ALA's Role in Adult and Literacy Education

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Introduction

The growth of literacy education programs in libraries in the 1970s and 1980s is not an isolated phenomenon in the field of librarianship. The role of public libraries in the continuing education and lifelong learning of the out-of-school adult was discussed in America as early as the 1830s. Current literacy education programs take the library's role in the community beyond being a center for book collections to serve the independent learner toward being a local alternative education center actively involved in building the learner's reading skills. It provides an expansive role for the librarian in developing users of books. Librarians are educators—not merely in the sense of being instructors but in the broader view of being facilitators for learning.

ALA Activity in Adult Education

According to Grace Stevenson, former ALA associate executive secretary, "the Association's purpose has always been to increase the use and usefulness of books....The ALA has been responsible for several projects of some consequence which are directly related to the stimulation and improvement of reading." A brief review of ALA's activities over the years between the 1920s and the 1980s demonstrates an evolution of interest in the library's role in adult education projects to its present support of the development of library literacy programs.

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In July 1924, the ALA appointed a commission on the library and adult education whose work was funded by the Carnegie Foundation. The commission, chaired by Judson T. Jennings, ALA’s past-president, was charged “to study the adult education movement, and the work of libraries for adults and for older boys and girls out of school, and to report its findings and recommendations to the ALA Council.” In its report published in 1924, the commission defined adult education with concepts that are relevant in the 1980s:

What is Adult Education? It may mean the teaching of reading to illiterates. To some, it means the Americanization of the foreign-born; to others, it signifies vocational training. But Adult Education goes far beyond all these. It is based on a recognition of the fact that education is a life-long process, and that the university graduate, as well as the man of little schooling, is in need of further training, inspiration, and mental growth; that the training secured in school and college is necessarily limited to fundamentals, and that the real development of the individual lies in the independent effort of later years.

At the conclusion of its two-year survey of public library activities the commission published a formal report. In the report they made six recommendations and cited “nine definite needs that require serious consideration” for libraries to meet their responsibilities in adult education. Among the needs cited were: (1) “a direct service of advice and assistance to individual readers and students”; (2) “an information service regarding local opportunities for adult education”; and (3) “organized and more adequate library service to other organizations engaged in adult education....” The commission recommended that the ALA “establish a permanent ‘Adult Education Board’ to continue [their] studies.” The commission also recommended the continuation of the ALA “Reading With A Purpose” project of reading lists launched in 1925. “These were carefully chosen well-annotated subject lists with an introductory essay by an expert in the field. The lists covered sixty-seven subjects when publication was discontinued in 1933, at which time approximately 850,000 copies had been sold.”

The commission was dissolved in 1926 but the ALA Council created the Board on Library and Adult Education (1926-1937) and later the ALA Education Board (1937-1955). The primary work of the latter board was “securing foundation funds for experimentation, initiating projects to increase the educational effectiveness of libraries, and encouraging librarians to put more emphasis on serving the educational needs of the individual reader.... The adult educational services provided by public libraries between 1920 and 1940 were directed toward three
main goals: personal development, vocational improvement, and civic enlightenment.7

These adult education activities within ALA and in the field were not accepted without controversy. Lynn E. Birge effectively describes the debate and opposition of many of the profession's outstanding leaders of their time as they viewed the role of the library in adult education.8 Margaret E. Monroe insightfully concludes:

There was almost no technique or condition of service which did not, at one time or another, receive the label "adult education"—from cataloging for the general reader to the placement of book collections in labor union head-quarters...increasingly within the American Library Association, "adult services" had become a category including the broad range of information and educational services to adults and proved a highly satisfactory term and context both for the librarians who were adult education minded and for those who were not. The development of "adult services" to cover the group of services freed "adult education" to function once again as a philosophy concerned with values and objectives for educational services.9

Assisting individuals and groups to use library book resources for personal education and enlightenment became well established in public libraries as the ALA maintained its involvement in both the philosophy and programs in adult education. Book talks, book clubs, exhibits, film programs, lectures, as well as reader's advisory services were being offered in public libraries. With grants received from the Fund for Adult Education, ALA launched a series of adult education projects from 1951 to 1955. Among them was a project to survey the varieties of adult education programs in public libraries. The findings were reported by Helen Lyman Smith on data collected from librarians' responses.10 The questionnaire developed for the study included a list of thirty-seven services identified and defined as relating to adult education. An important observation revealed by the survey was that the planning of these library activities was based on internal decisions rather than on an analysis of community need as advocated by the ALA Adult Education Board.11

ALA and Literacy Education

After the work of the Adult Education Board, ALA established, at the 1957 Annual Conference, the Adult Services Division (ASD). The term adult services was broadly defined to include "indirect guidance services, reader guidance services, services to organizations, library-sponsored group programs, and services to the community."12
In response to a growing interest of librarians to serve illiterates, both the ALA Adult Services Division and the Public Library Association (PLA) developed two separate committees: the ASD Committee on Reading Improvement for Adults and the PLA Committee on Serving the Functionally Illiterate. It was the ASD committee, however, that in 1964 obtained a J. Morris Jones-World Book Encyclopedia-ALA Goals Committee grant to study public library service to the functionally illiterate. Bernice MacDonald of the New York Public Library was hired as principal investigator. The study included field trips to fifteen cities where literacy education programs were being conducted. MacDonald observed joint planning and programming between libraries and literacy agencies. The primary problem librarians faced was a lack of appropriate materials for the beginning adult reader.13

The fifteen librarians involved in literacy education programs were reflective of the library field's response to the social changes occurring within the United States. Librarians were cognizant of the events of the times which included the civil rights movement and the development of the "War on Poverty." The library field was being challenged by new social needs and legislative priorities to serve the "economically and culturally disadvantaged." The Library Services and Construction Act (LSCA) reflected the concerns of the "Great Society." The word outreach became a label for the process of extending library services and programs to nontraditional library users.

The concern and interest of some librarians in the late 1950s and 1960s gave rise to the ALA Social Responsibilities Round Table (SRRT) and also, in 1969, to the ALA Coordinating Committee on Library Services to the Disadvantaged. After two years' work the committee recommended the development of an office to continue their efforts. In 1970 the ALA voted, at its annual conference, to establish an Office for Library Service to the Disadvantaged (OLSD). At the ALA annual conference in 1980, the council voted to change the name of the office to the Office for Library Outreach Services (OLOS). The OLSD advisory committee members requested a change to identify a process for reaching out to nontraditional library users rather than using the label ascribed to a specific population. The office was opened in September 1973 with the primary objective being "to ensure that all urban and rural poor have convenient access to library services that they recognize as meeting their needs." The program direction OLSD (and later OLOS) took was defined as: "(a) education, within libraries, for literacy and the maintenance of literacy skills; (b) the provision of life-centered 'survival' information and referral [services]; (c) promotion of library outreach services...."14
Literacy education is a significant and relevant method for reaching out to those individuals and groups often identified as "disadvantaged," "nonusers," or "underusers" of library services. Literacy education would provide the adult with a reason and a skill to use libraries. The terminology and definitions of adult functional illiteracy are discussed in most of the literature developed about the problem since the early 1900s. Briefly, adults are termed "functionally illiterate" when their skills of reading and comprehension are so limited that they cannot apply these skills to their everyday life. Reading labels, menus, applications, street signs, writing their names, and comprehending simple arithmetic problems or instructions are not within their capabilities. U.S. Department of Education studies in 1975 and recently confirm that one out of every five Americans is functionally illiterate. Literacy education is that part of adult education in which the basic skills of reading, oral and written communication, and numeracy are taught.

On the heels of the library field's involvement with the U.S. Office of Education's Right to Read (R2R) project, ALA began to discuss the library's role in activities for those people identified as adult functional illiterates. OLSD (OLOS) and PLA obtained a grant from the Bureau of Library and Learning Resources, the U.S Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Office of Education to develop a handbook for librarians about their role in literacy activities. The project involved representatives from eight ALA units and experts from the fields of reading, adult education, and literacy volunteer groups. The book, *Literacy and the Nation's Libraries*, written by Helen H. Lyman, was well received by those librarians who wanted a guide to help them develop literacy programs. It was reviewed in the education press as well as in library journals.

Lyman's book also became a focal point for the next program undertaken by OLSD (OLOS), which was to train a cadre of librarians who would act as trainers for other library staff members and trustees. OLSD (OLOS) obtained a large grant to conduct the training from the Lilly Endowment Inc. In 1979 a series of three workshops were conducted in Bloomington, Indiana; Denver, Colorado; and Syracuse, New York. One hundred and twenty-four participants from thirty-three states and the Virgin Islands attended the four-day workshops. The workshops were designed to train librarians in the techniques of establishing programs for tutoring in basic literacy skills for the functionally illiterate. The workshops had embedded within them an emphasis on identifying the community literacy needs and collaboration with other literacy provider agencies such as adult basic education programs or
literacy volunteer programs. The trainers involved in the program came from the fields of librarianship, adult education, the Literacy Volunteers of America, and the Laubach Literacy International. All expenses were paid for each participant from the Lilly Endowment grant. Participants came in teams of two. Each member of the team and their supervisor had to sign an agreement that the participant would return to their state, regional, or large metropolitan library to train others and/or to establish literacy education programs in their libraries. The results of the workshops were characterized as having a “ripple-effect.” Over 862 additional librarians (or 6.95 others per ALA workshop participant) were trained and new programs sprung up around the country.

Additionally, grant funds enabled OLSO (OLOS) to develop a model collection of materials for adult new readers that librarians could review as a basis for starting collections in their libraries. Two sets of basic literacy materials were purchased for circulation through the ALA headquarters library. The materials were selected by Melissa Forinash Buckingham, Reader's Development Program, Free Library of Philadelphia.

Workshops or ALA conference programs have been important in keeping a focus on library literacy activity. A post-conference workshop to bring together library literacy program administrators, library school faculty and trustees was held in Philadelphia following the 1982 ALA Annual Conference. The workshop was cosponsored by OLSO, the American Library Trustee Association (ALTA) and the Public Library Association (PLA). The workshop was underwritten in part by Scott Foresman's Lifelong Learning Division and the “Famous Amos” Cookie Co. (Wally Amos is the national spokesperson for Literacy Volunteers of America). In 1984 a preconference training workshop designed for public and state library staff and trustee members was presented in Denton, Texas. The workshop was again sponsored by OLSO, PLA, and ALTA. Both of these workshops also drew participants from the education and publishing professions.

Other units within the ALA also have developed strong committee interests in library literacy related activities. The American Library Trustee Association has made a strong commitment to library literacy programs. They promote literacy programs in libraries through a variety of ways that include an award that is given to an individual who has been prominent in promoting literacy. The Public Library Association revamped their Right to Read Committee into a very active Alternative Education Programs Section (AEPS). They represent the interests of public librarians in a broad spectrum of adult and literacy education programs. PLA/AEPS has inaugurated an “Advancement of Literacy
ALA's Role in Adult and Literacy Education

Award" whose recipients are publishers or booksellers. The Young Adult Services Division (YASD) has a High Interest/Low Level Literacy Materials Evaluation Committee that publishes annotated selected lists.

Another significant structural advance for literacy and libraries was the affiliation by the ALA Council of two national literacy organizations: the Laubach Literacy International (LLI) and the Literacy Volunteers of America, Inc. (LVA). Affiliation signifies a recognition of the "kindred purposes" of a national organization with the ALA. The affiliation of these organizations was sponsored by OLOS with the approval of other ALA units. Both LLI (or its national "arm"—Laubach Literacy Action) and LVA have public-library-based literacy programs. Their representatives have been active in many ALA-sponsored training workshops, programs, and conferences.

The ALA took a giant leap into its commitment to literacy education in 1981 when it brought together eleven national volunteer, private, and public sector organizations to organize the Coalition for Literacy. Each organization has a history of involvement in working to promote a more literate population. The ALA Office for Library Outreach Services is the coordinating unit for the coalition.

The organizations that formed the executive committee of the coalition are: the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (AAACE); American Association of Advertising Agencies (AAAA); American Library Association; Contact Center, Inc.; B. Dalton Booksellers; International Reading Association (IRA); Laubach Literacy International; Literacy Volunteers of America; National Advisory Council on Adult Education (NACAE); National Commission on Libraries and Information Science (NCLIS); National Council of State Directors of Adult Education (NCSDAE). There have been three chairpersons for the executive committee: (1) Carol A. Nemeyer, associate librarian for national programs of the Library of Congress; (2) Gary Eyre, executive director of the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education; and (3) Violet M. Malone, director of extension services, College of Agriculture, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

The coalition was organized on the premise that the keys to a solution of illiteracy in America lay in calling national attention to the problem and spurring local activity that would bring human and financial resources to bear on the problem. The goal of the coalition's program was to expand or increase the learning resources available to Americans with minimal literacy skills. The program had two objectives: the first was to conduct a three-year multimedia campaign that would inform the nation of the problem of illiteracy within the United
The coalition's media campaign was officially launched in a press conference held on 12 December 1984 in the Trustees Room of the New York Public Library. The Advertising Council (sponsors of "Smokey the Bear," "Take a Bite Out of Crime," and "A Mind Is A Terrible Thing To Waste") coordinated the media campaign. They recruited the advertising agency of D'Arcy, Masius, Benton & Bowles/Worldwide as volunteers to develop the print and nonprint ads. Two advertising campaign strategies were developed—one to inform and appeal to the general public and the other to raise the awareness of the corporate sector. The theme that was chosen for the general public ads was "Volunteer Against Illiteracy: The Only Degree You Need is a Degree of Caring." The audience was identified as those who wanted to become volunteers to help another person learn to read. The advertising theme developed to appeal to the corporate sector is: "Volunteer Against Illiteracy: A Literate America is a Good Investment." This audience is encouraged to bring corporate/private sector resources to assist national and local literacy activities.

The Advertising Council conducted studies to measure the awareness of communities about adult illiteracy before and after releasing the television and print ads. The campaign is now among the top five social awareness campaigns that the council coordinates. Within the first year of the coalition's advertising campaign, the Ad Council indicators cite that awareness of adult illiteracy has jumped from 21 to 30 percent. The print, radio, and television media have contributed an estimated value of $20 million in advertising space and time to the coalition's campaign.

The second part of the coalition's program was to operate a nationwide toll-free 800-number to provide a linkage between inquiries and local literacy-provider agencies. Since 1985 more than 40,000 volunteers have been referred to local literacy programs. The telephone information and referral service (I&R) is operated by the Contact Center—an organization experienced in running I&R services for exoffenders and runaway youth. They had developed an initial database of nationwide literacy programs in 1978 under the auspices of the American Association of Advertising Agencies. This databank has been expanded and is constantly updated.

The ALA started the coalition with a $15,000 grant from the H.W. Wilson Company. The coalition's program required funding to cover the out-of-pocket costs to develop the media campaign and funds to staff the I&R nationwide toll-free telephone number. Fundraising has been a constant activity of the coalition's executive committee members. Over
one-half million dollars have been raised since 1983 to conduct the work of the coalition. The ALA is the fiscal agent for the coalition and has made a substantial contribution of staff time and resources for keeping the coalition operational. Major funders for the coalition include: the U.S. Department of Education; the Business Council for Effective Literacy; B. Dalton Booksellers; the General Electric Company; the MacArthur Foundation; and the author, Sidney Sheldon. Other groups who have cosponsored coalition activities through "in-kind" contributions or small grants are: Time, Inc.; the American Newspaper Publishers Association (ANPA); and the Magazine Publishers Association (MPA).

The coalition has had an impact in focusing attention on adult illiteracy. The response from individuals, groups, and organizations may be characterized as both "bandwagon" and "ripple." Although any finite measure of effect on literacy education programs may not be possible, the coalition is undertaking a formative evaluation to assess observable changes between 1981 and 1985. The evaluation, conducted under the leadership of Anabel Newman, Reading Department, University of Indiana, Bloomington, will not be completed until June 1986. There are already notable activities that may be seen as having been influenced by the coalition. Chief among these are the growth of local, regional, or statewide coalitions of literacy activity. Librarians are very involved in those that have developed in Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, California, and other states across the country.

The coalition's three-year project has another year-and-one-half before termination. There are already local, state, and national awareness programs in the planning stages. The largest national program will be Project Literacy U.S. (PLUS). Organized by the Public Broadcasting System (PBS-TV) and the American Broadcasting Company (ABC-TV) it will develop television programming and engender or support local community task forces against illiteracy. The project has the endorsement of both the coalition and the ALA. This type of national project will augment and expand the work started by the coalition.

The ALA Washington office's unique role in library legislation is having an enormous impact on the development of literacy programs in libraries. The 1984 Library Services and Construction Act amendments authorized expenditures for literacy programs. The state library agencies in California, Illinois, Kentucky, Florida, New York, and New Jersey are among those that are actively involved in supporting the development of library-based literacy education programs. There are many state library agencies and local libraries that recognize the need but are still not sure of the library's role in literacy education. The role
JEAN ELLEN COLEMAN

for libraries in literacy and adult education activities is built on the underlying goal of library outreach services as stated by the OLOS Advisory Committee: "Effective library services must recognize the pluralistic nature of society and address the needs of all facets of the community. The service must be planned and well executed in order to achieve this goal."20

The ALA is currently involved in a planning process in which opinions and ideas about its role are being gathered from the association's membership. An area of interest cited by a significant portion of the membership surveyed was libraries and literacy activities. Because ALA has an impressive history and good role models, the association will continue for the remainder of the 1980s to reflect the interest of that portion of the profession that still believes in the educative role of librarians in adult and literacy education.

References

4. Ibid., p. 13.
5. Ibid., pp. 102, 105.
11. Birge, Serving Adult Learners, pp. 91, 93.
12. Lee, Continuing Education for Adults, p. 98.

216

LIBRARY TRENDS
ALA’s Role in Adult and Literacy Education
