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The History and Role of Libraries in Adult Literacy

Alice Horning

This exploration begins with the history of libraries in the United States, examining the ways in which Jefferson's library, the Library of Congress, and Benjamin Franklin's ideas about libraries intended to address public literacy levels and problems. Changes to the structure, function, and role of libraries in public life are discussed in terms of the changes made since the first libraries were founded in the US with an eye toward developing public literacy and critical literacy as presently understood. Finally, the current practices of public libraries, including their support for community reading projects, their use as sites of literacy instruction (both ESL and basic education), and their use of technology and related functions are explored to see how libraries contribute to the goal of improving adult literacy in America. Two case studies will show how public libraries function as key sites and librarians as key supporters of this goal.

My recent publications and presentations draw on studies in linguistics, psychology, education and biology to explain the nature of human literacy; I have demonstrated that literacy is the pinnacle of human language ability. However, this pinnacle is not fully reached by every citizen. National and international surveys entailing direct measures of literate ability (Kirsch, et al.; US Dept. of Education; Learning) as well as self-reported data on reading behavior in the United States make clear that despite some recent gains among young adults in literary reading (US NEA, Reading) more than half of the American population does not read at the level needed for full participation in our society and that reading of books and skill in reading of all types of material is in decline in the population at large (US NEA, To Read).

Public libraries have an essential role in addressing contemporary literacy problems in the United States. The ability to understand and produce written language is the summit of human linguistic achievement, as my research in psycholinguistics has demonstrated; other scholars draw on new studies of the anatomy and physiology of the brain to explain the literacy abilities of skilled readers (Dehaene). The development of critical literacy, defined in detail below, is essential to full human participation

in American society. This study of the history and current practices of American public libraries will examine their role in supporting the development of human literate abilities and in helping all Americans to be critically literate in order to participate fully and successfully in our society.

This exploration begins with the history of libraries in the United States, examining the ways in which Jefferson's library, the Library of Congress, and Benjamin Franklin's ideas about libraries intended to address public literacy levels and problems. Changes to the structure, function, and role of libraries in public life are discussed in terms of the changes made since the first libraries were founded in the US with an eye toward developing public literacy and critical literacy as presently understood. Finally, the current practices of public libraries, including their support for community reading projects, their use as sites of literacy instruction (both ESL and basic education), and their use of technology and related functions are explored to see how libraries contribute to the goal of improving adult literacy in America. Two case studies will show how public libraries function as key sites and librarians as key supporters of this goal.

Defining Critical Literacy

A linchpin in thinking about what libraries can do for the literacy problem is a clear definition of the goal they are trying to achieve. While there are many and varied definitions of literacy easily obtained from the dictionary, from national surveys, and from a variety of other sources, I have argued that the definition must be based on psycholinguistics. This area of research offers the fullest understanding of the reading process and the critical literacy of which reading is a part. Here is a definition I have proposed, modified over several years of research on the psycholinguistics of reading and writing:

Critical literacy is best defined as the psycholinguistic processes of getting meaning from or putting meaning into print and/or sound, images, and movement, on a page or screen, used for the purposes of analysis, synthesis and evaluation and application. Analysis entails being able to take a text apart and see how its parts or sections are related; synthesis requires that a literate person be able to put together these parts or parts of different texts for a particular purpose. Evaluation involves making judgments of texts based on prior direct or vicarious experience focused on accuracy, currency, relevance, authority, validity, bias, source, and context (drawn from the ACRL's *Information Literacy Standards*). Application reflects the literate person's ability to use written or digital material for a particular purpose in an appropriate way. These processes develop through formal schooling and beyond it, at home and at work, in childhood and

across the lifespan, and are essential to human functioning in a democratic society.

There is no question that this is a complex definition and a tall order for everyone.

Sondra and Larry Cuban, a librarian and educator, have expanded this definition to include what they call “multiple literacies,” which they define as follows:

Critical literacy. Reading and writing as a politically charged activity that challenges social conventions and institutions, and proposes social and political changes...

Digital literacy. Reading and writing through electronic formats; being able to critically analyze and integrate electronic information, including using data to experiment, creating databases, creating web pages, and desktop publishing.

Environmental literacy. Engagement with green issues and sustainability of the environment, such as global warming, as well as questioning mainstream scientific knowledge.

Health literacy. Being able to read and write a range of health messages; manage personal health and critically analyze health care; and address health barriers, as well as cultural, age, gender, and race issues with regard to health.

This list of literacies also includes academic literacy (critical use and experiences of writing for academic purposes), information literacy (locating, using, and critically evaluating diverse information sources), visual literacy (being able to design, identify, and critically evaluate images), media literacy (critical analysis of mass media messages), and multicultural literacy (cultural competence with diverse written narratives)...financial literacy (ability to critically evaluate and use economics in daily life)... (Cuban and Cuban 95-96)

Research evidence suggests that not only critical literacy as I have defined it but also all these other forms of literacy as explained by the Cubans are essential for people in our society, and not just in school. The goal of critical and other forms of literacy for every member of our society is essential, and not just for individuals to have a satisfying adulthood and maximize their individual potential. A recent study by the National Endowment for the Arts shows that reading and literacy have critical implications for our national social, economic, educational, professional and civic development (US, NEA, *To Read*). Similarly, Deborah Brandt’s award-winning study of the role of literacy in the lives of average Americans reflects literacy’s importance for many aspects of our society. Brandt makes the specific point that literacy has been linked to democracy from the founding

of the United States to the present day (Brandt 205) and should be taught and learned “as a civil right” (206). For all these reasons, examining the contribution of public libraries to the goal of critical literacy for every citizen is essential.

History of Libraries

The great libraries of all time are well known: Egypt and Alexandria, Rome and Britain, as well as France in the time of Charlemagne are all sites of the great libraries of early history, according to library historian Fred Lerner (1-50). The development and existence of libraries requires a number of preliminary steps, enumerated carefully by New York University Classics scholar Lionel Casson:

The alphabetic script that the Greeks devised, with two dozen or so signs capable of rendering every word in the language, made the path to literacy quick and easy.

That was the initial step. Others equally important had to follow. Schools had to be established to spread the knowledge of reading and writing. Enough people had to go beyond that basic skill to build up a literate class of meaningful size. Enough of its members had to indulge in reading for other than utilitarian reasons to foster the writing of books. And the demand for books had to grow enough to give rise to a book trade. Once books were commercially available, the literary-minded were able to build up collections—and the private collection was the precursor of the public library. (Casson 18)

So libraries do not arise immediately, but they are, from their origins, connected clearly to literacy in the population at large. As literacy grows and more books are produced, libraries grow too (Lerner 57); this development is especially the case in the Muslim world, where literacy is essential in order to read the Koran (Lerner 69).

Readers of the Koran, the Torah, the Gospels, the Bhavagad Gita and various other religious texts were engaged in a particular kind of reading that American historian and book history scholar Robert Gross identifies as “intensive,” that is, reading the same texts repeatedly. The goal of such reading was

the reverent return to the same sacred texts day by day, year by year, over the course of a life. Not just the Bible, but sermons, hymnals, and guides to devotion were treated the same way. ... Ultimately, reading was but the means to an end: the experience of divine grace. At stake was eternal life. (Gross 385-6)

This intensive reading was supplanted by “extensive” reading as a by-product of the widespread and cheap reading material resulting from the development of the printing press and its use in America (Gross 387).

Beyond these trends, Gross points to what he calls “rational reading” by those engaged in academic scholarly research and writing, which in turn led to the use of reading to explore matters of public concern in the realm of “civic affairs” (Gross 390). These three functions among many others are those that reading assumes in our lives as it provides us with both direct and vicarious experiences (Gross 395-96). Libraries are the key venues in or through which these many and varied types of reading can take place.

While it may seem that we are far from these origins because contemporary libraries now offer so much beyond books, the fact is that we are not far from these beginnings. One has only to think about “scrolling” through documents online, archiving messages in email files, and the various cataloging and searching systems of contemporary practice to realize that these strategies have their antecedents in the libraries of ancient times and places. Similarly, the new uses of new technology to make more books available electronically, utilized by Google (The Future) and even newer on-demand printing of books (“On Demand”), rely on libraries as resources; these new services look back to Casson’s discussion of widespread libraries as a source of manuscripts that could be copied by a scriptorium when ordered by an individual patron (60). Then as now, according to Casson, an educated population schooled and engaged in literate activities goes hand-in-hand with the development of libraries (Casson 55-60). The rise and spread of Christianity further supports the development of both education and libraries, particularly as books move from scroll form to codex form, making both production and storage much faster and easier (Casson 124-45).

The Library of Congress

In the United States, the need for a library for Congress led initially to a collection in Washington, which was lost in the War of 1812. Library historian Fred Lerner recounts the further developments of a national library for the U.S. Following the loss of the original library for Congress, Thomas Jefferson sold his library to the government and it formed the basis of the new Library of Congress (Lerner 118-120). Jefferson’s library of six thousand volumes contained much more than just historical and legal materials of use to senators and representatives. Though the Smithsonian might initially have been a better location for a national library, that institution moved more toward scientific research, at least at the outset, so printed materials that it produced or exchanged with other countries ended up in the Library of Congress as well.

By the 1940s, according to Lerner, Archibald MacLeish, the Librarian of Congress at the time had set up three clear domains of materials that belonged in the library: materials needed by Congress for its work, books and materials about Americans’ lives and achievements, and books and

materials about other peoples and places that are relevant to Americans (Lerner 119). Ultimately, the Library of Congress has become the national library, even though it has never been so designated by law (Lerner 120). James Conaway, journalist and author of a history of the Library of Congress, notes that the Library was meant originally to serve the reading and research needs of the Congress, but he agrees with Lerner that it ultimately grew to be the national library.

With regard to the issues of interest here, the Library of Congress took up a particular focus on books and reading in the creation of the Center for the Book in 1977 by a law signed by President Carter. The Center was the idea of Librarian of Congress Daniel Boorstin “to stimulate public interest in books and reading” (Cole and Aiken 13). The Center’s function was to pick up some of the work done by a prior National Book Committee, but in particular, its role was “to promote books, reading, and libraries” (Conaway 172). With outside funding, especially from publishers, the Center for the Book promotes reading with slogans, programs, national seminars and television programs. One of its subcommittees focuses exclusively on education and reading (Conaway 172).

Beginning in 1979, the Center took on the role of supporting books and reading in the US by honoring writers and creating various publicity campaigns in support of books and reading. Lectures, symposia and oral history projects all figured in the work of the Center in this area. Further work has led to development of the Center’s website, where a kind of “community of the book” is clearly established through listings of the full range of book professionals who bring writers and readers together: publishers, librarians, teachers, booksellers, and others.

In his historical review of the development of the Center, John Cole, the director since its founding, surveys the various activities the Center offers in addition to its connections with affiliated centers in every state (Cole). Initially, the Center’s focus was on connecting television and reading. A study by the Center in 1983 noted concern with both citizens’ inability to read (i.e. illiteracy) and their lack of interest in reading (i.e. aliteracy). In general, the Center has an interest in the ways that various aspects of technology can work together to address the need for more and better reading. In addition, Cole writes that the Center has focused much of its energy on the history of books and reading, with a third of its publications in this area.

Beginning in 1987, the goal of promoting reading became a major focus of Center activities through ads, slogans, and related activities. It established partnerships in support of reading promotion; more than ninety-five organizations that promote books, reading, and literacy are partnered with the Center for the Book and listed on the website. State Centers for the Book in all fifty states began with a proposal from a public library in Florida,

citing the need for more local support for the national center's goals. A partnership with the American Library Association is another project of the Center, begun in 1985. Clearly these organizations have mutually supportive goals and activities and their interaction makes sense for both. Since 1987, the Center for the Book has reached out extensively to promote reading in a variety of ways, according to Cole's *Encyclopedia of the Library of Congress*. The Center's goal of promoting reading and literacy has been achieved in various initiatives and diverse venues. There have been public programs, slogans, and campaigns, in addition to partnerships with an assortment of 90 public and private organizations with similar goals (Cole and Aiken 205-06).

Among its other activities, the Library of Congress hosts an annual National Book Festival, intended to promote books and reading, on the National Mall in Washington in September of each year, according to its website (Center). It also has affiliates in the states and supports states' common reading programs, to be discussed below. According to Anne Boni, Program Specialist at the Center for the Book,¹ this idea originated with Laura Bush, a librarian and advocate for literacy during the Bush administration, who had developed a similar event in Texas. At the Festival, The Center for the Book organizes the program of participating authors and the Pavilion of the States. Representatives from state centers for the book and state libraries discuss their state's projects and distribute material to visitors in the Pavilion of the States. The Book Festival has helped to develop the work of the Center and to support its encouragement of books, reading, and literacy. It should be clear from Cole's review of the history of the Center for the Book that it specifically and overtly connects the work of the nation's biggest library to the active support of literacy for the population at large.

Every state in the nation now has its own Center for the Book to support and encourage reading at the state level. Each state Center is an official affiliate of the national Center. The states sponsor an array of activities to promote books and reading, including book festivals, awards, literary maps, essay contests and "One Book" projects. For example, in Michigan, the Michigan Center for the Book is a small office in the state capitol in Lansing. Its mission is consistent with that of the Library of Congress Center for the Book. The primary role of the state center is to be a resource for public libraries and their projects, such as summer reading programs. According to its coordinator, Ms. Karren Reish, the Center offers a small grant program to support the work of public libraries under the auspices of the state's Department of History, Arts & Libraries and the Library of Michigan.² The national Center for the Book also partners with the American Library Association in work to promote books, reading, and libraries as well as with other programs that support young readers and family literacy (Cole and Aiken 206).

The Center for the Book also has an international role, given that the Library of Congress has become a kind of world library, taking in books and materials from around the world. It has supported various international meetings for publishers and others interested in the past and future of books. In addition to participation in the Frankfurt Book Fair, the Center has supported organizations similar to itself in various countries, including England, South Africa and Russia, among others. In terms of supporting literacy per se, the Center for the Book has focused its efforts on children and families. Through a link with Head Start and various other activities, the Center has worked to support reading development and to encourage children's reading.

The current activities of the Center for the Book reflect this connection, according to Ms. Boni. Through its partnerships with such programs as NEA's Big Read, to be discussed below, it supports reading of literature among young people. The Center itself sponsors a program called Letters about Literature, which encourages students in fourth through twelfth grade to read literary works and write letters to the authors. There is a contest for letter writers to enter; winners can then make a substantial monetary contribution to a library of their choice. This and other programs are supported by funds from major corporations. Through other strategies, the Center is moving toward greater support for literacy activities. One current project involves updating the Center's website, which has been changed from literacy.gov to Read.gov to reflect increased support for reading and literacy development.

History tells us that like the Library of Congress and its Center for the Book, most libraries arose to some extent to meet the literacy needs of a reading public, both in the United States and in Europe. In various venues, well-off and well-educated citizens would gather to discuss books and ideas, and eventually, the sharing of these materials among themselves became a common practice. In addition, less-educated individuals wanted to read for themselves, an idea supported by the Protestant view that individuals should read the Bible for themselves, according to Lerner (139). However, those who could read the Bible did not always have the means to buy their own books, and so in Europe and the U.S., subscription libraries, from which people could borrow books to read and return, came into common use.

Benjamin Franklin and the Library

Benjamin Franklin's contribution to the development of libraries arose in just this way. Franklin had formed a group called the Junto, a name derived from the Spanish word 'junta,' meaning fraternity, which read and wrote and discussed various issues, beginning around 1730. He tried to get the members to donate all their books to a common library that they could share, but many of the members wanted to have access to their books at

home, so that initial idea didn't work (Franklin 47, 57). However, Franklin liked the idea of a shared set of books and so developed the idea of a subscription library, originally the Library Company of Philadelphia, still in business now (Lerner 141). This library, the first circulating library in the country, began operation in 1730, according to the Norton Critical edition of Franklin's Autobiography (Franklin 57). Franklin explains how this idea developed:

And I now set on foot my first Project of a public Nature, that for a Subscription Library. I drew up the Proposals, got them put into Form by our great Scrivener Brockden, and by the help of my Friends in the Junto, procur'd Fifty Subscribers of 40 Shillings each to begin with and 10 Shillings a Year for 50 Years, the Term our Company was to continue. ...The Libraries have improv'd the general Conversation of the Americans, made the common Tradesmen and Farmers as intelligent as most Gentlemen from other Countries, and perhaps have contributed in some degree to the Stand so generally made throughout the Colonies in Defense of their Privileges. (Franklin 57)

The whole idea was a great success, even though Franklin notes that there were relatively few people who could read, and the books had to be imported from England. Still, the idea of a shared collection of books was quite popular and was soon imitated in other places around the country. It made, according to Franklin's observation, a specific contribution to literacy development:

The Institution soon manifested its Utility, was imitated by other Towns and in other Provinces, the Libraries were augmented by Donations, Reading became fashionable, and our People having no public Amusements to divert their Attention from Study became better acquainted with Books, and in a few Years were observ'd by Strangers to be better instructed and more intelligent than People of the same Rank generally are in other Countries. (Franklin 63)

Franklin himself was a great beneficiary of the library idea. He notes that reading was his main source of amusement and pursuing it allowed him to make up for his own lack of formal education (64).

Ultimately, the subscription libraries begun by Franklin become the public library as we know it now. One part of this development was the formation of book clubs, which shared books among themselves, as Lerner notes:

Lower-middle-class readers formed book clubs that used pooled funds to purchase small collections; some were maintained permanently, while others were sold once the books

had been read by all the members, and new ones purchased with the proceeds. Whatever class they served, these collections emphasized serious and improving reading [sic]. (Lerner 142)

So the library, again from its origins, has always been tied to literacy and to the support and improvement of reading in the general population.

Contemporary Libraries and Literacy

The American Library Association has identified literacy as one of its seven key action areas. These are areas in which the organization chooses to focus its attention and activities. The ALA, founded in 1876 in Philadelphia, according to its website, is the major professional organization for librarians. It includes public, school, academic, and research libraries as well as specialized libraries. In its discussion of literacy as an action area, the ALA focuses on information literacy, including not only reading and learning to read but also the development of skills to function in an information society (American Association of School Librarians, Standards). So it is clear that the major library organization sees literacy as a focal point of its enterprise. Importantly, it sees itself working on not only the development of essential literacy abilities but also on information and communication technology (ICT) skills.

The ALA has focused specifically on the needs of new and non-readers through its Office for Literacy and Outreach Services (OLOS). The mission of this office is to serve various groups, “supporting and promoting literacy and equity of information access initiatives for traditionally underserved populations” (qtd. in Orange 159). The ALA has also created a literacy officer position in this Office, who is charged with forming internal and external partnerships in support of adult literacy. Here as elsewhere, the ultimate goals are to help libraries and librarians work effectively with adult learners. Through successful partnerships with various organizations, the ALA has the resources to continue and expand the work to achieve these goals.

A recent telephone interview with the current Literacy Officer in the OLOS, Dr. Dale Lipschultz, confirmed these goals, particularly with new readers and non-readers.³ Ninety-four percent of public libraries that serve populations over 5,000 people offer literacy services and resources. About a third of these offer direct instruction. Individual states offer some models; California is a particularly strong example of a state that has made excellent use of funding to support literacy. In addition, according to Dr. Lipschultz, about three quarters of public libraries work in partnership with community-based programs in support of literacy. Beyond these activities at a basic skill level, libraries across the country offer book groups, technology training, and information literacy classes. None of this work is assessed in the way formal education is assessed because, again according

to Dr. Lipschultz, the philosophy of libraries is to provide materials and information based on individual needs and learning goals, using a lifelong learning model. On the whole, central to the goals of supporting literacy development among adults is making use of computers. Libraries should, can, and do offer information access through technology, but then readers must also have the basic skills to find, read, and use the information.

The interrelationship of these goals is highlighted in the work of Marguerite Crowley Weibel, who is a librarian, adult literacy teacher, and library professor at Ohio State. She has written two books on the role of public libraries in helping adult new readers develop their reading abilities. In both of these works, she makes clear that the public library can serve not only as a literacy classroom because it serves as a site of literacy learning, but also as a source of materials for readers, new and established. The role of the public library is critical, Weibel notes, in light of the literacy crisis identified by the National Assessment of Adult Literacy survey (US Department of Education; hereafter NAAL). She writes:

...we are continually reminded, in the media and in virtually every task we must perform, that technological advances bring swift and extensive change to our way of life and that as individuals and as a nation we need more information, more knowledge, and more understanding to accomplish our appointed tasks as well as fulfill our aspirations. The gap between an ill-informed and poorly educated populace and a society based on quick and efficient access to information is widening. If that gap is to be narrowed and literacy students are to become active participants in the culture of learning, then the public library, claiming “open to all” as one of its banner values, must play a pivotal role in the national effort to improve the literacy standards and learning opportunities of our citizens. (Weibel 5)

The library can play this role for new readers simply by performing the services it already offers to everyone: “providing access to knowledge and information, advising readers, offering facilities for learning, and promoting public discourse” (Weibel 6). Public libraries, then, are one of the central sources for addressing the literacy needs of the population at large.

In her earlier book, Weibel makes clear exactly what the needs of new readers are as they move through four stages of literacy development that literacy scholars have described; it is easy to see that these are stages all readers move through as they develop their abilities. These stages are labeled beginning, intermediate, advanced and mature. The first three stages correspond to school grades 1-3, 4-6 and 7-8 respectively, according to Weibel (43). Mature readers are people who read for both personal and professional purposes. Mature readers are those who will continue to

develop their reading abilities. Not every adult new reader will become a mature reader, though that is a worthy goal for all adult literacy programs (Weibel 44). Both of Weibel's books serve as handbooks and guides for teachers in adult literacy programs, because she demonstrates the use of public library resources to provide materials for adult new readers and teaching strategies for literacy teachers and librarians using them.

In a similar but more focused analysis not under the auspices of the American Library Association, Jeffrey and Charles Salter, a librarian and an educator, conducted a comprehensive review of the role of libraries in literacy development, published in 1991. In their chapter called "Literacy Involvement: How Libraries Can Help," these writers argue that all libraries can and should be involved in supporting, encouraging and teaching adult and family literacy (Salter and Salter 51). Though somewhat dated, this discussion is thoughtfully framed around the various definitions of literacy and specifically functional illiteracy. It offers suggestions for contributions

In this role for adults,
libraries have especially
recently taken on literacy
instruction for poor
and immigrant patrons,
information literacy
instruction for all, and
continued access to
information of all types
for everyone.

by public libraries as well as school, academic, and special libraries in supporting and developing literacy. In providing resources for adult new readers and suggesting ways for libraries to find the resources to fund programs, Salter and Salter offer strategies for libraries of all types to support literacy. They also discuss evaluation and assessment of programs along with a case study of a library literacy program.

Another librarian and educator team, Sondra and Larry Cuban, have more recently explored the role of technology in libraries and contrasted the uses of computers in libraries and schools in fulfilling their similar missions of literacy and education. The Cubans' study of the history of libraries and schools reflects on the lack of collaboration between the two types of institutions. Through their analysis, particularly in their case studies drawn from a variety of settings across the country, the potential for stronger collaboration between schools and libraries is clearly revealed. Sondra Cuban is a literacy researcher in England, and her father, Larry, is a retired Stanford faculty member in education. Their diverse perspectives work together to provide a balanced view of how libraries and schools contribute to literacy efforts.

The Cubans note early in their book that assessment of effectiveness is a real problem. For libraries, the key numbers come from circulation, and not from any measure of “what people learned and gained from their experiences of using the library” (20). Though this point was made about libraries in the mid-twentieth century, it is probably still true now. In addition, libraries do not generally see themselves as fundamentally educational institutions the way schools do. This point is reflected in the fact that library users are generally referred to as “patrons” and virtually never as “students” (Cuban and Cuban 25). Moreover, libraries, like schools, have had to cope with major social and economic changes in our society, including large-scale immigration in some areas, recession, and the impact of technology (Cuban and Cuban 26-27). The latter change has been a major force in the role of libraries in the community at large, as libraries have provided computer access for many who don’t have it or lack the expertise or training to use technology effectively (Cuban and Cuban 30-31).

The Cubans point out that libraries assume a key educational role for adults while schools assume the key educational role for children. In this role for adults, libraries have especially recently taken on literacy instruction for poor and immigrant patrons, information literacy instruction for all, and continued access to information of all types for everyone. Some of this work has been done using ordinary taxpayer funding and some of it has been done under the auspices of private funding sources, such as the Gates Foundation and the Wallace Foundation, sometimes with the support of the ALA (48-49).

Three different forces come together in the late twentieth century, according to the Cubans, to push libraries to work more aggressively on literacy issues. The first of these is the appearance of the National Adult Literacy Survey in 1993 (Kirsch, et al.). This Congressionally-requested direct test of a representative sample of Americans’ prose, document, and numeric literacy showed clearly that a significant number of people lacked needed reading skills to live, work, and participate fully in contemporary democratic society. Increasing interest in and use of computers is a second force moving libraries toward a literacy focus, as librarians recognized that computer programs could help with literacy development work. And finally, the ALA was working with the government in support of workforce literacy development (Cuban and Cuban 57-58).

Ultimately, the Cubans build an argument for libraries to work together with schools, workplaces, religious institutions, community organizations, and others in partnerships to develop and support literacy. More specifically, they point out that libraries and other institutions can and should support “multiple literacies” (95), discussed at the beginning of this article as including critical, digital, environmental, health, academic, information, visual, media, multicultural, and financial literacy. This list

creates a tall order of abilities for libraries, schools, and various other organizations and institutions to develop and support. The Cubans' argument is that no one institution can or should do this work alone; Deborah Brandt also presents this idea in her advocacy of libraries as "sponsors" of literacy (152). All need to cooperate and collaborate. Working together to draw funding support will also be essential to the success of this work. Evaluating the needs of various populations (urban, rural, immigrant, low income, women, teens), purposes, processes and knowledge, and presenting case studies, the Cubans show how successful collaborative projects around the country provide models of "transformative collaborations" (105).

One example illustrates how such an enterprise might work. In Seattle, community technology centers have been created through a collaboration among the library, public schools, city department of technology, a women's group, the parks and recreation department, and other groups. The result has been the formation of the Seattle Community Technology Alliance. Its centers,

located in established community centers, housing projects, schools, and social service agencies, offer a variety of programs, including after-school activities, adult and family literacy, career development and job preparation, and small business opportunities. (Cuban and Cuban 106)

This work in Seattle provides just one example of a successful collaborative enterprise where a library works with schools and organizations in support of literacy. The Cubans' book presents a number of other examples to show that such joint enterprises can and do make a difference to literacy. Such sharing should be supported and encouraged if the literacy of the population at large is to be improved.

Colleges and universities also need to be paying more attention to literacy, both in terms of improving the abilities of their students and in terms of improving the reading abilities of the population at large. Two studies make clear why colleges and universities need to focus more specifically on reading. The American College Testing organization, which offers a major test for college admission and course placement, released a careful study of 563,000 students in 2006 (American). Students who had taken the ACT exam were tracked for three years in terms of their performance in college and their persistence to the second year. The study shows that only half of the students achieved a score of 21 or higher on the reading section of the ACT and were successful in college; ACT's definition of success is a GPA of 2.0 and returning for the second year of college. A more robust definition of "success" would include an even smaller group.

Does college help students become better readers, given this starting point? Not according to a study of students nearing graduation conducted

by the Pew organization. The researchers who conducted the Pew study set about to learn “how prepared these students are to continue to learn and use the skills that they will need in the years to come...” as well as “the relationship among educational experience, literacy and preparedness for the job market” (Pew 4). To explore this question, they conducted a survey of “1827 graduating students at 80 randomly selected 2-year and 4-year colleges and universities (68 public and 12 private) from across the United States” (Pew 4). The survey was conducted by stratified random sample in two stages—first to choose institutions and then to choose students (Pew 66).

The survey made use of the same instruments as were used in the NAAL survey of the population at large conducted in 2003 and reported in 2006, and followed the same procedure as NAAL as well, except for a small change to the preliminary part of the survey. Student participants were asked background questions that included demographic information more pertinent to college student experience: “educational and language background, previous educational experience, career plans and current college experiences” (Pew 5). As I have reported elsewhere (Horning, “Defining”), the full results show that while college students generally have higher literacy levels than the population at large, they are still not as skilled in Prose, Document, and Quantitative literacy as they could be or should be (Pew 20-21). In particular, fewer than half of college students and much fewer than half of the population at large attain scores at the “proficient” level on any of the three dimensions of literacy according to both the Pew and the national assessments (Pew 19). Moreover, the Pew study was designed to help colleges and universities but also looks at the preparedness for the workforce.

Libraries should, in this connection, be at the center of literacy development in higher education, according to university library dean Patricia Breivik and higher education researcher E. Gordon Gee. In *Higher Education in the Internet Age*, they make clear that a campus library has an essential role to play in developing skilled users of information. Not only can the library offer a meeting ground for those who have grown up with computers and those who have not, according to Barbara Cambridge (qtd. in Breivik and Gee 49), but it can also better prepare students for work and participation in our society. Breivik and Gee point out that

we need graduates who are prepared as independent learners in a world characterized by rapid obsolescence of information and technology with the resulting shifts in employment opportunities. ...[A] new urgency now attends this need, and increasingly information literacy is being appreciated as a key to independent lifelong learning. (62)

Moreover, these writers point out that if students are properly prepared in college, they will become skilled users of public libraries following graduation (Breivik and Gee 65-66). Insofar as the library is overall the single most important resource for lifelong learning, this outcome will allow the population at large to be successful learners.

Colleges and universities, in order to meet this challenge of developing critical literacy, could and should be addressing the reading problem for their students and the population at large through use of at least two specific strategies. The first of these is to add Reading Across the Curriculum to programs in Writing Across the Curriculum already in use on many campuses. Breivik and Gee support this approach in their discussion of information literacy across the curriculum as well (59-60). I have argued elsewhere (Horning, "Reading") that RAC work in every course would help instructors achieve their teaching goals and serve also to build students' reading abilities. A second strategy might be the use of service learning to teach students the importance of critical literacy in the population at large while building their own and their clients' literacy skills. Many literacy programs do or would welcome the help of college students in working with nonreaders to develop their skills. Service learning is already well established through the work of such organizations as Campus Compact (www.compact.org), which offers connections to literacy organizations among other projects. Public libraries, as the case studies discussed previously show, serve as sites for these kinds of projects and also offer materials and other kinds of support.

One Book Projects

Libraries support books, reading, and literacy through programs that are often referred to as "One Book" projects; these projects are sponsored and supported by public libraries, community centers, and also at colleges and universities around the country. In these programs, begun in 1998 by the Seattle Public Library in a program of the Washington Center for the Book, all members of a community read the same book and attend a variety of events and activities related to the book. In Seattle, the program was called "If All of Seattle Read the Same Book." It was highly successful and has been widely imitated (Seattle Reads). If the book is by a living author, the author is often invited to speak to the community, sometimes holding several events for readers. There may also be discussions, films, panel presentations, and related activities. In the college and university iterations of the One Book idea, the book may be related to a campus theme or program.

The National Endowment for the Arts supports programs of this kind as well, including its Big Read partnership programs for libraries, schools and other non-profit organizations. Although NEA's most current research shows a marked increase in literary reading, reported in *Reading on the*

Rise (US, NEA), staff members there are aware that there are still serious problems with reading. In my meeting with David Kipen, former Director of Literature for National Reading Initiatives, Sarah Cook who is the program manager for those Initiatives, and Sunil Iyengar, Director of the Office of Research & Analysis, they noted that their programs attempt to support and encourage literary reading for pleasure among adults in the United States.⁴ Through a variety of indirect measures, including circulation statistics reported by libraries that participate in *The Big Read*, as well as participants' reported engagement with books, libraries, and literary discussions during and after the program, the NEA can track *The Big Read*'s potential impact on communities. The agency did not attempt to measure critical reading skills or literacy development. New studies may reveal more specific information on reading performance and skill development.

Similarly, in programs on college and university campuses, there is little assessment of the reading skills developed or used in One Book programs. In some cases, first-year students are given the book during a summer orientation program and asked to read it prior to the start of school in the fall. In other cases, students (and parents) are told about the book and planned programs and are encouraged to read the book, and in still other cases, students may be told about the book in orientation programs but then find that they are assigned to read it in conjunction with a particular course or with a First-Year Experience kind of program. The advantages of this last approach are discussed in detail by Laufgraben. Colleges and universities may also open the events of their One Book programs to the public, yet another way that they can support and encourage more and better reading in the population at large.

Case Studies of Contemporary Libraries

To examine the ways in which public libraries currently address literacy needs and issues, I consulted with directors of two libraries that serve very different communities in the greater Detroit metropolitan area. One of these, Ms. Marti Custer, was the director of the Baldwin Public Library in Birmingham, Michigan when I spoke to her.⁵ Birmingham is an upper-middle class community north of Detroit in one of the wealthiest counties in the country. Many residents are highly educated, so their literacy needs generally do not focus on basic reading and writing or on English as a second language; some informal tutoring goes on in the library, but it is not sponsored by the library. Work in these areas is generally provided by the public schools or community literacy organizations. The library has recently purchased *Mango*, a language learning program available online, which offers language instruction in a number of languages as well as instructional activities for learners of English as a second language from a variety of language backgrounds.

The library, according to its director, focuses chiefly on three major goals to serve the needs of the community. First, Baldwin tries to address the digital divide, providing computer access and technology training classes for patrons. In addition, it offers an array of material, both print and digital, for people from a variety of language backgrounds, including audio, video, and DVD collections. In a second area of work, the library participates in a program called “Everyone Reads,” which is a “One Book” project co-sponsored by Baldwin and other libraries in a local consortium. The Everyone Reads program is not meant to address new readers and non-readers, but may, according to Ms. Custer, meet the needs of those patrons who might be a-literate, that is, those able but unwilling to read. Typically, the program entails a common book, discussion groups, an author lecture and related activities. With respect to assessment, the library judges the success of Everyone Reads through numbers of checkouts of the book, attendance at programs and informal feedback from patrons. Thus, there is no direct assessment of the actual reading. This approach to assessment is consistent with the general philosophy of libraries to provide material and resources, but not to measure performance as an educational institution might.

A third area of focus, according to Ms. Custer, is the needs of children and youth. Indirectly, the goal here is to support adult reading to provide a model for youngsters. Reading can and should be a core value of the community in whatever ways possible. If alternate channels of delivery such as ebooks or audio books help to support and encourage reading, the library should be providing these materials. The library also offers youth programs, such as a summer reading program, with the goal of reaching people early in life to establish reading habits and interests. Baldwin has a wide range of materials for children, youth, young adults, and adults. Altogether, the library offers materials and services that impact people’s lives across the lifespan. The full range of Baldwin’s offerings can be viewed at its website, www.baldwinlib.org.

A second case study comes from a very different community in the greater Detroit area’s northeast suburbs. The Clinton-Macomb Public Library (hereafter CMPL) serves the Clinton and Macomb Townships, communities near the town of Mount Clemens, north and east of downtown Detroit. The community of 170,000 residents is predominantly white and middle class, with a median age of thirty-seven and a median income of \$71,000, according to the director of the library, Mr. Larry Neal.⁶ The mission of this library, relatively young at only ten years old, is to connect “people of all ages to resources that inform, educate, entertain and inspire,” according to its website (Clinton-Macomb).

Overall, the library does not have a focus on adult literacy as a specific goal. However, in its revised strategic plan, created in 2008, the library

has focused on adult literacy indirectly by working with various partner organizations to pursue its mission. One of these is the Macomb Literacy Partners, which serves English as a second language learners and those in need of adult basic education, including preparation for the GED exam. Library staff members regularly refer patrons to Macomb Literacy Partners and other organizations that may help meet patrons' needs. In addition, the library offers Macomb Literacy and other organizations priority meeting space for individual tutorial sessions, and also offers specific reading materials to meet these needs. In terms of technology, the library offers online access to GED preparation materials. To meet patrons' needs for information literacy, a volunteer program connects those with technology skills to those needing to become skilled. A grant has provided laptops in the library so that skilled volunteers can offer one-on-one tutoring. This program has been especially important in the recent economic downturn, as patrons have turned to the library for employment searching, online applications, and related uses of technology.

Mr. Neal reports that the CMPL addresses adult literacy needs through several other programs. First, in association with the Suburban Library Cooperative, a consortium of twenty libraries in the area, CMPL participates in the One Book, One Community common reading program. Though this program, which entails offering a single book to be read by all interested members of the community, followed variously by an author visit, discussions and other events, is not intended to address adult literacy problems, it does support and encourage reading. Generally, Mr. Neal has said that the common reading programs have not elicited great interest in his community, even when they have been done in conjunction with a state-wide program. The CMPL also participates in and supports the Great Michigan Read sponsored by the Michigan Humanities Council. In this program, the Council chooses a book by a Michigan author or one with a Michigan subject or setting (recently, for example, Hemingway's *Nick Adams Stories* was the chosen book) and it is widely promoted, along with exhibits, talks, films, and related events. Despite the relatively low level of interest in both of these programs (indicated by weak attendance at events in conjunction with the reading), Mr. Neal says that the CMPL will continue to participate in them. By contrast, there is great interest in topics related to history and recent wars, as shown by recent community surveys conducted by the library, and by attendance at events on these topics.

Finally, the library attempts to address literacy needs of patrons who speak other languages or who have difficulty reading in the conventional sense by providing collections of materials in different languages and formats. Materials in other languages are available at the library and through cooperative arrangements with local Hispanic, Italian and other ethnic groups. In addition, Mr. Neal reports that the CMPL offers audio books both

on CD and available through download for patrons to use if they cannot or do not wish to read printed books. Some of these materials are available through partnership arrangements with other local libraries, a scheme that provides a wider array of materials at lower cost for patrons of various libraries within the group. For all patrons, the library generally supports reading through summer reading programs for youth, teens, and adults. Like all public libraries, CMPL has seen a significant increase in library use and the numbers of transactions in the last year or two as a by-product of economic conditions.

Although the focal points of the programs in these two public libraries are somewhat different, there are some key similarities that highlight the overall lack of attention to the kinds of critical literacy urgently needed by the population at large. While the libraries do offer materials and support for reading, there is relatively little attention to improving critical literacy. It is fair to say that those who are not able to achieve simple comprehension of extended non-fiction prose texts, such as those who are non-native speakers, may not be able to work on critical reading skills, so this lack of attention may well be appropriate. On the other hand, if we are to address the needs of the population at large to become fully and critically literate in order to participate fully in our society, both libraries and schools need to pay greater attention to fostering the relevant reading abilities.

Endnotes

1. The information from my personal interview with Anne Boni is used with her express written consent obtained by email 13 Jan. 2010.
2. The information from my interview with Ms. Karren Reish is used with her express written consent obtained by email 6 Jan. 2010.
3. The information from my telephone interview with Dr. Dale Lipschultz is used with her express written consent obtained by email 4 Feb. 2010.
4. The information about my meeting with the officials at the National Endowment for the Arts was reviewed and approved by Ms. Sarah Cook, program manager for the Big Read project, by email 5 Feb. 2010.
5. The information from my interview with Ms. Custer is used with her express written consent obtained by email 5 Jan. 2010.
6. The information from my interview with Mr. Neal is used with his express written consent obtained by email 5 Jan. 2010.

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