

Reading Cultures

Summary of presentations and discussion: DRIVE network meeting 26th October 2020

Wendy Griswold

Wendy Griswold, Bergen Evans Professor of Humanities at North Western University, Illinois kicked off this week's session. In Wendy's distinguished career, she has written extensively on reading cultures and particularly has made this distinction between reading classes and reading cultures.

Wendy began by introducing the document which our session proceeded largely to centre around: The Continental Framework on Book and Reading Policy Formation in Africa. She suggested that our group work to separate some of the goals set out in this document and make some distinctions that the document does not make. These were highlighted as follows...

What is a reader?

What do we mean by a reader? It can mean a basic level of literacy, being able to decode signs. It can mean functional literacy, being able to read enough to get along. It can be necessary reading for different types of jobs, some jobs require more than functional literacy, but a considerable sophistication in decoding complex material. But what really interests me is unnecessary reading, reading for pleasure. This type of reading that you don't have to do for your job, but you do it because you like to, and certainly, at least necessary and probably unnecessary reading as well are involved in the project of life long learning, which is sort of central to our endeavours here.

Where do you draw the line? If everybody in a society were literate, or if everybody in a society had functional literacy, would we call that a reading culture? My sense says we would draw the line somewhere between necessary and unnecessary. That you have a society where the majority of adults can read fairly complex materials that are required for their job or for school, and some proportion read for pleasure, they are the people that we call readers, and that I call members of the reading class.

The demographics of reading.

We know that reading is highly correlated with education, that's the single strongest predictor. We know that it's correlated with gender. If gender literacy is equal, and in most places it's becoming equal, but in some places including some areas in Africa, areas in North Africa and the Middle East, we still have this lead where boys gain literacy before girls do. But where it is equal, women read more than men. Girls read better than boys in terms of comprehension, and as adults women read more. Those differences aren't huge but they're absolutely constant. There is simply no place that men are more avid readers than women, again if you hold education constant.

There seems to be a correlation with affluence as well, although so much of that depends on education that it's not very strong.

There's definitely a correlation with being urban. Again, that to some extent is accounted for by education, but not entirely. Age is pretty consistent. Children read a great deal until the early teenage years, then that drops off. They get more independent so they get interested in dating and other things, and the reading drops off. It picks up again in young adulthood, in most places probably at its height in the 30s and 40s and then starts to decline particularly when you get into the elderly years, presumably because of failing eyesight and so forth.

One thing that is not consistent but we see at most places, is that there are differences among ethnic or religious groups. For example in the US, white people read more than African Americans, and holding constant education, gender, urbanness, etc. there is that difference. In Europe, historically Jewish groups have read more than non-Jewish, than Christian groups, holding everything else constant. In Nigeria, the Igbo read more than the Hausa. So depending on the society and the make up of the ethnic and religious groups, there will be differences in their reading.

The reading class.

The unnecessary readers, the people who read for pleasure, I call them the reading class. Surveys have asked, have you read a book in the past month? Have you read a book in the past year? Are you reading a book now? There will be time use data to look at how people spend their leisure time, and in every society, you will find that there is some group of people that read a whole lot. This is a part of the reading culture, and the percentages themselves don't matter. For example, in very high reading societies like Finland and Norway, they always come out on top in terms of reading. 35-40% of the adult population will be reading pretty consistently as a pastime.

In the US, about a quarter of women and about 14% of men read 20 or more books annually. There's no one definition of the reading class, it would vary from one society to another.

So in a society, if you're talking about Malawi, you might say people who have read 5 books a year would constitute the reading class. It depends on the society, how available books are and how prevalent the reading habit is.

In addition to surveys, you can do observational data to identify this reading class: who goes to the bookstores, who subscribes to literary magazines, book clubs, libraries, participation in good reads. The people who do these things are members of this reading class, and in no place are they more than half the population, even in Finland.

Most adults get along quite well without doing a great deal of reading. However, members of the reading class have enormous cultural power, they have enormous influence in academia, in government, in their purchasing power, in what they support. So they are a cultural elite that is a very significant one.

Continental framework of books and reading

I referred before to some of my bewilderment of the continental framework of book and reading because of the variety of goals that it has. If we think of the book, or any written material, as a cultural object, we can think of that in terms of producers and receivers, and producers and receivers have different goals.

Educators want something slightly different than what the book industry wants. There was a lot of talk in that report about text books, and educators have been concerned about text books; the quality of text books and the access to text books. The book industry would like to move beyond text books to a broader reading public. The book industry similarly is divided between those producing print materials and those producing digital media, and those are promoted in different ways. Policy makers want something related but something different, they want development and are convinced that a reading culture will bring about development.

What readers want is somewhat different, and particularly members of the reading class. Readers want stories, as you know, readers want entertainment, readers want access to information. One doesn't read a book because they think it's going to help with national development, or because they think it's going to save the publishing industry, that's not why we read. These things get blurred in a lot of policy circles,

so I refer to this as a misfit between the educational goals, the book industry goals, and the reading culture goals that are particularly represented by this reading class.

Digital media use and reading habits.

So finally, I will briefly refer to a piece of research where I have been, for a number of years, studying students, highly educated students, mostly university but some elite secondary, in terms of how they relate their digital media use to their reading habits, and you will immediately think, 'reading online is reading after all'. Students make a sharp distinction. They do not regard short form reading as reading, whether it's on the phone or on anything, they don't see that as reading, nor do they regard listening to audio books as reading. They regard reading as something long and it could be text or print.

We find a number of things, one is the separation of reading and digital media. These kids were born with smart phones in their hands, even in Malawi and Botswana. I'm catching them when they're 18-20 years old and they are at university. They're elite kids by definition, and there's nothing surprising to them about facebook or texting, they've been doing it their entire lives, it is not strange to them. They regard reading differently, they regard it as sacred. So the digital media, the social media, that's every day, that's the air we breath. Reading is special; 'I remember when my father first took me into his library' 'I always like to read in a special place'. They regard it as a separated activity as opposed to an every day air we breath activity.

A surprising fact that is found across the board is that about two thirds of the university students prefer print. You find a lot talk about materiality, "I like the way pages feel" "I like the way a book smells", these sensory engagements, "I like to curl up with a book or magazine, i'm not distracted by the beeping or whatever from a text message."

About a third of students prefer to read on screen, giving reasons such as convenience when travelling. The Chinese will talk about eyesight; it's a culture that's very sensitive to issues involving the eyes. It's a different cultural context and they're coming at it with different conclusions.

Readers in a reading culture.

The final thought is to think about readers in a reading culture, not as people, or even as a practice, but as some sort of an interplay between human beings in a particular context and with particular demographics, and then a text in a particular context in print, digital, on the phone, oral, on an audible device. If one is trying to encourage a reading culture, to think of the reader as this combination of situations that vary across national cultures but also vary across the demographics of the people involved, the accessibility of the media and all of those things which do vary despite the constants mentioned earlier.

Discussion points

- The 'digital native' - do people who have grown up with digital technology necessarily reject 'old' media - we see trends in, for instance, collecting vinyl as opposed to solely listening to music digitally.
- How do you promote a reading culture, and how do you overcome the barriers to being able to read that exist particularly within Kenya?

- Motivations for reading - is reading for improvement (non-fiction/educational materials), or entertainment and pleasure? Some research suggests a high preference for the former in Kenya.
- Research methods for understanding the experiences of reluctant or non-readers: can story circles reveal more?
- The framework - it has been created to help every African country to develop their national book and reading policies, to enable each country to have in place the services and systems required to support a reading culture. It is a guide to help governments to support writer development, publishers, working with printers, supporting book sellers, supporting libraries and librarians. With this in place, the Framework guides on creating an atmosphere that supports a reading culture across each country.
- Reading is a fundamental skill that allows every other skill to be developed within an individual. If you are able to read, then you are able to acquire any other skill. "Reading is the key that opens doors to many good things in life" (Ruth Bader Ginsburg).
- The idea of reading as sacred resonated with the stories shared by the group and stories generated in the Reading on Screen project - memories of the actual physical act of reading - where, with whom, a special place.
- In talking about reading skills in Africa, we need to consider that one in two people are not literate - they are basically an oral people. How do we teach them reading skills?
- The culture has been to read for exams, that's how we bring our children up. Our students do not read. Whether it's digital or a print book, they just don't read, even when it's a text. We have not developed that reading as a culture basically because we are not a reading people, we are an oral people.

Fredrick Otike

Fredrick Otike is a librarian and teacher. He holds a Bachelors in Education, Languages and Library Studies, a Masters in Library Information Studies. He is currently studying for PhD in Hungary.

Reading cultures in Kenya: promotion - challenges and opportunities.

Reading culture is basically a skill that has to be acquired, it has to be taught. Now in all university libraries, they are trying to educate students on the acquisition of information literacy skills. In our education system, the first thing we normally start with is learning to read. After we learn to read, we are able to read to learn. This skills needs to be taught at a tender age. In Africa, there's a saying, 'you fold a fish whilst it's still fresh, when the fish is old, or when the fish is dry, you are not able to fold it.'

Something important to note is that reading is a catalyst of learning and it is a skill lost if not practiced. Also, the promotion of a reading culture has to be initiated. My research was to assess the level of preparedness and efforts that are taken to cultivate and promote a reading culture in Kenya because it has always been said that we do not have a reading culture. The process and the means of making sure

that the reading culture is achieved is never mentioned - the people, organisations and institutions; instead it is always the individuals that are blamed for the lack of a reading culture.

During my research I focussed mainly on the three ministry of education levels, primary schools and a selection of NGOs. To start with I did research using the Kenyan education system, which had offered a free and compulsory primary school education for all during that time. The same system was also giving free reading books to all public institutions. But there were some challenges in as far as reading culture is concerned. There are no policies for the promotion of a reading habit in primary schools. Children were being given books, but that does not automatically enable a child to become a reader, or gain the reading habit. We also discovered that there was a lack of central policy in the form of legislation, regulations, or guidelines.

The research also focussed on primary schools in Kenya, and we discovered that for them to try to cultivate and promote a reading culture, they were organising 'library reading lessons' and 'Maktaba reading lessons', but we also discovered some challenges. There was a lack of local culture in books, there were few library lessons organised, there was a lack of libraries or librarians in the schools, the classes were congested as was the curriculum, and children with special needs were not identified.

We also researched the Kenyan National Library Service, a key influencer in promoting reading culture because most of all they were giving free space for kids to access books. They were giving them free books, they were working in collaboration with the schools, they organised book weeks, reading events and competitions, and in some areas they organised mobile libraries. However, again, we discovered there were some challenges: the libraries are small and congested and there was a lack of specialised guidance.

Some of the observations that we discovered might be part of the major problem of promoting and cultivating the reading culture in Kenya is that schools fall under the Ministry of Education, while the Kenyan National Library Service is in the Ministry of Sports, Culture and Heritage, and yet despite all that, we discovered that the Kenyan National Library Service was doing a lot more in cultivating the reading culture in Kenya at that particular time.

Many community libraries are engaging, and more people are embracing the community libraries, more that even the Kenyan National Library Service because they are giving personalised services to the kids. A good example is SAIDE community library that is being run by Kevin; Inspire is another one and Micaro/Americashare community library in Ukuru Kwa Njenga, Nairobi, and there are also other initiatives like the African Library Project. Other opportunities involve the establishment of e-content initiatives. So, with the current development with the digital gadgets, these initiatives will play a great role in solving some of these problems.

Discussion points

- Clearly context is everything and one of the interesting things that the research shows is that the habit that forms in childhood. So if you develop the reading habit in childhood, that probably stays with you for the rest of your life.
- Space for reading - depending on how households are organised, people may not always have the luxury of space.

- Lack of policy: without policies, we will keep on talking and nothing much will happen. The framework is a very useful document. We should familiarise ourselves with it to get a perspective of what is required in African countries, and what needs to be done on the ground.

Dr. Beatrice Masibo Busolo

Dr Beatrice Masibo Busolo is a literature Lecturer at the School of Humanities and Social Sciences Department of Languages, Linguistics and Literature at Pwani University in Kenya. Her responsibilities include Academic Leader- Master's Literature with a specific interest on Gender and Woman Studies.

The focus today is to examine how sexualised images of women impact society with the case of the Ndombolo dance. Ndombolo is a type of Zairian dance. It was born in Zaire but it was transported to other parts of Africa and it is a major dance in Kenya. Music videos are supposed to be entertainment but as you continue to watch, you realise that it goes further than just entertainment and women are projected in a very hyper-sexualised manner.

How are women projected through these videos, and what impact or response does it bring out from the women?

This stereotyping of women is very prevalent in media, and this can have a very negative effect on young girls and women. It also gives the impression that the only thing women can think of is this kind of projection of their body. Though they also argue that it's my body, my life, my style. 'This is what freedom has brought me from a patriarchal society', but it neglects a lot of what traditionally women thought to get freedom for themselves.

This kind of dancing, the message one gets is that you can invest in erotic dancing, it's an investment on its own and it can earn you whatever you want. So for young girls, one of the hindrances of digital reading or reading is that they are questioning why would I read when I can make money through this kind of thing? Many girls lack self-esteem, particularly because they are not being appreciated for not having the buttocks, for not having the big breasts, so there is a lot of inferiority. So when they see this, this is what they want and it makes them very happy. But at the end, it has a very negative impact on women.

Discussion points.

- If the parent knows the value of learning to read, reads with their children, reads to their children, they develop good language skills and know the value of reading.
- Videos have layers and layers of signifiers that are reinforcing the stereotype. So it's not just about the kind of narratives that are put forward, or the language used, but you've actually got these layers of performance, of mise-en-scène. The interesting tension is between the perceived value of fame or status through the women in these videos and the challenge of reinforcing stereotypes and how to counter this. It is important yet problematic to challenge stereotypes when you've got those associations between wealth and poverty, status and non-status, visibility and non-visibility.
- Young people produce music, and they will have young girls dancing in a very sexual manner, and to be 'cool' in school can be dependent on what young people have watched on TV or social media.

- Can we use social media to help make reading cool, perhaps, for younger people because there is so much discussion of reading and activity around reading that is going on?