

## Trailblazers and the Pioneers Who Followed: Discovering the Role for Literacy in Libraries

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I am pleased to be here today because it has given me a chance to reflect on past experiences in working to bring literacy services into libraries. Serving as State Librarian from 1980 to 1994, I followed the taxpayer’s revolt, Proposition 13, and found myself challenged to encourage libraries to act in new directions. We faced times when budgets were being drastically reduced. Elected officials were hard pressed, particularly in the counties of California, to meet previous commitments to build and support public libraries.

There were three major initiatives of which I am the most proud during my years as State Librarian. They are the California Literacy Campaign and its related Families for Literacy Program, the Partnerships for Change Initiative, and InfoPeople. Each of these initiatives asked librarians to think outside their traditional roles and to prepare for a future that would be different. We would never recover the funding base of the past. But we found there was residual good will on the part of the publics we served and the publics we hoped to serve.

The Rand Corporation study I commissioned in 1987 challenged the very basis that traditional public library service had been provided in California and forecast a rapidly changing demographic environment that we needed to meet.<sup>1</sup> In 1983 I determined, with the support of my consulting staff, that we would take on a new initiative. Led by Carmela Ruby, we envisioned the California Literacy Campaign. A sum of \$2.5 million in LSCA funds was set aside, and applications were invited.

Twenty-six public libraries were granted funds to start the program. I recall one letter in particular from a county librarian who stated that she really didn’t think this was the kind of thing that libraries should be doing, but it was new money and she wanted

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<sup>1</sup> Payne, Judith. *Public Libraries Face California’s Ethnic and Racial Diversity*. Los Angeles: Rand, 1988.

her share. It didn't take long for her to become a believer and staunch supporter of what her library experienced.

The campaign focused on native-born adults sixteen years or older who spoke English and were below the level of skill they needed to be enrolled in adult schools across California. There is a large back story for this decision and our early and difficult road of collaboration with adult education in California. This collaboration worked well at the state level with close connections into the Department of Education's adult education program. It was often at the local level where it was challenged.

I recall one adult ed conference where I was invited to speak. I approached the podium, and the cat calls began. About a third of the way into my remarks the "boos" were raised. Before I could finish several, walked out of the conference hall, and I was escorted out a back way from the conference. It was not a warm, wonderful experience. But those times passed, and our collaborations grew.

Those of us involved were convinced that public libraries had a significant role to play. The legislature agreed. In a time when we could not get other funding, they passed the California Library Literacy Service Act as a library program designed to reduce adult illiteracy by providing English language literacy instruction and related services to adults and youth who were not enrolled in school. The legislature had confirmed our role.

I am most pleased that this legislation was carried jointly by a Republican in the State Assembly and the Speaker of the Senate, a Democrat. While they would seldom appear together in the Capital, they made numerous trips to my office together to promote the bill. On one such trip they arrived to have coffee with First Lady Barbara Bush, who came to champion our cause. They were impressed, to say the least. This nonpartisan support was crucial to all of the library issues we put before the legislature.

Some seventy public libraries had developed programs and were key players in numerous communities around California. The literacy services were then administered under the California Library Services Act and the State Board, and its members were key players in moving it forward.

The following year we were able to get legislation for the Families for Literacy Program through the California legislature. The program was structured to help prevent illiteracy through coordinated literacy and preliteracy services to families that include illiterate adults and young children. It provides reading preparation services for young children in public library settings and instructs parents in the importance of reading to their children.

That same year we tried to get legislation passed called the Students for Literacy Program, which would have been a funded work-study program that would bring prospective teachers in the colleges into public libraries to work as tutors and get paid

for their time. We ran headlong into the broader lobby for student financial aid and became “road-kill” in the Assembly aisles.

Over the ten years I saw scores of talented literacy services staff embrace public libraries as their new home, thousands of new adults discovered public libraries, and thousands more children were engaged with their parents in public library programs. It was a sea-change for the public libraries in California who have been committed to the program.

I am sure that Susan will talk more in depth about how the program is further integrated with the passage of new legislation and process. I want also to note that in addition to Carmela Ruby and other consultants on the staff in the early 1980s, Al Bennett and Carol Talan came to work at the State Library and brought energy and commitment to literacy programs. They are the pioneers and the trailblazers along with the literacy staff of the libraries who took the risk in believing that libraries are places where people go to read!

When I went to Queens Public Library in 1994, I found a vibrant, library-based literacy program already in place. Our six adult learning centers were up and running with funds from the mayor’s office in the City of New York, and we were swamped with adult learners. But we also had developed a fantastic program for those immigrants for whom English was not their first language.

We believed that reading and writing are essential to maintaining a free and democratic society. Adults in Queens regardless of native language should have access to literacy instruction at the library. Because Queens is the most ethnically diverse county in the United States, its two million residents comprise almost every cultural and social background on the globe. Almost half speak languages other than English at home. Some never attended school as children. Still others, for any number of reasons, just never learned.

Queens Library’s Adult Learning Centers offer several options for learners to obtain basic literacy skills. Formal classes in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) are offered through the New Americans Program with certified ESOL teachers conducting each class. Regular classes and small group instruction for adult new readers are conducted by volunteer tutors. There are conversation groups led by volunteers so learners can practice. They go on field trips around the city together learning from each other. There are adult basic education classes. There are computer-assisted instruction labs for students learning English or improving their reading skills. Each learner is introduced to the library and almost always becomes a library user and advocate.

Every library in America needs to make a commitment to literacy and learning. That almost sounds like a given, but I assure you it is not. Public libraries can be involved in the following ways:

- Be knowledgeable of the conditions of literacy in their service communities and gather information and facts concerning literacy status, service providers, and delivery systems that are available to adult learners. Reference librarians, children's librarians, and readers' advisors are key referral agents to such services on behalf of library customers.
- Develop collections of educational materials, including ones designed especially for adults at low reading levels and containing books that parents can read to their children. Collections should include teachers' manuals and tutoring guides.
- Provide meeting room space for tutor instruction, local learning councils, and learner instruction provided by other organizations.
- Participate in community coalitions that focus on adult learning and family literacy. Actively advocate approaches that recognize the condition of illiteracy in the community and work to find community solutions. Work with adult schools, community colleges, and private providers to ensure that all in need have the opportunity to be served.
- Provide instruction to adult learners in Basic English and English for Speakers of other Languages, using computer-aided instruction and one-on-one or small group tutoring. This is the highest level of involvement for a public library.
- Make sure that every adult in a learning program receives orientation to the public library and its services and instruction in how to use information, facts, and knowledge for personal empowerment.

I frankly never thought too much about how colleges and universities might have a role in literacy until I took my current post as university librarian at UCLA. Information literacy is a huge component in our instructional engagement in classes across the UCLA campus. Our information literacy librarians work with faculty to embed library components and quality library resources into classes and engage in instruction when appropriate. We work with assessment and partner with various instructional and research units across the entire campus to make sure those students are prepared to fully access the tremendous resources that can support their learning and research.

We define information literacy as the set of skills students need to identify an information need, locate information efficiently, evaluate information, and use information effectively and ethically. These are skills that students will find essential throughout their undergraduate and graduate careers and beyond, yet many come to UCLA with critical gaps in this skill set.

The United States is the only country in the world where the Constitution guarantees every citizen the right to be ignorant. And yet we used to believe that every child, woman, and man had a right to learn to read—and it's in the library that we do that. It is our collective responsibility as a society to make sure that the right to be ignorant is one right our citizens do not choose to exercise. In my opinion reading is not optional; it is not elective; it is required to secure the other guarantees of the Constitution of a free, enlightened, democratic society.

If we are not careful, we shall become the friends of ignorance and the enemies of knowledge, and that would not portend well for this country. We must engage elected officials to understand the important role that access to information makes possible with a sound system of library services in assuring our country's future.

But we must not only look back and value the past, we must move vigorously into the future. We still have much to do.

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