

# Potential Unexploited: Public Libraries and Adult Literacy

by Jennifer Cram

There is a Yiddish proverb that goes "The one who can't dance says the band can't play." In public libraries, in the area of literacy, many of us are guilty of taking it one step further. Our mindsets tell us that there is no band. The following is theoretical and, I hope, challenging.

I want you to come with me on a journey, a journey through the mindsets that hinder the full exploitation of resources that we already have in our libraries. You will notice that I use the word mindset rather than attitude, which was the word I used in the abstract of this paper. The change is deliberate. I used attitude in the abstract because it is a more familiar and perhaps less threatening word. An attitude is something of which most of us are aware, and most people's attitudes are, to a greater or lesser degree, fluid. If we cannot completely change an attitude, at least we find the boundaries of that attitude changing on a day to day basis.

A mindset, on the other hand, is something of which we are generally not aware, simply because it is an ingrained way of looking at things. It is habitual and we may never become aware that we even have a particular mindset until it is pointed out to us that there may be a different way of looking at a particular subject.

Lawrie Ryan, recently retired State Librarian of Queensland, is wont to say that libraries support the act of reading. I cannot fault him on that one. But if we leave it at that we severely limit what libraries can do.

## *Homo Typographia*

We limit what libraries can do because we become guilty of a mindset that we are dealing only with Homo Typographia, Typographic Man, a kind of sophisticated subspecies of Homo Sapiens. The mark of Homo Sapiens is the word. The word is the main means of communication for our species.

As Laurens van der Post says:

The word is not just a rational thing...it is a very complex, seed thing. With every good word some of it is rational, some of it is non-rational, full of its own, independent association, feelings, meanings and very complex context like a seed that grows when the rain falls on it: it is received and the reception is its rain. Part of it is obvious: you can see it logically and recognize its use at once. But there is a strong non-logical content in it, so great that the word is more than it expresses. One can listen to words, poetry above all, and one is aware of this immense, almost magical evocation of meaning, of ancient meaning that just comes along with the words as part of the package...Altogether words form a system of communication which is as profound, subtle, proven and experienced as life itself. And in a sense it is life and gives life. Without it, life as we have know it is inconceivable.(Van der Post 1986)

## *The Word in Society*

We tend to think that those who come from cultures that did not develop writing are somehow the product of more primitive societies. They may be more primitive in terms of our technology, though one often finds that the technology they developed was entirely appropriate for their society. However if one looks at the development of the word in that society, a somewhat different picture emerges.

When everything depends on the word, the living word, the spoken word, that word is meant to be forever. The sign of a well-brought up person in such cultures is the person who speaks well. A well-spoken person in that context is not a person with the gift of rhetoric, nor a person with a highborn accent – our definitions of a well-spoken person – but the person who can use the word in a way that moves people, that changes people.

That is what our libraries are really for. They are very dangerous places, as has been acknowledged in those political coups and revolutions that require people to be passive and accepting, and which therefore burn books and restrict access to libraries.

So, are we sure that we are not operating with a mindset that urges us to restrict the dangerous ideas we house by making them available in a form which is accessible only to Homo Typographia? I would ask you to hang on

to this thought about the importance of the word and to measure the ideas posit in this paper against it.

The human spirit owes a tremendous debt to the word, and it is therefore terribly one-eyed to assume that only in its written form, and only to those who can decipher this written form, is it of any importance. Such claims are the product of a particular mindset that looks at society on a macrolevel.

#### *The Macrolevel View*

On a macrolevel our society is a literate one. Without being able to read and write English at a reasonably sophisticated level it becomes difficult not only to adequately fulfill one's legal obligations but to operate on a day to day basis. To decipher the directions on a packet of aspirin or read the instructions on a frozen TV dinner one needs to read at the level of those who complete eight years of formal schooling. To read a lease document one needs a post-secondary reading level.

#### *The Microlevel View*

On a microlevel things are very different. And, if public librarians are giving more than lip service to the professional pledge to match the user with material at this own level, then we have to consider the microculture which formed each individual. We are seeing many people in their 60s and 70s now, who, because of the Depression, had such interrupted schooling that they never learned to read or write. Depending on their reaction to this their children and grandchildren have grown up in one of two possible microcultures.

Those who missed out on learning to read would have felt the lack keenly and while possibly covering up their own inability would have encouraged reading in a way that conveyed quite forcefully within the home that these were to be valued. Or in discovering that they could function quite reasonably adequately without reading the microculture of the home could have become one in which reading was either ignored or denigrated.

In dealing with migrants we tend to classify cultures as literate or non-literate. Ross Gibbs from Carringbush Library told me of a story about that library's attempts to provide services to a reasonably large Turkish population in the area. They bought books and magazines, advertised the services and waited for business. It was not forthcoming. Eventually someone thought to ask a few questions. The answer was simple, and unexpected.

While Turkey, on the macrolevel is and has been a literate society for a very long time, the particular area from which the groups of migrants had come was not a literate one. Carringbush changed the books for videos, usage took off and everyone was happy.

Public libraries do serve those who cannot read, but that service tends to be conditional. It is conditional on being intellectually able to decode words on paper, but because of physical infirmity or age, being no longer able to hold a book and turn the pages, or because of visual impairment, being unable to see the words on the page. Or it is conditional on having a genuine desire to learn to read and an innate ability to do so.

#### *Conditional Services*

Are we serving those who cannot read as exceptions rather than as customers who deserve service at a level appropriate to their needs and abilities? I believe that our mindset says "we deal with Typographic Man, he is our prime customer, the stereotype for whom our services and stocks are designed. We make exceptions for those who can no longer read the printed word because of physical infirmity or visual impairment, and we make exceptions for the migrant and the illiterate and for the native peoples of our countries, but only if they are trying to fit into our norm."

It seems to me that while we do tend to make exceptions for the aged and infirm we tend not, as our mindsets allow us to believe, to serve them out of pure philanthropy, but rather out of sneaking self interest. In addition we feel that these people are all right, they are our type of people, they really can read. We feel comfortable with them.

Many librarians joined with Hear-a-Book and the Australian Listening Library in the fight to have the copyright waiver extended to those who are physically impaired. The fight to have such a waiver extended to the illiterate is by no means as intense. We happily provide children's picture books for children who have not yet learned to read, because we are preparing them for reading, for entering into the typographical culture. And we try to ensure that what we buy for them is enjoyable. But when we are looking to buy material to support English as a Second Language students and Adult Literacy students do we look at the material for its enjoyment factor? Probably not. Enjoyment is what you get from being one of us. When buying to support adult students just how guilty are we of regarding reading as exercise?

### *Library Users and Nonusers*

Librarians tend to divide people into users and nonusers, rather than users and potential users. Into the group of nonusers we put those who are never going to learn to read, and as a result that group tends to be very poorly served, even though we may well have a lot of material suitable to their needs already in our collections.

#### *The Newly Illiterate*

There is another group, almost universally ignored by public libraries, and that is the newly illiterate. We tend to think of the illiteracy-literacy continuum as a one-way street. Unfortunately it is possible for those who are literate to become illiterate, and that change is almost inevitably accompanied by tremendous emotional difficulties.

Brain damage can cause people to lose the ability to decode the printed word, or it can so impede sequential concentration that it becomes impossible to read a sustained narrative. I must stress that just as the congenitally intellectually handicapped person is often aware of his own intellectual limitations and acutely embarrassed by them, so is the person who can no longer perform to the level which he recalls was normal for him. And then there is the migrant who is newly illiterate because while he may speak and understand English, he is used to a different sort of writing. For him the Roman alphabet is just marks on paper. Alan Barclay, in a paper given earlier in 1988 at the conference "Opening doors for closed ears" makes this comment when comparing services for deaf people with the adult literacy experience in libraries:

Librarians gradually became aware of the literacy problem, so widespread but hidden, in the community some years ago. They had to examine their library materials and determine how people with literacy problems could best use them. Music and spoken word cassettes were often in the stock and so too were "teach yourself English language" tapes. Librarians found something to offer these people immediately. Further research identified books in the children's library with large printing, and a simple range of vocabulary accompanied by illustrations. Suitable texts – often photographic, in the adult section were also identified. Lists were prepared of these books for people who wished to develop reading skills. Librarians promoted literacy in their community, and as specially designed materials became available for people

with literacy problems, many librarians included them in their stock. They were not restricted to that group and many other people in the community, such as parents or teachers, use the literacy section today as freely as the tutors and literacy students.

Barclay's summary is a neat one. It demonstrates, however, not only how one can find material to support new usage, but also how by one's attitude once can limit that usage. "Librarians," he said, "promoted literacy in their community." Until it becomes clear to all that libraries do not only support literacy, that it is acceptable to appreciate the word and the idea and thirst after both in other than the written form, and that there will be no stigma attached thereto, libraries will not reach their full potential.

#### *Resources*

Let us take a brief look at the resources in our libraries that we may not be exploiting to the full in the interest of the literacy student. First, there is the building itself. We do not have to run classes ourselves though many libraries do that successfully. We can provide access to the building as a classroom or meeting place for tutors and students, and we can provide access at a time when the library is closed to other users to enable new readers to become familiar with the idea of using a library in a nonthreatening situation.

But this still limits us to usage by people who have admitted they have problems with literacy and want to do something about it. What about those who have not yet taken that step? If we provide an environment that communicates clearly this is a place in which it is accepted positively that not everyone wants to read, we broaden the potential for the illiterate citizen to feel that it is all right to "come out of the closet" if he feels that learning to read is something he wants to do.

This means simple things like looking at our advertising, looking at the form of our application card, in short taking an illiterate look at our own services and deciding whether they are appropriate and accepting. When we look at our book collection have we ensured that we have enjoyable material at all levels? Are we providing adult material for those who have problems with sequential concentration – picture books with short, snappy, directly connected captions? We often find those are scattered through the collection; we just never thought to group them in that way.

It is not much use making lists of those things which are scattered through

the collection which may be appropriate. It is easier for a hale and hearty, fully literate user to find material which has been taken out of the main collection into a special collection, than it is for those who have difficulties to find material which is appropriate to their needs but which is scattered through general collections. It is also an easy matter to find non-perjorative terminology for those collections. The term "Adult picture book collection" is, for example, pleasantly neutral.

And what about material that is not in print format? Are we still limiting our purchase of recorded readings of books to those restricted to the physically impaired? A few years ago manufacturers of recorded books in the United States realized that there was a whole reading public out there in the marketplace that was too busy to read except when they had time on their hands – on the freeway.

The result was a huge increase in the availability of recorded books. Manufacturers moved away from the abridged recorded book and started to produce full length recordings of popular material. This has been the publishing success of this decade. Many publishers release the recorded book almost simultaneously with the printed one, and a whole generation of executives is now keeping up with cocktail party discussions of mainstream, high hype novels before they are turned into mini-series.

How many of our staff have to wait for the end of the request list to get hold of those books which our public have expected them to know about and discuss across the counter? How many librarians actually buy commercial recorded books? In not providing recordings which may be borrowed by the healthy, able person we deprive our staff of reading experiences (a recorded book can make shelf checking and shelving a more pleasant experience). We also lose the custom of those people who can really influence those who fund libraries. But worse still we deny the pleasure of the story to those whose taxes may have contributed to its purchase, simply because they do not fit into our norm. If we accept the notion that libraries, particularly public libraries, exist primarily to communicate ideas, and we also accept that the word is the vehicle by which Homo Sapiens communicates these ideas, then it becomes perfectly logical to accept that as communication by the written word is only one means of disseminating ideas, public libraries are morally obliged to support the illiterate. It is only by actively supporting the illiterate population that we can support literacy, and the developing literacy of the user populations we are funded to serve.

If we wish to support literacy through public libraries we must make sure that the message those libraries delivers to the community is not "Come join us in literacy" but rather the more neutral and accepting "Come join us in the library."

The problem really is not as I suggested at the beginning that in libraries we say there is no band. That is, and was meant to be, a provocative absurdity to catch your attention. The problem may be more invidious than that. Are we saying, "If you want to dance, you do not need a band, the musical score is enough?"

#### WORKS CITED

Van der Post, L. 1986. *A Walk with a White Bushman*. London: Chatto & Windus.

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