

# The Evolution of Literacy Programs in the Context of Library Adult Education

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IT IS NOT SURPRISING that adult literacy has emerged and reemerged cyclically as an element in public library philosophy and adult services. Democratization of our political society and evolution of our economic society from emphasis on skilled crafts to industrial mechanization to high technology have put a premium on the adult's capacity to read. While public schools from the early nineteenth century were focused on the three basic literacy skills of "reading, writing, and 'rithmetic," a significant proportion of our adult population arrived in mainstream American society either without English language skills or without capacity for the three Rs in any language. Waves of immigration from overseas throughout U.S. history and, increasingly in this century, from ill-schooled rural and urban areas of the United States have evoked response from urban public libraries.

What is the rationale for the public library's involvement in literacy programs? Basically, the public library has a responsibility to maintain the climate for use of the library's resources; a literate society is essential to its continued use. As Ranganathan has made clear, libraries have a responsibility to their resources to see that they are used by people who need them.

## **Roots of Public Libraries in the Concern for Literacy**

In the much embattled field of the history of public libraries in the last decade or two, no one has sought to claim a motivation of the young

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institution to be that of providing basic literacy skills. Users were assumed to be able to read, and those who were not literate were outside the scope of the library's concern. Literacy was the context within which the public library functioned. Jesse Shera, in *Foundations of the Public Library*, wrote:

In [the appeal to the popular mind] the public library [of the mid-nineteenth century] was favored by a spirit developing in New England, as elsewhere in America. There was a widespread conviction that universal literacy was necessary, and there was much enthusiasm for education for its own sake. Many believed in the possibility of self-education and the practical value of vocational and technical studies. Finally, there was a prevalent assumption that reading promotes morality. From these convictions there emerged a popular awareness of the importance of the public library to the people.<sup>1</sup>

The library's role was beyond the basic capacity to make out the words on the page. Benjamin Franklin's assessment of the influence of the Library Company of Philadelphia, as cited by Shera, was tied to the library's influence on the informed thinking of society: "the [North American subscription] libraries have improved the general conversation of the Americans, made common tradesmen and farmers as intelligent as most gentlemen from other countries."<sup>2</sup>

Literacy at the level of intellectual curiosity and the power to grasp the significance of meanings leading to the desire to gain and use knowledge was linked by Shera to public-library development. He quoted a foreign visitor in 1853: "Bostonians are a reading public," and he observed that this determination to acquire knowledge was carried to such a pitch "that the coachman who drives you to hear a lecture will pay his money to go in and attend its delivery."<sup>3</sup>

As George Ticknor underscored in his famous 1842 Boston Public Library Report, the public library was to pick up its educational task from the point that the public schools left off. We are justified in concluding that the role of the public library in the early years carried a concern for a higher level of literacy than that of basic literacy.

By the 1850s, Sidney Ditzion concluded that the public library movement was a major force and had swept a wide variety of philosophies and purposes into its forward progress.

On the whole, the needs of the urban wage-earner and his children seem to have been the focus of ideas expressed in behalf of free public libraries. The humanitarian emphasized uplift for the underprivileged. The educator wished to extend downward the benefits of learning beyond the limits already achieved. The democrat desired an informed populace for wider political participation. The common man was interested in his own advancement. The conservative saw in

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such educational facilities more favorable auspices for a stable society....Both the institution and its methods were conceived...as a contribution toward the self-realization of the broad masses of the people.<sup>4</sup>

Basic literacy was assumed as a prerequisite to public-library use, but the spread of knowledge, understanding, and vocational and civic skills was seen as linked to the outcome of the use of libraries.

In interpreting the role of the public library at the turn of the last century, Rosemary Dumont quotes Henry Steele Commager: "The decade of the 1890s is the watershed of American history,"<sup>5</sup> with its move into the predominantly industrial, urban society of "modern" America. Dumont sees the early roots and goals of the public library yielding to new social forces. Extensive cultural adjustments required by the influx of uprooted rural Americans and European immigrants caused turmoil in the cities. Government was mobilized as an agency of human welfare as social reforms swept the cities. Public libraries intensified their role as a social escalator for the deprived, providing literacy, acculturation, and employment skills. Lowell A. Martin commented on this period: "The family and school were no longer sufficient to mold a unified society, as in late 19th century America, with large groups of immigrants entering the country. The democratization of knowledge attending the rise of the common man was one of the contexts within which the public library grew."<sup>6</sup>

Work with the foreign born in the New York Public Library and similar large urban libraries across the country began about 1900 and initiated the first programs of basic literacy in public libraries. Branch library programs had a wide scope. Monroe reported:

While the emphasis varied in work among different national groups, there was a similarity of program among the branch libraries serving concentrations of foreign population: viewing the branch library as a neighborhood cultural center; sponsoring classes in English for adults; introducing adult school classes to the library; presenting lectures, concerts, and art exhibits related to the national cultures of the neighborhood groups; involving neighborhood leaders in sponsorship of library events; sustaining a book collection in the native languages of the neighborhood groups; staffing the library with a professional librarian competent in the native languages of the local groups and sympathetic to their cultural values.<sup>7</sup>

One foreign assistant made clear the subtlety with which literacy "instruction" was introduced through her weekly Mothers' Club: "I tried to devote one part of the meeting to reading and discussion of an article on [hygiene, child study, or current events], the other to the reading of a story."<sup>8</sup> Specific "classes in English" were sponsored rather

than conducted by the public librarians on the whole. The selection of "readable books" for literate and illiterate foreigners and American-born readers of limited reading ability was a common focus among public libraries in the 1930s and 1940s and represents an extension of "literacy" services although it was seldom interpreted as such.

### Defining Literacy

The term *literacy* refers to "the ability to read and write," according to Webster's various dictionaries. Library literacy programs have focused on reading. The expansion of literacy to include understanding, critical analysis, and ability to grasp knowledge from print and to put it to use has evolved over the years.

With the Manpower Development and Training Act of 1963, there was an expansion of the meaning of basic literacy from a single focus on reading to include reading, writing, and simple calculation. The earlier test of basic literacy (the ability to write one's name) then expanded to the abilities gained in primary grades. The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 enabled programs of adult basic education (ABE) to become widely available through public schools. The definition of literacy expanded to show two levels: basic literacy and functional literacy, which represented skills for coping with daily living.

At this point the question was raised: What is the public library's role in literacy education? Professional response to this was embodied in the refocus of libraries away from "literacy" to "services to adult illiterates," the focus used by Bernice MacDonald in her report *Literacy Activities in Public Libraries* in 1966.<sup>9</sup>

During the 1960s, public librarians focused on identifying or stimulating development of reading materials for illiterate and new literate groups, and on joint planning and programming with other educational agencies. But reading aloud adult groups; adult school class visits to learn skills in library use; informational materials on home, jobs, and job-finding; as well as book talks to stimulate interest in applying the new reading skills expanded the program of materials provision to teachers and classes.

MacDonald identified the question "Is it the library's job to teach?" and concluded that the debate was probably won by those who said: It is the library's job to see that the teaching gets done<sup>10</sup> and that the library is ready to supply materials and space for classes, recruit students, and follow up with reading guidance and information service to the adult new literates.

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For the decade following the MacDonald Report, new and innovative programs—both in and outside libraries—emphasized the excitement of reading when it is related to the keen interests of the nonreader.<sup>11</sup>

An extensive study in depth of the relationship of illiterates and new literates to print, conducted by Helen H. Lyman at the University of Wisconsin—Madison over almost a ten-year-period, brought a series of professional reports, two of which have shaped the thinking of the profession about literacy.<sup>12</sup> In 1976 and 1977 Lyman freshly defined literacy as characterized by four developmental stages, moving from (1) *illiteracy* (unable to read or write) to (2) *basic literacy* or functional illiteracy (some words are recognized and meaning is extracted from them, but assistance from others who can read is needed for many daily functions at home or work) to (3) *functional literacy* or “limited literacy” (able to handle home, job, community tasks using print but not fully able to study new fields of knowledge) to (4) *mature reader* or “literacy” (able to understand virtually all materials the average citizen is expected to read plus materials within his or her special interests).<sup>13</sup>

Lyman further summarized the nature of skills needed for reading:

1. Visual discrimination among letters and words.
2. Auditory discrimination (hearing words distinctly and relating them to printed words).
3. Capacity for sustained attention.
4. A range of vocabulary and idiom.
5. Comprehension: understanding words and sentences; grasping details as well as main idea or general significance of a passage; grasp inferences or implications.
6. Fluency and efficiency in reading.
7. Capacity to handle special kinds of reading materials (maps, telephone books, dictionary, etc.).
8. Capacity to respond (critical reading, empathetic reading) for evaluation, appreciation, enjoyment.<sup>14</sup>

Further, Lyman perceived literacy as providing the power to the new literate to deal with the tasks of daily living, the expansion of horizons for life, and for self-realization. She pointed to Howard McClusky's model of the power/load concept with the perception that literacy can provide the “margin of power” to enable the new literate to handle the load of his responsibilities.<sup>15</sup> By the late 1970s, the definition of *literacy* has grown to include competent understanding and use of a range of printed materials and the capacity to put the new knowledge to use.

In the decades of the 1960s, 1970s, and into the 1980s, the expansion of media which store information, opinion, and creative experience has

been great. The capacity to use films, television, and computerized programmed texts may well represent the additional literacy skills needed in the 1980s and 1990s for the daily tasks at home, on the job, and in the community. Ella Griffin, then education program specialist, U.S. Office of Education, wrote a foreword to Lyman's *Literacy and the Nation's Libraries* and commented on a broader definition of literacy in dominantly illiterate societies:

Libraries have become more education-oriented, utilizing a wide range of communications media. This is especially important in areas where the great majority of the people are illiterate and where literacy education must begin and often continue indefinitely to operate at the pre-book level. In such regions, literacy is still not considered to be the first stage in the process of education, and the oral tradition still prevails. Audiovisual media make a natural bridge between customary and new ways of learning. Accordingly, library services are being developed which capitalize on this phenomenon, services which can respond flexibly to the varied and changing needs of an expanded readership.<sup>16</sup>

Public librarianship has yet to make the leap in literacy programs to include skills in obtaining information and messages from these media with understanding, with critical analysis, and with the capacity to use what is learned.

### **Issues in Current Adult Literacy Services**

Tying the program of literacy services of public libraries to the institution's philosophical commitments raises two important issues. The first issue rests for its resolution on what we understand literacy to mean and the extent to which public libraries have an interest in sustaining a fully literate public. Ralph Beals, in a 1943 memo to his supervisor of branches in the New York Public Library, commented that the major role of the public library in adult education was "infusing authentic knowledge into the thinking and decision-making of the community."<sup>17</sup> The American Library Association Council in 1984 provided a rationale for the association's "Four Year Goals" "in an atomic age," declaring that libraries "must now put major emphasis on spreading information and stimulating citizen action upon the solution of problems." Merely having collections and services related to the problems was no longer sufficient, but library services should directly contribute to citizen action.<sup>18</sup> Lyman's analysis of the mature reader in 1976 included the capacity for "independent critical thinking."<sup>19</sup>

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Are these matters of literacy? Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren, in their college manual *How to Read a Book*, identify four levels of reading:

*Elementary Reading*—"beginning literacy": recognize the words on the page and have the capacity to answer the question "What does the sentence say?" Only after answering this question can one proceed to try to understand.

*Inspectional Reading*—the art of "skimming systematically," of getting the most out of a book in a relatively short time, in order to understand the topic, structure, and point of view of the book.

*Analytical Reading*—"the best and most complete reading that is possible given an unlimited time" and concentrates on understanding. This is "intensely active reading," testing and criticizing the book.

*Syntopical Reading*—reading a number of books on a topic comparatively, "placing them in relation to one another and to the subject." The syntopical reader "is able to construct an analysis of the subject that may not be in any of the books."<sup>20</sup>

Literacy has traditionally been related to level one, yet true literacy (in Francis Bacon's terminology) requires special skills at levels two, three, and four. Reading is not just deciphering the words, but includes ingesting the meaning and testing its validity as well as responding by putting what is learned to use.

Public librarians, under the adult education movement, have had an instinct for their responsibility to enable reading at level three (analytical reading) as they have sponsored book discussion programs for over fifty years. The skills of reading complex ideas and reading about complicated human experiences have been the focus of discussion programs from the late 1920s, with the People's Institute; through Great Books, American Heritage, and the diverse programs of the 1950s and 1960s to the present the "Let's Talk About It" series. These programs may well be conceived of as a part of a broad literacy program.

A second issue revolves around the question of whether literacy has to do only with print. As the technology for delivery of information, opinion, and human experience has expanded beyond print and the stained-glass window to include such media as films, television, and computerized programmed texts, the need to master new skills in analysis and criticism of these forms of message is urgent. Much uncritical use of film (to pass the time, to trigger conversation, etc.) needs to be supplemented by critical use of film. Television's mock-up of reality is very persuasive, but sophisticated viewers are able to analyze bias in the camera work and distortion of facts and impressions by the selection or sequencing of topics or the editing of the record. The field known in the

late 1930s as "propaganda analysis" and designed for the layman needs now to be drawn from the corridors of research in the advertising and political party fields so that, in full public view, the layman may be a good critical judge of what he sees.

Equally important for laymen's understanding are the limits and problems posed by programmed texts—the computerizing of which does nothing to remove. As reading is supplemented by these media as sources of knowledge and bases for action, public librarians might appropriately assist in the sophisticating of their users.

The exercise of intellectual freedom, which so often stresses freedom from interference in access to resources, might focus equally on the freedom to make informed judgments. The cause of intellectual freedom may best be served by professional concern for the promotion of skills in informed decision-making. Public library services, when analyzed for their contribution to use of a wide range of resources for arriving at opinions and decision, may prove to have established a considerable program of "literacy for the mature literate."

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