World Library and Information Congress: 69th IFLA General Conference and Council

1-9 August 2003, Berlin

The Literacy Challenge

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ABSTRACT

The UN Decade of Literacy (2003-2012) presents an opportunity for the global public library movement to reassert its educational and cultural role on behalf of the world's most marginalized population—adult illiterates. A culture of literacy is proposed that embraces the entire range of programs and services most public libraries aspire to sponsor. Adult literacy is a key element in this culture due to its impact on children and its immediate return on the investment in programs. Five action steps suggest how to revitalize the public library as a cultural institution with a focus on adult education.

CULTURE OF LITERACY

- Unifying concept for libraries
- Embraces libraries and librarians of all types
- Reasserts library's role as a cultural and educational institution

Pierce Butler in his *Introduction to Library Science* (Chicago, 1933), reminds us that perhaps the most important obligation one generation has to the next is the transmission of its culture. Given the growth and complexity of the records of our culture, the one essential requirement for the transmission of our culture is literacy. Although it is useful to recognize that the unifying concept for all of the fragments of our field is the role of acquiring, organizing and making available for use all of the records of human culture, we must at the same time recognize that it is essentially a passive role. It is difficult to assume a leadership role as a spectator. As an alternative, I would suggest that what librarians, archivists, documentalists and information scientist have as a common purpose is the obligation to promote a culture of literacy.

Taken together all of the specialties of our field from storytelling to the most advanced scientific communication specialists are engaged in enhancing literacy. This includes both general literacy as well as the more advanced concept of information literacy. Promoting a culture of literacy involves embracing the many ways that humans communicate that we can participate in facilitating. It is also a means for helping people transform their lives and the societies in which they live. Daniel Boorstin reminded us that culture is ubiquitous.

INDIVISIBILITY OF HUMAN CULTURE

The world's cultures—and the culture of books—may be defined by language, by traditions, by historical movements.
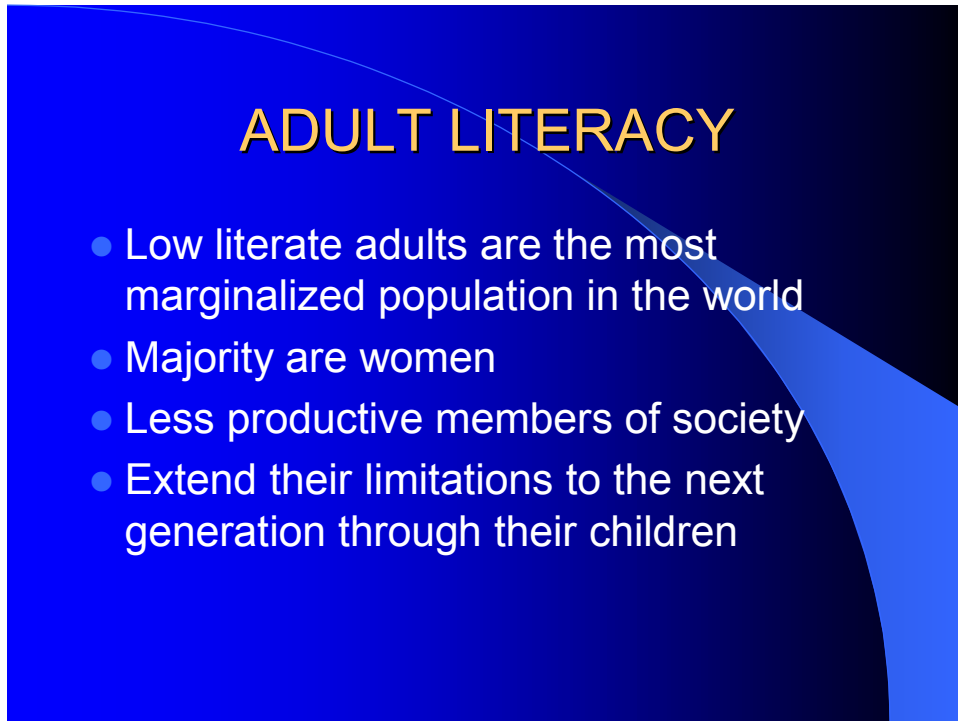
But they are not bound by national boundaries. Ideas need no passports for their place of origin, nor visas for the countries they enter. All boundaries in the world of culture and ideas are artificial, and all are doomed to be dissolved. (Daniel Boorstin, IFLA,August 1985)

Twenty women came together with their children in a rural village in Bangladesh. On the dirt floor of a two-room hut they participated in a beginning literacy class. The class looked at a poster depicting a woman with five children surrounding her. The children were malnourished and held empty plates symbolizing their hunger. The word hunger was written in Bangla and they began to discuss it. What does it mean? How does it feel? They related the word hunger to their own experiences. They saw how words could express their deepest feelings.

In another community in Latin America, a group of residents who had started a literacy program saw their houses burn down because of their proximity to a garbage dump. They used this opportunity to read, write and discuss what they would like for their community in the future. They built new houses and cleaned up their community.

These two vignettes taken from *Literacy for Social Change* (1990) illustrate an effective method of literacy training that is independent of language and culture yet uses language and culture as a starting point. The 2003 UNESCO Literacy Prize went to a program in Bangladesh. The second place winner was a network of programs in Latin America. Both use this methodology and both are partners of ProLiteracy Worldwide which specializes in this approach. Literacy for social change allows us to explore the common bond of humanity through literacy training. It can be effective in the *barrios* of the Phillippines or the slums of New York. It is as applicable to the *favelas* of Brazil as to immigrant communities in Europe. The materials and training are available to anyone who chooses to adopt them.

There are many programs around the world that promote, encourage and address literacy for children, as there should be. We should commend and support them all. There are few literacy programs for adults which is why my organization believes them to be so important.. Almost every social problem we know has a literacy component whether it is hunger, disease, poverty or natural disasters. Those who are the least capable of defending themselves or their families feel their cruelest effects.

ADULT LITERACY

- Low literate adults are the most marginalized population in the world
- Majority are women
- Less productive members of society
- Extend their limitations to the next generation through their children

It has been said that the alphabet is the most dangerous weapon in the world, yet it is still surprising how many people go without arming themselves with it.   Adults with low literacy skills are the most marginalized people in the world. They earn less than the average income; they live in areas where there are higher rates of unemployment, crime, and other social problems.

Since they pay little tax and do not participate in civic affairs, political leaders seldom hear their voices. The vast majority of them are women, many of whom are deprived of the opportunity for education because they lack the power to resist becoming wives and mothers while they are still children. Not only are they less productive members of their societies, they are creating another generation of less productive citizens. We know that children whose parents have low literacy skills have about a 50% chance of becoming low literate adults themselves.   These dimensions of inequity are compelling, but first let's be sure that we understand the nature of low literacy skills as a contributing factor.

LITERACY BASICS

- Decoding
- Reading comprehension
- Difficult to learn
- More difficult to maintain and improve

The ability to read is a difficult skill to acquire and an even more difficult skill to maintain and improve. Adults who master the skill of reading hardly remember when and how they learned to read. For those adults who never mastered the skill, or who struggled to become competent, the memories of embarrassing and painful moments are crystal clear. Many adults in literacy programs have struggled for years to master the skill of reading. About 60% of the adults in basic literacy programs in the U.S. have some type of learning disability like dyslexia. Others are literate in their native language, but not in the language of their adopted country.

I know some of you are saying to yourselves that this is not a problem in my country. It is a problem in many countries and it is likely to grow for at least two reasons. First, increased population mobility and the availability jobs propel immigration from places where there is no work to countries where there are jobs. Second, the demands of increasingly information intensive societies leave some students and workers behind in every generation. Unfortunately, the number of unskilled jobs is decreasing in the information economy.

As complex as it may be, decoding is only the first step toward learning to read. The second step is the development of reading comprehension skills. Many adult learners who come to literacy programs learned how to decode at an earlier time. However, with little or no use, this skill atrophies. Maintaining and improving reading skills requires continuing practice. The amount of reading relates directly to the development of vocabulary and the acquisition of general knowledge. Less reading slows this process. Even the choice of reading materials and exposure to language has an effect. The

average children's book explores 50% more vocabulary than listening to a prime time television program   is reading enough?


"Clearly, 21st Century Literacy requires more than just the ability to read, write and do math and science. Though reading still requires the skill of print literacy, for example much of the information we encounter now takes other forms, such as graph materials or moving images, or appears in new formats in databases or on websites. Yet, simply being able to use a computer is not sufficient either. Literacy in this new century starts with these skills. But it also encompasses a broader spectrum of technology and critical thinking skills, as well as a willingness to view the process of learning in new and different ways." {*21st Century Literacy in a Convergent Media World: White Paper*, sponsored by Bertelsmann Foundation and AOL Time Warner Foundation (Berlin: 7-8 March 2002) p.13}

DIGITAL DIVIDE

- The term "digital divide" refers to the gap between individuals, households, businesses and geographic areas with regard both to their opportunities to access information and communication technologies (ICTs) and to their use of the Internet for a wide variety of activities. (OECD, "Understanding the digital divide", 2001)

The advent of the Information Society, where most activities involve processing information, has broadened the definition of literacy, as we have known it. The definition of literacy evolved during the 20th century from the ability to read and write to the ability to perform basic functions of daily life involving literacy skills, Messages no longer appear predominately in printed form on a static medium. Many messages are flashed momentarily on a screen or appear as images or icons with which we are expected to be familiar. Not only has the pace accelerated for understanding a

message, but also the methods by which we access the messages have become dependent on a range of information technologies.

GROWTH OF INTERNET HOSTS
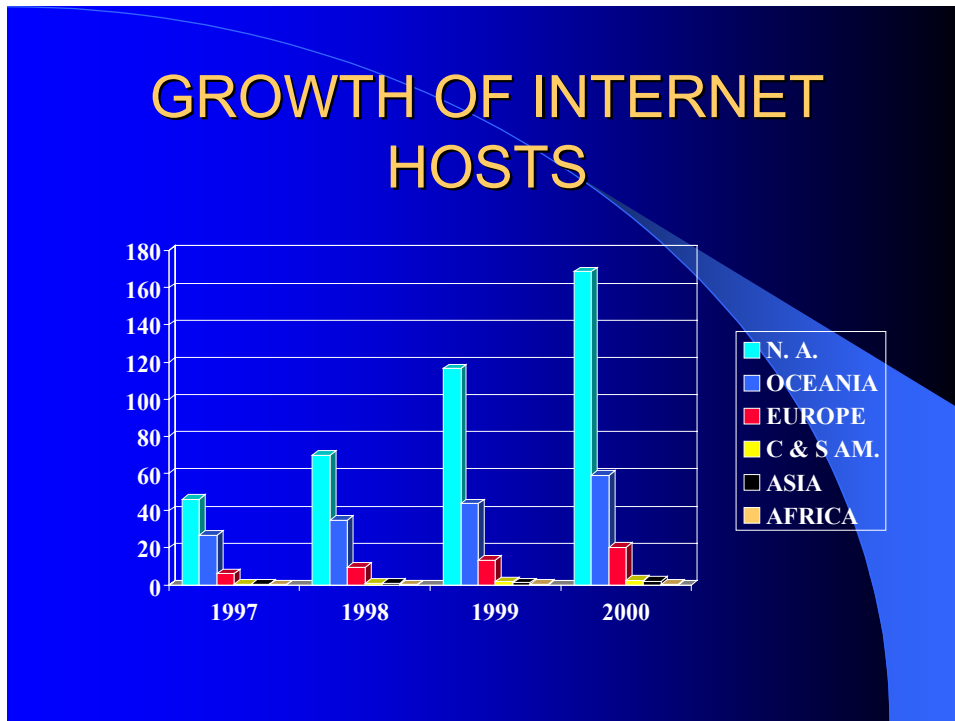
Perhaps, one of the best indicators of the digital divide is to look at the growth of Internet hosts between 1997 and 2000. The regions of Central and South America, Asia and Africa are barely visible. Although there has been remarkable growth in the Asia region since IFLA's 1996 conference in Beijing, the gap remains significant.

But technology does not play a major role in the lives of most adults with low literacy skills. They spend most of their days focused on food, shelter, clothing and relief from common ailments. An appropriate program for them introduces fundamental skills like reading and writing. It helps them develop critical thinking skills It increases their ability to express themselves culturally, and gives them the confidence to solve personal and community problems.

LIBRARIES AND LITERACY

- Educational materials
- Facilities
- Educated staff
- Lack of commitment

Historically, libraries and librarians have supported the objectives of literacy, but except for children's and school services, libraries have not been in the forefront of the development of literacy services.   Embracing a culture of literacy as the core mission of libraries and librarianship could have a liberating effect across the spectrum for professionals and their institutions. It could pave the way for the replacement of bibliographic instruction with a broader range of information literacy skills including critical thinking. It could stimulate greater harmony within the ranks of revitalize education for the profession by the recognition that librarianship and information science have a common purpose.

Librarianship would bring an impressive net worth to the development of a culture of literacy. Our facilities, our collections, our geographic distribution and our professional commitment would be important assets. Our principal liabilities would be lack of experience and lack of knowledge about literacy training. That suggests a strategy of partnerships that would bring the capabilities of libraries to bear in conjunction with other institutions and organizations. Potential partners would include, businesses, academic organizations, social service organizations as well as local, state and federal agencies. One important partnership I can propose here today is one with the experts of the literacy movement.

WHY ADULT LITERACY?

- Well-suited to library capabilities
- Multiplier effect on the family, work and the community
- Consistent with the ideals of the Public Library Manifesto

Adult literacy represents a major opportunity for libraries because it draws upon the primary resources that libraries already offer—reading materials at all levels, facilities and trained staff.   But literacy programs for adults have different requirements than programs for other user groups. Therefore, the materials, hours of instruction and methods of instruction have to be deliberately designed for adult learners. It is not just a matter of skills and vocabulary. Adults have mature thoughts, emotions and experiences. Successful adult literacy programs utilize all of these attributes to make literacy training meaningful to their lives.

Second, the multiplier effect of adult literacy has an immediate impact at work, at home and in the community. We usually have to wait 10 to 15 years to see the impact of the education we impart to our children. With adult learners the impact is almost immediate in terms their families, their employment skills and opportunities, and their communities Interestingly, the impact of adult literacy may be greatest with their children because adult learners tend to encourage their children to complete their basic education which contributes enormously to their lifetime earnings.

Third, libraries can become advocates for literacy as a key tool for transforming societies**.** Dimensions of inequity related to literacy and adult education are contributing factors to virtually every major social problem our generation faces worldwide: poverty, disease, famine, war, crime, substance abuse, or disabilities. This is not to say that literacy is a cure for these problems. It does suggest that literacy training is an integral element for addressing them.

Information Literacy Umbrella
Source of confusion?
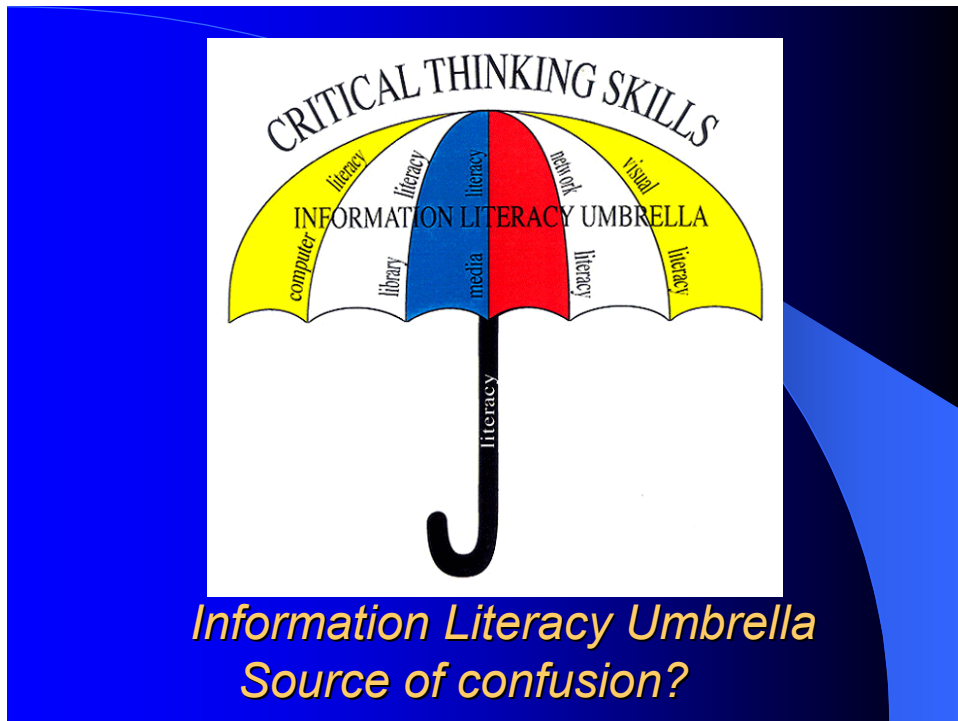
Libraries can be leaders in defining literacy for the 21st century to include not only basic literacy, but also financial literacy, visual literacy, and media literacy.   However, for many of us it is not yet clear whether the concept of multiple literacies leads to greater clarity or greater confusion.

As *Literacy for social change* suggests, to define literacy is to express a social value. The definition depends heavily on the social perspective of the speaker. Libraries need a broader vision of their role in promoting a culture of literacy. A vision that is equally at home with sponsoring an exhibition of rare diaries, or sponsoring a lecture by a popular author, as it is introducing a low literate adult to her/his first book. We can create that vision only by becoming involved in communicating with those who need the services of libraries but are the least capable of using them.

UNESCO'S DECADE OF LITERACY 2002-2012

- Major opportunity for ProLiteracy Worldwide
- Dakar Accord (2000 World Education Forum)--Proposes to halve illiteracy rate by 2012
- 862 million adults with low literacy skills
- Two-thirds are female
- Significant progress in Africa and Asia

The advent of the UN Decade of Literacy presents a major opportunity for public libraries to reassert their educational role, especially for adults.   With an estimated 900 million adults in the world who are illiterate and a substantial number of others who lack adequate literacy skills to cope with the demands of a digital society, the need for libraries to promote and advance a culture of literacy has never been greater. Moreover it is fully consistent with the Public Library Manifesto.

Public libraries in industrialized nations have been reasonably successful in reaching a substantial literate population with programs and services. But broad commercial access to books, music, videos, magazines and newspapers has robbed libraries of some of its traditional users. In developing nations with high illiteracy rates, the scarcity of resources limits programs and services to a small fraction of the population.

Reasserting the educational role of the public library, especially for adults, has the potential for gaining new users, cultivating economic and political support from non-educational sources like business and labor interests, as well as enhancing the library's position as a vital community institution. I am well aware that international priorities currently do not reflect many of the needs of our global population.

INTERNATIONAL NEEDS

- Food and water
- Health and sanitation
- Housing
- Economic development
- Education and literacy
- Social development

INTERNATIONAL PRIORITIES

- Terrorism
- Trade
- Immigration

Yet our experience demonstrates that we may have something to offer even in a world ravaged by violent confrontations. Some of the most important work in the literacy field thrives under the direst circumstances in places like Bosnia, Afghanistan and the West Bank. There is the opportunity for you to join this work by addressing adult literacy where you live, perhaps in partnership with local social agencies. As you consider this, here are five things public libraries can do to begin to embrace a culture of literacy. I know you can think of many others

- **R**eassert the educational role of the public library by embracing adult literacy as a core program of your library and by joining the network of educational and social organizations that address the issues of poor and disadvantaged populations.

- **E**mphasize the cultural and educational role of the library in library education.

- **A**dvocate a culture of literacy by speaking out on the issues related to the demands of an information society and the debilitating effects of parents with low literacy skills.

- **C**ontribute your library's support for literacy programs by providing adult learner materials, programs space, and where possible, staff literacy specialists.

- **H**ost meetings of related educational and social organizations to coordinate local adult education services.

FIVE IDEAS FOR PUBLIC LIBRARIES

- Reassert the public library role as an educational and cultural institution
- Emphasize the cultural and educational role of the library in library education.
- Advocate a culture of literacy as a core value.
- Contribute library materials, facilities, and staffing to adult education.
- Host meetings of related educational And social organizations.

Many of you know me as an academic librarian, library educator and a leader of national and international library associations. However, I have been an active literacy advocate for many years as well. More recently, I have been responsible for merging the two largest volunteer literacy organizations into a global resource for the adult literacy movement.

Currently we provide educational materials, and literacy methodology training to over 1200 local affiliates who do literacy training in local communities across the U.S. In addition, we provide financial grants, literacy materials and training to partner organizations through which we offer literacy services in 47 developing countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East. This year we introduced an online training capability for tutors and literacy program staff that we expect to revolutionize the delivery of programs as well as training materials.   It is from this perspective that I speak today about the literacy challenge.

PROLITERACY WORLDWIDE

- 1200 U.S. affiliates
- International partners in 47 countries
- New Readers Press, publishes materials for tutors and learners in U.S.
- Issues weekly newspaper to 90,000 subscribers
- Certifies trainers for tutors in U.S.
- Trains local leaders for international partners
- Offers learning materials in 22 local languages like Pashto, Bangla, and Kiswahili

PROLITERACY WORLDWIDE'S PRIORITIES

- Self-reliance
- Health
- Education
- Peace
- Human rights
- Environment

Self-reliance, health, justice, peace, human rights, and preservation of the environment are the primary contexts in which ProLiteracy Worldwide attempts to affect social change through literacy training. These common aspirations of the peoples of the world need to be addressed by all of the world's basic institutions including libraries.