educated elite (all of us here in this room), are trying to shape and reshape the culture of ordinary people into one that celebrates books, individuation and personal response.

Rationale

Engaging in the project of cultural reformation is always fraught with moral and ethical dilemmas. Therefore, we require some clarity on why we would wish to engage in such a project. We could give many kinds of reasons for why such a cultural transformation is essential-- including the commonly provided arguments that books help to enhance the child's creativity and imagination, it opens up worlds unknown to the child, even as it deepens the child's knowledge and understanding about the world she lives in. And all of these are true. But, there is another set of reasons that for me, is particularly compelling. These relate to the issue of empowerment, of giving children from varied social classes access to culturally valued and powerful skills, attitudes and experiences around texts. Lisa Delpit (1988), a noted African American educator referred to these as teaching the “codes of power” – which, she argued, should be taught fairly explicitly to children who come from cultures that do not have access to the codes at home. What are these powerful skills, attitudes and experiences that educated/middle class parents regularly provide for their children? They provide their children with:

1. Exposure to a wide set of texts of different kinds – pictures books, poetry, longer, chapter books, biographies, encyclopedias, magazines and more.

2. Exposure to the idea that you can read books a wide range of purposes, including, for information and for leisure. The idea that books can be used for leisure and pleasure might be a novel idea in certain communities and cultures.
3. The idea that books can be argued with and responded to. This implies that children feel that they are on an equal power footing with the books. This, too, could be a novel cultural idea in cultures where books – where available – are meant to be mastered, not countered or discussed.
4. Exposure to reading adults who model for the children how *they* interact with texts and the value that they derive from them.

I believe firmly that we can only inculcate values and habits in children that are mirrored in the society around. It is impossible to “cultivate” the “reading habit” – or, any other habit, for that matter, in children whose societies and cultures do not have that habit. Therefore, before we try to make readers out of our children, we need to pause and ask ourselves honestly – are *we* readers? And if not, we need to set about rectifying that minor issue ☺

Building Communities of Readers and Writers

This brings me to the last segment of my talk – which is about how we can build communities of readers and writers. A “community” is defined for the purposes of this talk, as a group of people with a shared identity and common values. Perhaps not in all respects, but, for our purposes, towards reading books and valuing literature. How can we build communities of readers in challenging contexts in the Indian sub-continent, where most people are barely able to sign their names, and who struggle with using literacy even for the most functional of purposes? This is a daunting task – getting enough good books published in enough regional/local Indian languages; getting funding to acquire these books for our libraries on an ongoing basis; getting these books out to locations where they are needed; recruiting and training personnel to help children interact with the books – these are difficult enough tasks to manage in our country today – and most of the organizations present here today are doing a fairly good job with it. However, I would argue that we will fall short of our end goals of creating engaged readers, if these tasks do not consider and include the even more difficult challenge of getting the cultures surrounding the child to value reading.

You see, when we move from semi-literacy/illiteracy to literacy, we’re not just acquiring a new set of skills. We’re trying to move whole cultures and communities from oral ways of

being to literate ways of being. Now, there are many differences between orality and literacy. But, one of the most significant ones is that oral cultures largely communicate in face-to-face contexts, where the community is obviously a part of the meaning making process. In contrast, reading is a relatively private, lonely task, where the burden of meaning-making appears to fall on the reader. People from largely oral cultures might be willing to learn to acquire the script – because they see it as functional in their lives – but, they may be less willing to engage in the culturally unfamiliar task of confronting the printed page on their own. If we seed literacy in children, but not in the surrounding communities, it is unlikely to survive, because the pull of orality is likely to be greater than that of the “hidden treasures” of reading – because, indeed, they ARE hidden, and need to be chased through the pages of a book.

How can we motivate and support communities in becoming readers and writers? Here, I will briefly describe a few examples from my own work (and the work of my students) at Azim Premji University, where we have tried to build such communities:

1. Folklore Project. One way that we can build community is by viewing and involving parents and community members as key stake-holders and considering innovative ways to engage them in the library. A relatively easy way by which community libraries across the world have engaged adult community members is by offering adult literacy classes. But, we can think of other ways, as well. As some of you may know, Azim Premji University has been hosting a Children’s Literature festival, KathaVana for 5 years now – targeting government school children – many of them first generation literates – in and around Bangalore. A few years ago, we conducted what we called the “Folklore Project” – where we had children collect folklore from their families and communities and bring it to the classroom, where it was presented, performed, and later, converted into some written/art form. A similar project – but on a much larger scale – has been attempted by Keerti Jayaram in villages near Ajmer, Rajasthan – which was called the Kahani Mela. I think folklore is a particularly powerful way to connect literature to communities, because it easily bridges the oral-written divide; and it positions the community members as the “more knowledgeable” others – thus, even as they are learning about the written form from librarians, the content of the effort depends on the knowledge brought in by community members.

2. Teacher-as-Reader. A second idea we have been using in KathaVana- quite successfully over the past 2 years – is the idea of creating communities of teachers-as-readers. When we started working with schools and teachers around providing literature for children, one of elephants in the room was that teachers themselves were not readers of literature. Therefore, even when we taught them powerful strategies like Reading Aloud, Shared Reading, etc., they were not really able to DISCUSS the books in a meaningful way with the children, because they, themselves, lacked the habits and skills of being sophisticated readers of literature. So, we started reading short stories written for adults (in Kannada and English) together – in a facilitated setting, and we used “literature circles” for conducting the discussions. During these discussions, we got teachers to consider literary elements – such as theme, point-of-view, did the setting have a bearing on the story, can we read “between the lines” and discern implicit messages that the author has left for us? Can we understand symbolism in the text? And so on. Teachers who just before the session had claimed that they were “not readers of literature”, were immersed in discussing a single short story for two hours without stopping – and then spent another two hours sharing about their discussions with other groups that had also been discussing the same short story. It was not just the time spent that we were impressed by, but by the quality of observations and comments that the teachers were making. Why do we feel that using such literature circles with teachers is effective? If you notice, once again, it bridges the oral-written divide – even though reading the story is a private, individual act, sense-making was done in an oral, face-to-face, highly interactive manner – which was a familiar means of communicating, even though the content might have been unfamiliar. More recently, a student of mine, Trupti Abhyankar – has successfully used the Teacher-as-Reader model with library and literacy teachers working with QUEST, and NGO that works in a tribal area of Maharashtra. She, too, reported the teachers who were initially struggling with “going beyond the protocol” of conducting the mandatory “discussion after reading aloud with students” – suddenly exploded in their understanding of how to discuss literature with students after experiencing it for themselves.
3. Teachers-as-Writers. I will give one last example from work that another of my students did for her field internship a few years ago. The student’s name is Nomita Sikand – and what she did with teachers was to get them to engage in becoming writers. The teachers

belonged to two schools for the children of migrant laborers in Bangalore, which are run by Azim Premji Foundation. Now, these teachers felt that they did not have any books that represented the lives of children of migrant laborers. They wanted the children in their schools to see their own lives reflected in the books they read. So, Nomita, Geeta Varadarajan (a writing teacher from Teachers College, Columbia University), and I challenged them to write their own book for their children. Nomita (with inputs from Geeta and me) mentored the teachers over 16 sessions (spread out over 4-5 months) in drafting, revising and editing their jointly authored book, and she recorded and analysed their conversations. Once again, we were amazed by how sophisticated the teachers' discussions were once they were themselves engaged in the writing process. They were picky about the choice of particular words to characterize someone, the specific adjectives to use, the flow of the story, point-of-view, and so on. In their reflections, the teachers shared time and again, that this effort had forever changed their understanding about the reading-writing process. They say that good readers are often good writers--but, this may not always be true. However, good writers are almost always excellent readers, because they read with an eye to details, they're able to appreciate the author's craft, and so on. After the writing experience, when the teachers Nomita had worked with discussed books with their students, their discussions were richer, deeper and less superficial. Again, group discussions were critical to the success of this effort – we write, we talk, we think, we read, and we write again. Bringing orality centrally into efforts related to literacy is central to success in building a culture or community of readers and writers.

I have given a long talk here, but I hope I've succeeded in making a few points. First, that reading is a cultural process, therefore, libraries need to go beyond thinking of building collections and services, but also focus on building communities of readers and writers. Second, that while having a community of readers is important in all cultures, it is especially helps in oral cultures like ours, where the loneliness of reading is offset by opportunities for community-based discussions and face-to-face interactions. A third, and perhaps, the most important point that I've made – but somewhat lightly – is that our reasons for imparting a love for books to children has to go beyond the cognitive/emotional reasons that we commonly cite – at its heart, it is a move towards building social justice and equity in our society by providing the “codes” of the elite to

all. And finally, to return to a question that has been troubling our participants all day long – should libraries in India focus on imparting literacy or should they serve larger goals and purposes? Some participants suggested passionately that the vision for libraries needs to go beyond that of providing literacy. I have challenged us in this talk to do the converse - to broaden the vision of literacy and literate practices to include meaningful participation in a reading and writing culture—that centrally includes libraries.

References

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