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Library-based literacy programs: the Reading Section's major activities
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Summary

A presentation on the literacy work of the IFLA Reading Section. Describes the 3 main elements of the Section's work, and relates the 'literacy' facet firstly to IFLA, and then to a wider professional context. In presenting the latter, the example is used of the Reading Section 'Guidelines for library-based literacy programs', with the UK adult literacy initiative 'Quick Reads' used as an illustrative case study. Suggestions are made of ways in which library-based literacy programmes can be developed, sustained and evaluated.

1. Introduction

I am delighted to talk to you today on behalf of the Reading Section, on the subject of 'Library-based literacy programs: the Reading Section's major activities'. The word 'literacy' is present in each of the titles of the presentations given here today, and literacy is clearly a major focus of the work of each of us here in this room, both in terms of our IFLA roles and the work we do during the rest of the year.

The main subject of my presentation is a specific literacy project we in the Reading Section have been involved in, but first I wanted to talk more generally about our literacy work and to demonstrate to what extent it both interrelates and forms part of a wider context.

2. The Reading Section and literacy

It was in 1999 that the IFLA Professional Board turned the final report of the 1996-9 IFLA Literacy Working Group over to the Reading Section 'for whatever action it deemed necessary'. The Reading Section therefore added the promotion of literacy by libraries to its agenda and to its strategic plan. This addition is clearly reflected in our current mission statement for 2004-5:

'The mission of the Reading Section is to assist IFLA in effectively fulfilling one of its key professional priorities: promoting literacy, reading and lifelong learning.'

This priority is comprehensive in its understanding of literacy, from basic literacy to information literacy, its understanding of reading and of lifelong learning.ⁱ

From this statement we can see the three focal points of the work we do:

- | | |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Literacy □ Reading □ Lifelong learning. | <i>For all people, whatever their age, gender, educational attainment or social status.</i> |
|---|---|

These themes are fine in theory, but no individual Section should operate in isolation: we need to relate them firstly to IFLA as a whole, and secondly to the work that we and colleagues do when we're not attending international conferences!

2.1 Relating the Reading Section literacy work to IFLA

Let's look firstly at IFLA. It would be very straightforward for any of us to relate the work we do to the organisation overall, and there are a number of ways in which a section on reading could do this. For example, we all know that President Kay Raseroka's theme for 2003-5 is 'libraries for lifelong literacy'. The link from 'lifelong literacy' to reading is clear, but how do we apply the theme in practice?

To give you a practical example, our Open Session this year (on Friday from 8.30 to 10.30 in the San Telmo Room, Sheraton Retiro Hotel) uses the overall conference theme as its backbone. Entitled 'Libraries, language and literacy: linking continents through reading promotion programmes', our broad theme is linked to the overall conference theme 'libraries: tools for education and development', and to President Raseroka's theme of lifelong literacy. The objective of our session is to demonstrate how countries in the Northern and Southern hemispheres – or countries within the developing world – work together in their reading programmes to support development in local communities. We wanted to hear from community or region-based reading programmes, and we asked each speaker to consider six aspects of this programme when planning their presentations. And I would suggest to you that these six elements could be used to assess the value of any project or programme:

1. Planning & development	How did the project come to be; what were its objectives?
2. Management	Was a team established to oversee the day-to-day operation of the project?
3. Accountability	To whom were project staff accountable? Were there any external funder requirements?
4. Cooperation & networking	To what extent were partnerships developed to help to deliver the project, and how effective were these? Can we be honest about the more difficult aspects of our work, and what actions have we taken to remove these difficulties?
5. Challenges faced/overcome	Can we be honest about the more difficult aspects of our work, and what actions have we taken to remove these difficulties?
6. Evaluation	One of the most important and yet often overlooked aspects of a project/programme: what measures do we take to evaluate the work we do, and what recommendations would we make to a team planning to undertake similar work in the future?

Giving a template such as this to our speakers serves two purposes: firstly, it ensures that there is a degree of consistency, that it is easier to compare one project to another. Secondly, it hopefully means that the individual members of the audience can more easily extract those elements of each presentation are most useful to them.

2.2 Relating the Reading Section literacy work to a wider professional context

Having looked within the IFLA organisation I would now like to move on to consider the way in which the literacy work of the Reading Section relates not only to IFLA, but to a far wider professional context. It is, of course, essential to report on the professional practice and research of ourselves and our colleagues, but in the Reading Section we try equally to adopt a more proactive approach, and to use our committee as a channel through which to play a more active role in practice. In my public libraries research group at Sheffield Universityⁱⁱ we talk of ‘GRIPP’, in other words ‘getting research into policy and practice’, and this is equally applicable to this key objective of the Reading Section.

2.2.1 ‘Guidelines for library-based literacy programs: some practical suggestions’

The work I have chosen to illustrate this is our project devising ‘guidelines for library-based literacy programs’. This takes the form of practical suggestions for library staff ‘who would like to help our society become more literate’. They are available to download from the Reading Section website, and are currently available in English, French, Spanish and Portuguese, although we would hope to use our IFLA colleagues’ expertise to develop further translated versions.

In devising the guidelines we had two specific aims:

1. To encourage libraries to become involved in literacy programmes
2. That they should serve as an informal checklist for evaluating library-based programmes which are already in place.

We structured our guidelines around eight questions, which as a whole are intended as a guide to library staff. We recognise, as our text states, that the ‘answers we give will not apply to every library or every project’. Both questions and answers are offered as suggestions, not as formal guidelines. ‘They are written for library staff who share, and wish to implement, our belief that libraries and literacy are partners.’ⁱⁱⁱ

These, then, are the eight questions our guidelines both ask and attempt to answer – or at least, attempt to guide the librarian to the most appropriate solution for his or her individual situation:

1. *Who is our audience?*
2. *How do we start planning and developing community cooperation?*
3. *Who are our potential partners?*
4. *What materials are needed and how do we choose them?*
5. *How do we train our staff?*
6. *How do we promote our literacy program?*
7. *How can we tell if we are successful?*
8. *How do we keep our program going?*

In order to respond to each of these I thought that it would be helpful both to summarise the key points from the relevant section of the guidelines, and to illustrate them using a real-life example. This example is a library-based literacy programme from the UK, an initiative called ‘*Quick Reads*’^{iv}, a partnership initiative begun in 2000 by Essex Libraries and Adult Education. Essex is a large county in South East England, the western edge very close to the East side of London. Typical of the majority of British counties, it contains areas of both relative wealth and poverty, and many of the poorer communities can be overlooked in terms of housing, education and leisure facilities. Literacy levels are often low, as reflected in the overall UK statistics.

It may surprise you to hear that during the past decade the UK media have reported that as many as seven million British adults, approximately 20% of the British population, have more or less serious problems with basic skills, i.e. with literacy and/or numeracy. (Department for Education and Employment, 1999^v). Since coming to office in 1997, the present Labour government in the UK has focused in part on adult learning, particularly basic literacy and numeracy, and the Quick Reads initiative was funded as a direct result of this governmental concern for adult literacy.

The overall objectives of the Quick Reads project were to promote ‘the pleasure of reading to those with reading difficulties, and to provide ‘a new resource for engaging and motivating learners’. (Essex Libraries, 2002^{vi}). It gave adult learners throughout the county the opportunity to select, read and review books from a specifically targeted collection, entitled ‘Quick Reads’:

‘Quick Reads are mainstream books selected as being accessible for emergent readers using criteria drawn up with Mid Essex Adult Community College’^{vii}.

I was the academic researcher employed by Essex Libraries to evaluate the impact of the Quick Reads project, and the data I collected for this evaluation give us excellent examples to illustrate the benefits to an initiative of taking into account each of the points made in the ‘guidelines for library-based literacy programs’ document.

3. Guidelines for library-based literacy programs: the questions

3.1 Who is our audience?

The first question we ask is ‘who is our audience?’ When we are looking to devise a literacy programme it is very likely that we will have a target audience in mind. As soon as the group is identified, we need to think about the needs of its members in terms of, for example:

- Location, time and frequency of literacy classes
- Aspects of learning support – audiovisual, printed, ICT materials.

How did the Quick Reads project team determine and reach its target group(s)? The main target group of the Quick Reads initiative was taken from the 20% of the population as described above, and could be described using the term ‘emergent readers’. Participants were aged 16 years and over, and were one or all of the following:

- Adults with a reading age between 9 years and 14 years of age (this relates to level 1 and lower level 2 of the national standards for basic skills).
- Functionally literate readers, who need to build enjoyment and confidence and simply practise their newly acquired reading skills.
- Adults who may lack experience as readers and in discussing and sharing reading experiences.

3.2 How do we start planning and developing community cooperation?

What is the local, regional and national context in which the library service operates? Think about cultural and educational policies, the cultural identity of the locality, and basic community information.

A vital element of this planning stage is to determine the aims and objectives of the overall programme. These must be clear before beginning any work, and need to be agreed with key stakeholders, including colleagues, project partners and members of the local community. Depending on the scale of the initiative it may be helpful to consult experts in regional or even national positions, representatives from authors' organisations and the media.

How did the Quick Reads project team plan and develop its partnerships with the local community?

It was decided at an early stage of the initiative that there would be a specific post created, the 'County Basic Skills Manager', a person who acted as a mediator between the colleges and the libraries, coordinating the overall project partnership. This was regarded by both parties as beneficial:

[from the Adult Education perspective] '*...the management by Maggie has always been very effective...so it's been quite easy.*'

[from the Library perspective] '*We have an effective partnership model, in that Maggie is the Basic Skills Manager, she is on the project management group, and she has regular communication with the coordinators of the tutors.*'

3.3 Who are our potential partners?

Working in partnership with other interested agencies with shared objectives, we are more likely to succeed. If we think about our own local community, the library is frequently a major link between cultural, educational, information and literacy services.

How effective were the Quick Reads partnerships between the library and adult education services?

It can often be daunting to set up a partnership, but the benefits can be considerable. Some reluctance was initially felt by Quick Reads tutors, who were obviously concerned by their workload and the relevance of the project to their teaching. Where the project had been allowed to develop, however, the library staff had been able to demonstrate to the tutors that all new activities could be a useful part of the curriculum, and the level of commitment subsequently increased. As the Basic Skills Manager reported:

'...in each one of the nine adult colleges, there is this excellent work going on, and it's got better as the partnership has progressed, so we would see it [the partnership with the library] as one of our most successful partnerships.'

3.4 What materials are needed and how do we choose them?

Materials for library-based literacy programs can be obtained from many sources, and a number of them will be available free of charge, for example to download from the internet, or as donations and loans, or even produced in-house. Whatever the source of the materials, a number of criteria should be considered, for example:

- **Design** – e.g. is the print large, clear and easy to read?
- **Language** – e.g. is the language plain, common usage and in the present tense?
- **Words** – e.g. does the writer use short, common words?
- **Sentence & paragraph structure** – e.g. are the sentences and paragraphs simple, short, and clear?

How were the Quick Reads materials selected?

The Quick Reads project management group decided that an ‘accessible’ text would be one in which the length of the book, the size and clarity of the text, the use of illustrations and the book cover were regarded as appropriate to the adult learner. All Quick Reads titles were selected by Essex Libraries according to the criteria they developed specifically for the selection of both fiction and non-fiction materials for the adult learner. A librarian commented on the criteria as follows:

‘I think it’s because we are rigorous about the value of having a criteria so that the books in our collection do match the criteria of the tutors and the learners, I think that’s really important, we have to keep that consistency. It’s hard work, because we reject more books than we accept, but that’s why we have a good collection to work with, because we are putting that time into doing it.’

3.5 How do we train our staff?

All staff, especially staff working with the public, need general training to provide them with an awareness of the needs of the target group, and an awareness of the ways in which these needs can be met. This can help to remove barriers and even prejudice that may previously have existed. As the Basic Skills Manager commented on the library staff who had participated in the Quick Reads project:

‘...I’ve seen changes in the library staff...massive changes in their approach to basic skills and coming into the classes, which has been absolutely wonderful to see...in terms of their confidence, and understanding of what basic skills learners need, what it means in terms of what libraries can offer...I think it was a learning curve for them, because they had preconceptions which were either confirmed or not confirmed.’

3.6 How do we promote our literacy program?

Promotion is vital if a project is to be successful. This does not only take the form of standard publicity materials, but the reasons behind the program also need to be made clear.

In the case of the Quick Reads project, a major focus was to encourage library use by the adult literacy learners, and to remove any old stereotype views of an unfriendly, silent environment. As the library staff commented:

'They don't always know about the way in which libraries have changed, and have become less silent, and more welcoming and friendly, generally, and the range of services.'

'I think the concept...of staff being there to help them is new! If you come to the enquiry desk, you're not interrupting, that's what we're here for! Quite a lot of them [the learners] don't really think like that...so it's worth stressing.'

3.7 How can we tell if we are successful?

Our literacy work must be evaluated in order to understand how effective our efforts have been in meeting the aims of the program, and in reaching the target audience. Many programs are evaluated upon completion, using only quantitative, short-term measures, whereas it would be more effective to adopt a longitudinal approach that includes some qualitative methods. As Ruspini said in 2000:

'Longitudinal data allow the analysis of duration; permit the measurement of differences or change in a variable from one period to another, that is, the description of patterns of change over time'^{viii}.

The Quick Reads project management team clearly understood this, as they hired an external evaluator to come and study their project from beginning to end, observing and interviewing as appropriate. As the project manager reported in her foreword to the final report:

'This evaluation report confirms the benefits the project has brought to learners and tutors...[it] provides further evidence of the distinctive role of libraries in supporting emergent readers.'

3.8 How do we keep our program going?

To continue and plan for the successful future of library-based literacy programs, library staff may consider any or all of the following suggestions:

- Developing collections of suitable reading materials
- Organising activities and projects both in the library or at other appropriate venues
- Involving local authorities to follow up activities and perhaps provide additional funding
- Networking with other groups and organisations to sustain partnerships
- Interesting the media in success stories.

To give you an example of one of these, the Quick Reads tutors and librarians took advantage of particularly enthusiastic learners and discussed with them ways in which they could sustain their newly developed reading habit, and could continue to visit the library to borrow books. Some groups planned to participate in a monthly reading group, and had asked if they could use rooms in their local libraries for this. As one tutor commented:

'Our learners have now encouraged the tutors to set up reading groups in the library...the learners have taken a bit of control there, haven't they?!'

4. In conclusion

Hopefully in this brief presentation I have given you an insight into the literacy-based work of the Reading Section, and some helpful suggestions of ways in which library-based literacy programs can be developed, sustained and evaluated. I will leave you with some words from the IFLA 2000 Guidelines for Public Libraries, which state:

'Literacy is the key to education and knowledge and to the use of library and information services.'^{ix}

Thank you.

References

ⁱ IFLA (2004) Reading Section Strategic Plan, 'Mission', <http://www.ifla.org/VII/s33/annual/sp33-04.htm>

ⁱⁱ CPLIS (Centre for the Public Library in the Information Society), <http://cplis.shef.ac.uk>

ⁱⁱⁱ Available to download from: <http://www.ifla.org/VII/s33/project/literacy.htm>

^{iv} Train, B. (2003) *Quick Reads: reader development and basic skills. An evaluation report*. The University of Sheffield, with Essex Libraries and the Learning and Skills Council.
<http://cplis.shef.ac.uk/publications.htm>

^v Department for Education and Employment (1999) *Improving literacy and numeracy: a fresh start*. Report of the Committee of the Working Group chaired by Sir Claus Moser, Department for Education and Employment.

^{vi} Essex Libraries (2002) *LSC Essex Flexible Funding Application for the Quick Reads project*, July.

^{vii} Idem.

^{viii} Ruspini, E. (2000) 'Longitudinal Research in the Social Sciences', *Social Research Update*, 28 (Spring), University of Surrey, UK

^{ix} IFLA (2000) *Guidelines for Public Libraries*, August, <http://www.ifla.org/VII/s8/proj/gpl.htm>

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