The Reading Connection

By Jordan Fabish

An Educated Populus

I worked for the Long Beach Public Library system for twenty years before graduating from the CSUF reading program, and when I began to write for the REG newsletter, I imagined my first contribution would be in praise of public libraries and the people therein who serve our communities. It wasn't first, but here it is, and just as appreciative.

On the importance and cost of education:

Preach, my dear Sir, a crusade against ignorance; establish and improve the law for educating the common people. Let our countrymen know, that the people alone can protect us against these evils, and that the tax which will be paid for this purpose, is not more than the thousandth part of what will be paid to kings, priests and nobles, who will rise up among us if we leave the people in ignorance.

Thomas Jefferson, 1786, from a letter to George Wythe (http://www.monroecc.edu/wusers/pcollinge/jeffquot.htm)

Who among us would disagree with Thomas Jefferson's impassioned admonition? The public school and the public library are woven into the fabric of our very value system... two parallel public institutions whose mission and populace are fundamentally the same, two institutions that have our allegiance and whose practitioners, teachers and librarians, are as one in the "crusade against ignorance."

Reading Instruction and Libraries: A Thoroughly Logical Pairing

In our print-dependent world it is text that transmits most cultures’ mores and values, much of their art and beauty, and an overwhelming amount of information. To participate fully in the world of ideas, the ideas that shape our lives, we (and those we teach) must be proficient interpreters of text. And it follows that we (and those we teach) need access to print. That sounds like reading instruction and libraries to me!

The research of Cunningham and Stanovich (1998) illumines the value of text in a way most unforgettable. Positing that the cognitive benefits of "avid" reading are numerous, they cite, for example, vocabulary acquisition as a corollary of reading volume. Because increases in our understanding of word meanings and usage result from indirect exposure to language via life experience, rather than from direct instruction (both a common-sense and research-based assumption), then which language exposure will afford the content-specific, meaning-rich words by which we do build vocabulary? The answer is text—printed text. Far surpassing even the speech of expert witness testimony, it is text, even text in children’s books or comic books, which delivers "rare" vocabulary-building words.

MAJOR SOURCES OF SPOKEN & WRITTEN LANGUAGE

(Sample Means)

Rank of median Word*
Rare Words per 1000
I. Printed texts

Abstracts of scientific articles
Newspapers
Popular magazines
Adult books
Comic books
Children’s books
Preschool books
4389
1690
1399
1058
867
627
578
128.0
68.3
65.7
52.7
53.5
30.9
16.3

II. Television texts
Popular prime-time adult shows
Popular prime-time child. shows
Cartoon shows
Mr. Rogers and Sesame Street

Cunningham, A. E. and Stanovich, K. E., 1998

Adapted from Hayes and Ahrens, 1988

(*e.g., “the” was ranked #1, the most frequent; “vibrate” was ranked #5000)

Figure 1

What's more, even after statistically teasing out both decoding ability and intelligence, Cunningham and Stanovich's findings suggest that reading volume is not only associated with vocabulary knowledge, but
causally linked. And increased vocabulary is only one consequence of high reading volume; comprehension, ordinary accumulation of information, and maintenance of verbal ability as we age are others.

I believe it is through print that we hone the tools to communicate articulately our most significant ideas. More than that, Vygotsky postulated that “thought is born through words” (p. 153, italics mine), not the other way around. His focus was on speech and social interaction, but with the Cunningham and Stanovich research in mind, one can extrapolate that it is through print we will find the most precise, exquisite words, not only to express our ideas but to create them.

If we intend to expose our students and ourselves to print in our classrooms, for longer than just a semester or a year; truly for an entire life, we need a lot of it. Further, because only the very wealthy have the means to acquire all the print they want and bookcases to store it in and rooms in which to store the bookcases, most of us need a library. Benjamin Franklin thought so, when, besides his practical inventions, his pragmatic advice and his political statesmanship, he was a prime mover in establishing America’s first circulating library in Philadelphia, 1731.

Stephen Krashen thinks so, too, when he correlates print environment with reading success or lack thereof. “There is very strong evidence that disadvantaged children read less well primarily because they have far less access to print” (1998, p. 6). His research reveals that public libraries in affluent California cities such as Beverly Hills may have from two to six times more books than those in, for instance, Watts or Santa Fe Springs—not to mention 200 times more books in the home (1998, p. 6). While correlation is not causation, Krashen unwaveringly continues to assert that reading achievement is strongly influenced by access to print and library quality (2002).

WHAT’S IN IT FOR OUR STUDENTS

Obviously, our students gain access to print when they connect with a library. In the Main library and 11 branches of the Long Beach Public Library system, according to their 2002 Annual Report, that means access to 40 subscription online databases and 997, 509 items in a collection with an annual circulation of 1, 721, 269; it means an association with librarians to answer their questions, which LBPL librarians did 354, 948 times last year (N. Messineo, November 8, 2003). LBPL provides books and magazines for children and adults in English, Spanish, Vietnamese, Khmer (and French and Greek and, well, you name it). The smallest branch, Mark Twain, renowned for service to its local community, boasts the largest collection of Cambodian-language books in the state. In the Long Beach system one will also find non-print media from videos to recordings to audio books, as well as preschool story-times, summer reading programs, family-learning centers for homework help, teen programs such as teen councils and readings of their own work, rocking chairs and volunteer readers, school visits, library tours, computer-use introductions, telephone reference, large-print books, delivery of materials to homebound readers, and a new information center for people with disabilities.

But, what about the Internet, isn’t Internet information on its way to making libraries obsolete? Not really. For one thing, many people have neither a computer nor an Internet service. For another, people still enjoy holding a book when they read. More importantly, librarians are trained in the organization and evaluation of information. As school librarian Shaun Lloyd has pointed out, “You can’t find answers to all the questions on the Internet . . . sometimes students need to open an old-fashioned book. Sometimes it can be so much quicker for a student to do research in a regular encyclopedia set. And they might not have the wisdom to evaluate whether information found on the Net is true or false. Librarians have a real feel for various types of resources, whether they’re electronic, books, visual or CD-ROM” (“Librarians,” 2002, p. 17).
When one of my LBCC college classes meets at a workable hour, I always bring my students to the Ruth Bach neighborhood branch, just a block away from the liberal arts campus, or to Mark Twain, close to the Pacific Coast campus. There, they get a taste not only of the variety of materials available to them through the public library, but also of the high level of service they can expect. What I hope sinks in is the possibility of expanding their prior knowledge. I think most of us subscribe to the cognitive learning theory that the way we learn anything new is by relating it to our schema—that by activating our prior knowledge we give new knowledge a place to adhere—and I recite it nonstop to my students. For many difficult subjects, however, prior knowledge is skimpy at best, so I want students to know they are not powerless to establish and strengthen prior knowledge—they can start with a children’s book (preschool to high school): a book with the basics, with clear organization, with a picture worth a thousand words. From pre-algebra and geometry to astronomy to history to the folk and fairy tales that underlie every culture, nowhere is there a better collection of printed prior-knowledge-builders than in the children’s sections of a public library.

Imagine the collaborative possibilities! Here is one: for several semesters now, a storytelling class in LBCC’s Child Development Program has met at the Ruth Bach library, giving the students easy access to just the books they need—isn’t that a great idea?

WHAT’S IN IT FOR US

The salutary benefit of our connecting with libraries is the potential working relationship with another literacy professional, the librarian. Did you know that a librarian has a Master of Science degree, as we do? Did you know that our own CSU Fullerton hosts a satellite program of San Jose State’s School of Library and Information Services? During my 20 years at LBPL, I found librarians to be among the most service-minded, dedicated, dynamic, diverse, delightful (please pardon the alliterative roll) women and men I’ve ever known. And I have never heard one of them say, “SHHHHH!”

I probably have been preaching to the choir; on the other hand, there are plenty of educators who feel positively disposed toward the library, but who just never go there. If you never go there, perhaps it is because you are working so long and hard that scheduling personal free time to read is futile. Teachers’ propensities to put themselves last is, perhaps, a subject for another day. However, personal needs aside, the library can be the very place to dispel one of your professional anxieties. Are we not ever searching for high-interest, high-quality, low-reading-level books for our struggling students? (And high-interest, high-quality, high-reading-level books for those ready to move ahead?) In graduate school I heard this earnest query over and over from fellow students who were already experienced teachers, but quite fretful about finding the right books for their own students. I did not know the answers, either, but I sure knew whom to ask! I could ask Madeline or Suzanne or Sandy or Candy or Gail or Chris or Hilda or Nancy or Michael—I knew so many terrific librarians, and that’s what librarians do: they match books to people. They are familiar with hundreds of plots, authors, titles, genres. They can match a general topic to a general audience (high-interest/low level books to struggling readers) or, better yet, particular books for particular patrons—and maybe that patron is you!

WHAT CAN GO WRONG

Now that you, full of hope and mutual altruism, sharing my opinion that librarians are perpetually clothed in white raiment, are about to make that library visit, you need to know that there is always the possibility you could end up with a dud. Just as there are mediocre teachers, textbook writers, or travel agents, a less-than-service-oriented librarian does surface from time to time, someone whose paperwork is clearly more important than patrons, someone who is cross or lazy or incompetent or just weird! I truly have found such to be the exception, not the rule, so try another day or another librarian until you find one who is really there to help you.

What else can go wrong is that library services, probably even more than school services, are always in funding jeopardy. Long Beach Public’s strength has always been its people, providing exemplary service
despite smaller budgets for staff and materials than other systems (Orange County, for one), but currently, they are in crisis. Every Saturday, I keep thinking I will run over to my neighborhood branch, but it is closed because the Long Beach system has implemented rolling closures (along with a 14% materials/book budget reduction, slashing of library facility hours and substitute staff hours, and an overload of additional cuts) to accommodate the $1.1 million budget reduction for fiscal 2004, per their letter to library patrons. While I worked at the library, it was often noted that we never really recovered from Proposition 13’s cuts, never could restore, for instance, evening hours, branch hours, or children’s librarian hours to their former standing. I wonder what permanent losses this shortfall represents.

THEREFORE . . .

Crusade against ignorance! Your city government representatives, charged with the harrowing task of distributing shrinking revenues, need to know how much you value libraries. Tell them. Then visit your local library and library staff, and arrange to bring your students!


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Faculty Footnotes

By Kathi Bartle Angus

Despite some of the “bad news” headlines over the summer, CSUF and the Reading Department are alive and well. This is not to say that we haven’t had some fairly nasty budget issues to deal with, but we are surviving in what will be for several years most likely a “no growth” mode. What this means for our graduate program is that we can continue to offer the program we have been offering to the current number of matriculated graduate students at our Fullerton and El Toro campuses as well as at a select few off-campus sites. We currently have cohorts meeting in Tustin, Capistrano, and Newport-Mesa school districts. We plan to add Anaheim City School district to that list in the spring as the Newport-Mesa students prepare to graduate.

We have had several good things happen that should be shared. Our Fullerton campus-reading clinic, which has been a model for several others across the state, was visited again last month by Education faculty from CSU San Bernadino. They are hoping to model their new clinic after ours. Also, plans are being made for a center on the new El Toro campus that will incorporate many of the aspects of the
Fullerton clinic but will go farther in its ability to serve the neighboring community. More news about this will be shared in future columns.

A new certificate program of four classes in Post-Secondary Reading and Learning will be offered beginning in the fall of 2004 through Extended Education. This has been in the planning stages under the direction of JoAnn Carter-Wells and has recently been approved by all the appropriate campus committees. The program will be offered entirely on-line and will hopefully meet the needs of the growing number of teachers who want to work with adult students in post-secondary settings. Initial publicity was provided at the College Reading and Learning Association meeting in Albuquerque last month. For more information contact Dr. Carter-Wells at jcarterwells@fullerton.edu

Finally 65 students completed the comprehensive exam last month. So we will most likely have another graduating class of well over 100 students at commencement in June.

Hancock Fund

The Hancock Fund was established to honor Dr. Deborah Osen Hancock for her contributions to the field of reading and specifically to the Reading Department. The fund is solely for use by the CSUF Reading Clinic. Over the years, the fund has supplied books and technology for use by clinicians and students. REG would like to thank the following members for their generous contributions to the Hancock Fund:

Julia Austin Janice Blanton  
Susan Burgess Amy Talaganis  
Melanie Haeri Leslee Milch  
Peggy Hammer Shannon Maddux  
Mary Hansen Claudia Leyerle  
JoAnn Healy Sheila Kridner  
Margaret Hirsen Patty Meyer Travis  
Kathi Bartle Angus Pat Irot

REG Winter Dinner

WHEN: Tuesday, March 9, 2004  
WHERE: The Fullerton Marriott  
TIME: No host bar at 6:00 P.M.  
Dinner at 6:30 P.M.  
WHO: Guest speaker  
Ash Bishop

Reading Educators Guild Newsletter Staff

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If you would like to contribute to the newsletter, by being a regular column writer or just an occasional article donator, please contact Jan Court-Keller at kellermrs@hotmail.com. We need all of you to help make REG great!