

READING CLUBS AS PARTICIPATORY ART AND SCIENCE IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES

MARIA PILCHIN

PhD Student

Moldova State University

B.P. Hasdeu Municipal Library

Chişinău, Republic of Moldova

maropil82@gmail.com

ORCID ID: 0009-0002-4477-8730

Abstract: The social rating, the feeling of identification with a brand, the group with which an individual associates can be tools for stimulating the need for reading through the creation and development of reading clubs. Reading circles are a form of participatory art and science. The sense of associativity contributes to the education of active citizenship, to the creation of the sense of community and civic belonging, increases the pluralism of ideas and actions, intensifying human communication. The collective allows the sharing of experience and reading states. In addition to intellectual development, clubs, through their informal format, contribute to the stimulation of unconventional thinking, critical thinking, horizontal interpersonal communication and the development of socially proactive interpersonal relationships. A new concept applied to functional literacy is that of transliteracy, which we will not refer to in this article.

The public libraries of the Republic of Moldova saw in the last decade an opportunity in these forms of providing reading services. Branches of the B.P. Hasdeu Municipal Library provide users with a wide range of clubs, workshops and cenacles in which reading and post-reading dialogue are the main occupation of the group. The purpose of these services is to increase interest in books and develop reading skills in the community.

Keywords: public library, reading club, critical thinking, intellectual associativity, participatory art, participatory science, pluralism of ideas.

JEL Classification: I30; M31; Z13

1 Introduction

Today, more and more is insisted on the thesis that the purpose of reading is not a passive act (as it is often stereotypically perceived), an activity of rest, but, obviously, social involvement, associativity, participation, the acceptance of a proactive behavior, the generation of post-reading attitudes and results (book events, digital content, textual publications, research projects within reading clubs, cenacles and workshops).

Books and reading are no longer synonymous only with solitude and retreat in the privacy of one's own home. Readers are drawn into library spaces to generate events, to become central actors in them. Reading becomes a public manifestation, performance, show.

Thus, we emphasize the orientation towards a more dynamic, more involved perception of the act of reading as a form of social participation of the individual in a community. And libraries become active hubs for fostering interest in science, technology, and civics through art and research.

Technology, moreover, is that variable that continuously changes the way the user relates to the

library. We do not strictly refer to university and academic libraries, although they are the first to cultivate interest in science, but we extend the perspective towards libraries frequented by the general public, where such concerns are not a priority.

2 The Sciences and Praxis of Reading

Transdisciplinary studies on reading applied to several fields of knowledge are becoming more and more important. Many scholars refer to a type of universal reading that transgresses the boundaries of philological training by encompassing cultural history, education, sociology, psychology, and cognitive neuroscience. It is necessary to massively popularize the culture and science of reading to take on practical forms, applicable to new social needs.

More and more theories of reading development are formulated in different social and individual contexts, connected to the particular needs of the reader and the community. Thus, in the age of inter- and transdisciplinarity, we cannot talk about a unified science of reading, but about the sciences of reading constituted by the multitude of theories from several fields of human knowledge that research the multitude of reading needs of the contemporary individual as well as the variety of practical forms of their satisfaction.

The creation of centers for the study of reading and the promotion of reading, the massive reorientation towards the reading public is the new paradigm in which public libraries exist today. The Internet has shifted the emphasis. Electronic multiplication has diluted librocentrism.

The multimedia dimension has virtually eliminated the concept of the old and rare book as an inaccessible object. Everything can be digitized, all documents can be accessible in possible digital collections. Thus, from a prestigious institution through the preserved book collection, the library gradually became the prestigious institution through the promotion of reading and the dissemination of books.

It is not only interested in quantitative data regarding the collection of documents, but also statistics regarding services and events promoting specific titles and authors. The book is no longer a finality of the bibliographic field, the book has become an important element of a flow of library processes that generate an offer of products and services.

The infrastructure of reading today involves more than the reader, the book, the reading room. It encompasses and runs them like a Möbius Strip, where the process matters and not the object to be preserved, where movement matters as a sign of evolution.

For a long time bibliology, as the science of books and reading, and library science were of interest to the writer. Over time, bibliography became a field strictly reserved for book publishing, and librarianship concerns migrated to the other pole – the reader, the ideal user of the library and in great demand lately, as we all inhabit a universe where the economy of attention is an axis of human development, development supposing the perspective of behavioral psychology and that of behavioral economics (Festré, 2015, P. 3).

Libraries cultivate their user of reading services, always attract them into orbit, competing with other cultural or educational institutions. However, there is more and more talk about a marketing of reading materialized in a range of library services: book clubs, reading workshops, contests and book battles, sustainable reading programs and campaigns, etc.

Library spaces have become friendly, they encourage reading and the reader's presence, library design has also been oriented towards capturing attention and creating a user-friendly atmosphere

that generates needs capable of reconfiguring process flows and the offer of library services.

3 Book Clubs, Reading Clubs, Reader Clubs

We are familiar from literature lessons with the notions of literary salon or literary cenacle. Referring to the development of reading skills, functional and social literacy, we currently use the terms (on-line) book club, reader's club, reading group and book discussion club.

This phenomenon has become an important part of contemporary culture since the 20th century. An applied trend in the western English-speaking area (especially in the USA) is that of writing textbooks, guides, theoretical volumes about the science of reading from the general perspective of knowledge and not through the strictly philological prism of reading, as happens in our area. This reflects the fact that the library must also be multidimensional and multifunctional.

Kathleen F. Malu and Bryce Smedley, in their textbook “The readers club. Handbook”, define a reader's club as a group of its members who meet regularly to read and discuss texts and/or visual images. At the same time, the series of meetings of that group of readers also constitutes that club (Malu and Smedley, 2018, P. 1).

This book club guide outlines some event planning strategies and resources: pre-reading (choice of text, theme, style), reading (visualization, comprehension, semantic linking) and post-reading (discussion, written interpretation, dramatization, use of new words) (Malu and Smedley, 2018, P. 21-83).

An innovative element of this reading vademecum is the fact that the authors refer to a visualization strategy, the exercise of understanding and interpreting an image, its chromatic aspects, its dimensions (Malu and Smedley, 2018, P. 87-96).

Visualization as a complementary activity to reading also belongs to transliteracy, that media and digital literacy imposed by the young generation and the user who comes with new technological requirements that expand the textual to the visual sphere (Andretta, 2010, P. 148).

4 Participatory Art and Science in Book Clubs

Just as reading clubs often organize workshops on interpretation of texts, creative writing, group writing projects, often as a public manifestation or as a public product, we will consider this type of artistic creation as a form of participatory art (professional or amateur). This concept appeared in the Western space as early as the 60s of the last century as a result of cultural emancipation and the need for collective expression.

Terminologically, this type of creation belongs to collaborative art, public art, relational (the artist relates the participants to the activity), contextual (concrete social circumstances of the creation) and social (art influenced by the community, community creation) (NESF Report 35, 2007, P. 2).

Researcher Nelly Țurcan in a documented and conceptually substantiated study published in 2019 in “BiblioPolis” magazine and entitled “Public library and participatory science”, insists on the idea that “public libraries are attractive because they are institutions of knowledge that transcend the boundaries of different disciplines, generations, as well as being transcultural. They also have a huge capacity to fuel social changes through curiosity, knowledge, culture and science” (Țurcan, 2020, P. 13-14).

However, libraries constitute a space open to innovation in the field of participatory research, open science and popularization of science. They bring transformation, ensure the sustainability and efficiency of collective life.

5 Good Library Practices

We believe that public libraries can organize different forms of participatory science within reading clubs, encouraging the creation of scientific book study clubs, with an openness applied to the researched topic (questionnaires, surveys, experiments, etc.). For example, the “Forza” professional reading club at the B.P. Hasdeu Municipal Library (a discussion group of librarians) can easily be transformed into a club with results related to participatory science, which would not be limited only to understanding scientific concepts and theories, but would try to apply them in practical activities. At the same time, already existing book clubs in the Republic of Moldova can be attracted to the physical and online space to benefit readers of different ages and with different experience. An environment conducive to the exchange of post-reading opinions and feelings could be created.

An example of this is the SciFri book club in New York which brings together people interested in science reading: science fiction short stories, non-fiction science books, scientific articles and studies, etc. The club meets monthly, with books chosen for reading by community members. There is also a club radio show, debates are hosted online, authors and scientific experts are invited for interview (What is the SciFri Book Club?).

Similar entities are science book clubs in different geographical spaces that operate online, for example Sciency and Philosophy London Book Club (1000+ members) which aims to read and discuss the world as a dimension of the depths or The Science Book Club Meetap Group in Reston, USA (over 1500 members) that encourages community interest in popular science. We thus identify a horizontal perspective of science, in contrast to the horizontal developments of academic paradigms in the past.

Indeed, recent changes in the librarian field have imposed models of horizontal communication and interaction with the user. The transparency and democratization of the processes is obvious (free online access, free access to the shelf, access of different communities to the library space to host different types of events: from the conference of atheist philosophers to festivals of religious poetry). The library has become a common space where the elitist symbolism of book enlightenment and the Enlightenment pragmatism of book emancipation coexist. We also find a struggle for power, a power through academic, social, cultural discourse, etc.

Library specialists always ask themselves what should be kept, transformed, changed, abandoned in the flow of reading services. And these processes must reflect the needs of the community. There are real answers to potential library strategies and tactics. The tradition of science and culture, the preservation of information and knowledge, the cultivation of memory and cognitive existence do not exist without modernization and updating.

The new paradigms redefine, moreover, the tradition and an aesthetic of the old good, valuable, to be perpetuated. Thus, public libraries move away from the passive custody of library documents to their active promotion, starting from the thesis that, in fact, “knowledge is not identified with the accumulation of texts or information, nor is it found between the covers of the book itself, but in the experience that detaches from the page and turns into another experience” (Manguel, 2011, P. 86).

The transformations are visible (Rosenblatt, 2023, P. 35-38): from the reader-object of infodocumentation processes to the reader-subject of using library products and services. The passive object of book lending has turned into the active subject of the flow of book services. Libraries break away from conservative elitism, from the cumulative preservation of secret and rare documents, resorting to their intensive dissemination to different segments of the reading public.

A book consumer who actively reads (Adler and Van Doren, 2014, P. 293) for a continuous development being the desired and the purpose of the modern library.

The librarian is no longer a custodian in the classic version, but a promoter, an animator, a facilitator of book and reading events. The librarian is no longer particularly concerned with the perishability and safeguarding of the document delivered within the service, but with its impact on the community. The book market, creative industries in the publishing sphere always allow the re-editing of the used book and the intensification of book propagation (in print or electronic format). From the “temple” of the book, the library has turned into its multifunctional center, a social hub that produces cultural and cognitive animation. Animation stimulates the degree of involvement, connection and participation in processes, phenomena, social and community movements that a public library can generate.

The document shelf is no longer an iconostasis, a museum of precious relics, but a collection of public goods to take, to use, to apply, to optimize the life of the individual and the evolved society. It is an environment conducive to human gatherings and relationships.

Conclusion

Public libraries must become centers for the propagation of science and art. Reading and reading services can facilitate this process and its results. We emphasize once again the importance of reading clubs as forms of participatory art and science in public libraries, especially in the context of the Republic of Moldova and its vector of European integration.

These intellectual workgroups not only stimulate an interest in reading, but also contribute to the development of critical thinking skills, discernment, interpersonal communication and civic engagement.

The activities organized within these library activities promote social association and pluralism of ideas, transforming reading from a solitary activity into a collective and dynamic process with public impact.

Also, our article highlights the changes brought about by digitization, book technologies, posthuman knowledge (AI and human-robot mutual knowledge), the nature of reading in the light of recent transformations and new social needs, which have led to the reorientation of libraries towards services more interactive, more accessible and more impactful.

Reading clubs thus become a conducive environment for innovation, creativity and collaboration, facilitating the exchange of experiences and ideas between participants. Thus, book clubs are an effective strategy for revitalizing interest in reading and strengthening communities through outreach, education, participatory research, open science, culture, and civics. Book clubs can help create a fairer, more equitable and more beautiful world.

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