

Literacy Researchers at Work in the Public Library

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The smell of old paper: public libraries reflect social change

Before we describe how libraries such as Westpark contribute to community literacy today, allow us a brief glance back at how libraries shaped our own lives when we were children.

The library of Angela's youth in England provided her with enchantment and refuge from drab post-war Coventry, and the "library walk" itself was an important childhood routine. Even in the children's section, however, no one suggested books or offered literacy programs. The three books a week Angela took zealously from the library were a mixture of the great and the ghastly. The range of children's books in the library was quite limited, including the amazingly (in retrospect) jingoistic and racist tales of ace World War II pilots Biggles and Worrals. It never occurred to Angela to do homework at the library; nor was she encouraged to use the library's books and newspapers as resources for school projects. Indeed, books taken from the library and read at home were strictly a private pleasure, with no connections ever made to school learning. But the smell of old

As researchers involved in schools for much of our lives, we never anticipated how fascinated we would become with the role of public libraries in community literacy.

Our current study of literacy in a Saskatoon neighbourhood has shown us that the public library provides a rich context for a wide range of literacy practices. This research has involved interviews with librarians and teachers, and many visits to libraries in our city. In particular, we have frequently visited Westpark, the local library for the community we are studying.

paper and the quiet within that small gem of an Edwardian building still linger in Angela's memory.

For her part, Linda learned to read from her home library by rereading about that persistent and resilient train engine, *The Little Engine that Could*, memorizing its refrain of "I think I can, I think I can" as the tiny engine struggled to pull cars full of Christmas toys up a steep hill. When she exhausted the supply of books at home, in a Boston-area town, she began weekly excursions to the local library. Linda fondly remembers sitting in a big oak chair with a stack of picture story

books, sampling every one until she had her three-book borrowing limit. She remembers being captivated by Virginia Burton's *The Little House*, which follows the changes a little house goes through, from sitting alone on a hill in the country, to being dwarfed by the huge buildings in a spreading tide of urbanization. She would look for every little detail in the pictures, which changed from page to page. The text was also a pleasure and stretched her imagination, but at the time she was probably oblivious to the author's intended message. However, she had discovered that books contain worlds between their covers.

Linda saw libraries as a magical repository of literature just waiting to entertain an inquisitive child. Later, when she was still in primary school, she viewed libraries as a bibliographic resource, spending many hours with her mother in historical archives and law libraries, tagging along and helping as her mother pursued research and professional interests.

Westpark: the site for our research

Westpark library opened in the 1970s as part of a leisure centre. From outward appearances there is no way to know it exists; it is simply one of a number of municipal services offered to local residents. It's also hard to access on foot. The leisure centre is across a busy highway from the main shopping area and bus stop. The architecture of the library blends with the commercial buildings and the shopping mall.

The Westpark library competes with hundreds of organized school and community activities, such as soccer, gymnastics, crafts and music, for the attention of children in the neighbourhood, as well as with the enormous home entertainment industry. For children of earlier generations, leisure activities were limited. Entertainment centred on church and school activities and street games. Reading was an important source of amusement and escape. Now, even at the library, books are no longer the only game in town. The 10 computers in Westpark

library are sometimes booked two days ahead, and we saw many young library patrons who did not touch a book, but accessed the Internet and borrowed videos.

Private and public spaces

In a useful book called *Local Literacies*, the authors describe “vernacular literacies” as “ones which are not regulated by the formal rules and procedures of

sites for this hybrid use of literacy – the girls were able to use materials in their own way without running up against adult perceptions of the “right way” to read or do homework. This hybridity and multitasking are familiar to parents of teenagers, who often see their children simultaneously interact with friends in a chat room while gathering information for homework.

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dominant social institutions and which have their origins in everyday life.”¹ Libraries today provide spaces where vernacular and dominant literacies intersect. This was clearly illustrated by a conversation we overheard between two teenage girls ostensibly doing homework in Westpark library. What began as a discussion of the Canadian Constitution slipped quickly to comments on clothes in the teen magazine lying on the table beside them. No parent or teacher came to admonish them; the girls' mixture of schooled and vernacular discourses seemed natural in the library. Libraries are unique

The public library provides an intersection of public and private space, of school and work, of youth and the elderly. Westpark library activities are organized by space and, in the case of the computers, by the structure of the medium and the limited time available. Despite access to many kinds of texts, users tend not to interact across boundaries. Elderly magazine users, Internet browsers, young children clicking through Barney stories and teenagers doing homework exist in separate clusters. The front area of Westpark library, where computers are hooked up to the Internet, is used primarily

by young people, particularly boys. Mothers of young children make quick visits to the fiction section but spend more time in the children's section, encouraging their kids to take out books or watching over their shoulders as they use interactive computer programs. Middle-aged women browse the fiction section. In the magazine section of Westpark and other libraries in the city, retired men peruse farming and hunting magazines, often for 30 minutes or more at a time. These patterns are probably familiar to many librarians.

The Westpark staff perceive themselves as actively engaged in community education, with programs for preschoolers, parents, seniors and those "totally terrified" of the computer. There is also great interest in developing literacy programs in the library setting. Librarians are caught up in the rush to organize activities for people whose lives are already highly structured by work and leisure programs.

Role of the public library in community literacy

Perhaps it is the threat of electronic communication that has encouraged libraries to rethink their traditional roles and to enter the "literacy business." What author Brian V. Street describes as "a relentless commitment to instruction" has reached the library.² The institutionalized processes of teaching and learning – "pedagogized literacy,"

as Street terms them – have become part of library planning. The discourse of school learning is hard to avoid, and has come to seem natural to community organizations. The more neutral role of the library as a place where self-directed literacy learning might occur is likely to be replaced by a view of the library as a place where parents take their children to reinforce school success.

At the moment, Westpark library seems to fill the space between self-directed learning and schooled literacy. Young people still have freedom to explore books and computer resources, but more formal programming is on the agenda. Perhaps the demise of reading as a private pastime has already taken place, as the romantic concept of personal, reflective reading is overtaken by perceived societal needs for structured leisure activities. As the research continues, we will engage community members, librarians and teachers in discussions about formal and informal literacy in their lives. In revisiting our own early library experiences and connecting them with current patterns of literacy in the library, we have a renewed appreciation of the ways in which literacy practices are changing. 🐾

Notes

- ¹ David Barton and Mary Hamilton, *Local Literacies: Reading and Writing in One Community* (London: Routledge), 1998, p. 247.
- ² Brian V. Street, *Social Literacies: Critical Approaches to Literacy Development, Ethnography and Education* (London: Longman), 1995, p. 125.

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