

A library for learning: experiences of students in Uganda

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I count myself lucky that I happened to be visiting KwaZulu-Natal at the time of your conference, and I'm much honoured that you've asked me to speak to you. Before I go further, let me acknowledge the people to whom I most owe this honour: Snoeks Desmond, whose Family Literacy Project I have just been visiting, was the one who established the initial contact; Val MacGarry has been my main correspondent about the conference; and Khanyi Dubazana issued the formal invitation. Thank you all very much, and it's a great pleasure to meet you after corresponding for so long. And thank you, conference delegates, for coming to listen to me! I hope I'll be able to say something that's of use to you, and I say that with some trepidation, for unlike all of you, I am not a professional librarian, nor do I have any experience of working in South Africa. I know, however, that you are doing tremendous work in this country on promoting reading in various ways, and I have developed a particular interest in what is happening here with regard to libraries.

The reason for this interest is that since 1999 I have myself been deeply involved in library projects in my adopted country, Uganda. Today I'll be focusing on research that I have been doing recently in two libraries, one called the Kitengesa Community Library, the other the Caezaria Public Library. They are located in different parts of the country but are both in rural areas in the central, Luganda-speaking, region, the first to the west, the second to the east of Kampala. These libraries are not, as I understand most of the ones where you work are, school libraries; they are community libraries, which is to say that they try to serve people of all ages and all occupations within the rural communities where they are located. Nonetheless, they each have a close relationship with a secondary school, as well as working with local primary schools, and the majority of library users in both cases are students. My most recent research has involved interviewing groups of

these students as well as teachers, the particular issue being whether and how the libraries are helping them to gain access to higher education.

These libraries have been set up in a curiously paradoxical situation: Ugandans have a desire for education so great that it has been described as “legendary” (Paige, 2000), and yet publishers, teachers, and students themselves continually lament that the country “lacks a reading culture.” Many Ugandans, says Father Peter Bakka—who is one of the most vocal promoters of reading in the country—are “so educated but so illiterate”, and he cites his experience in secondary schools, where all the students he talks to say they can read, but pitifully few claim to have read any books other than textbooks (2000).

A number of reasons can be cited for this phenomenon. Uganda, like many African countries, has no indigenous tradition of literacy, and when the country became independent in 1964 the numbers of people who could read were still low (literacy rates were reported in 1960 as 62% for males and 32% for females (UNICEF, 1999)); schools were good but few, and what they taught was a colonial curriculum heavily dominated by British traditions. When I first went to the country in 1968 the education system was expanding and the curriculum was being somewhat Africanised, but then, in the 1970s and 80s, Uganda experienced years of military dictatorship and civil war, and it was as much as the schools could do to survive at all. Many books were lost—my graduate students at Makerere University in the late 1990s reported having seen the troops using them for lighting fires—and of course no new books were bought. Since then, in response to popular demand, many new schools have “mushroomed”, but they are pitifully short of resources, and books, even now, are low on their list of requirements.

The result of this experience is that teachers have become expert at transmitting book learning without books. Notes are written on blackboards and transcribed into notebooks and then are dutifully “crammed” in preparation for exams. This pattern of behaviour militates against any kind of exploration or discovery through reading, for students and teachers alike learn to view school subjects as narrow collections of facts and of education as a process of marshalling those facts in response to exam questions. It is a tragically limited view that allows authoritarian teachers to lord it over their classes and prevents students from developing their faculties of curiosity and imagination.

My recent work with community libraries suggests that **libraries can offer a way out of this situation**. I do not mean, however, that all we have to do is put up a building and stock it with books, as well-meaning donors have done in some places in Uganda. I visited a library recently, for instance, where the books had been sent from the United States in a container and were now neatly arranged on shelves; they were classified and numbered according to the Dewey Decimal system, and a teacher at the school where the library is located had been put in charge of them. But none of those books had been borrowed, no one was coming to the library to read, and, although the head teacher was most gracious, the teacher in charge did not come to greet us (Journal, 17 July 2007). Another library that I visited recently, has likewise received generous foreign support, in this case from Britain, and the shelves are well stocked with I would guess three or four thousand books. But even though membership is free and the library has three librarians who offer adult literacy classes as well as general assistance, **few people show much interest in coming to read—some even suggest that they should be paid for doing so!** (Journal, 19 July, 2007)

The story is quite different, however, in the two libraries where I have been doing my research. I myself established the Kitengesha Community Library in the village where my Ugandan husband grew up (see www.kitengesalibrary.org) working with the headmaster of a local secondary school. He has been active in drumming up local support for the library and whenever we have a library event—such as inaugurating our new solar panels in 2004—he mobilises the local leaders and other members of the community to take part. The Caezaria Public Library was founded and continues to be run almost entirely by one individual, a local farmer who, having failed to get into university, decided to provide his community with books so that others could do better. He too has been active in seeking local support by, for example, buttonholing people as they come out of church and urging them to come and read. Such proselytisation, as one might call it, is undoubtedly important to ensuring that the libraries are used, but still more important, perhaps, is the **relationship that each library has with local schools**. Each is affiliated with a secondary school located nearby, and each organises events for students at both primary and secondary level.

Most of the library users, therefore, are school students, especially ones in secondary school, and my research over the past few months has involved interviewing groups of them **to find out whether and to what extent the library is meeting their needs**. I have concentrated on those working for "A", or "Advanced" level subjects, which are studied during the last two years of a six-year secondary school career. These students want above all things to "jump", as one of my informants told me, into the "middle class" (interview with the headmaster of Bwala Secondary School, 26 June 2007), and to do that they must pass their exams. The books that they most want access to, then, are ones that they describe as "examinable". Such books include, first, standard textbooks that are recommended to the students by their teachers; they are generally old publications, being those that the teachers were taught from themselves, and the range is narrow, with the same titles being mentioned again and again by different students. Second, they include what people in Uganda call "pamphlets", that is potted notes on how to answer exam questions.

As the chief purchaser for our own library, I resisted these demands at first, fearing to encourage that narrow view of education that I've just described, so when we began building up our stock in 1999 I didn't get any textbooks at all, focusing instead on story books that would encourage students to read for pleasure. Yet the ideology on which the library is based is that it should be responsive to the community's needs, and the community itself should tell us what those needs are—and since secondary level students comprise the majority of the library users, we must surely pay serious attention to their demands. So, despite my own feelings as a teacher, I have responded by buying what the students ask for, and I am pleased to say that my recent research shows that this policy is amply vindicated.

One of my main reasons for coming to this conclusion was a conversation that I had with students at the Caezaria Public Library on 17 May this year. Given the circumstances of its founding, this library has for long been providing "examinable" books, and the library's director tells me that "pamphlets" are by far the most popular, a claim that is corroborated by **an analysis of the loans** made by the library between 25 June 2004 and 9 December 2005. Three books were borrowed more than twenty times in

that period, and they are all pamphlets, *Physical Geography A' Level* by Nzabona, *Economics* by Gesa, *UCE Biology Revision Notes for O' Level* by Rubahamya—and these titles are ones requested by the students at Kitengesa too. The students I interviewed at the Caezaria library told me how they use such books. Contrary to my fears, they do not simply “cram” them. One young woman insisted that while it was important to “pass”, “you also need to understand,” and the pamphlets helped such understanding because they are “straightforward” whereas with “textbooks, to extract a point is always a problem.” She had a strategy, too, for using the two kinds of material together: in her subjects (sciences) she maintained it was best to study the textbooks first and then to use the pamphlets for review. A young man who was studying history suggested an alternative method, “You read the pamphlet and then you go to the textbook because these pamphlets rarely give the quotations...” These students also discussed the merits of “cramming”: it was justified, they said, for material like quotations and for other instances where the exact wording mattered, as, for example, in stating Newton’s Law of Motion; but the young woman reasserted, “I don’t advise people to cram. Because ...once they forget one point ... the whole thing is off. ... At least, try your level best to understand.” In short, these students convinced me that once they have the books in their hands, and especially when they can talk about them with one another, they are empowered to move away from the patterns of rote learning that are so well established in the schools and can be trusted to develop their own methods of accessing—and understanding—information.

None of the groups of students that I interviewed at Kitengesa got into such an extended discussion of learning strategies—partly because, as a result of my own policies to date, they have not had easy access to the “pamphlets”. They did, however, tell me about other aspects of their use of the library. At Kitengesa, they are not allowed to borrow the textbooks (because we were afraid when we introduced the books that a small number of individuals might monopolise them), and so they do their studying in the library building. It often suits them best to do this in any case, as one of them said, “When I was still in O level this library helped me a lot to pass O level because this is the place where we always came to revise. There were the solar lights which could not be the

same case when we were at home using candles, you cannot read on the candle"

(Kitengesa boys group interview, 19 May 2007). Besides being lit at night, the library is cool and comfortable during the day, and thus it is, literally, a learning space.

However comfortable it is, though, after two or three hours of studying, the students get tired. They don't then leave the library, however; rather, they pick up something to read that is entertaining and less demanding. What is this material? I asked. "For me," said the young man quoted above, "I feel like I'm bored, I just go to Modern Stories or Traditional Stories [these are both categories that we use in the library]. I get there *Foolish Ten Goats* and ... You get a short book and then you read it." Another suggested that biography was "good for relax," and he referred particularly to a simplified biography that we have of Isaac Newton. "We also use newspapers," said another. More surprisingly, they told me that another good way to relax was to look at language books: they browse through dictionaries and collections of idioms and proverbs to find words and sayings with which "to challenge young people." Some students like "boasting around," one explained, and they all burst into laughter. The participants in a separate group discussion likewise affirmed that they used "novels" as well as newspapers for relaxation (Kitengesa general group interview, 20 May 2007), while one boy, who is studying Fine Art, likes to look at picture books—when I first met him he had at the bottom of the pile of books he was studying *An Animal Encyclopedia*, in which he showed me a photograph of a cobra as an example of design (Journal, 28 April 2007). The behaviour reported by the students at the Caezaria Public Library was similar. Especially in the holidays, they come to the library to read, and when they get tired they take some time off by reading novels (Caezaria group interview, 17 May 2007).

This talk of reading for relaxation is music in my ears, for, as a language teacher, I know that it is through such unpressured reading of material that they enjoy that the students will pick up vocabulary and develop fluency, both as English speakers and as readers. All those I talked to were well aware of this fact, and one in the Kitengesa boys' group articulated it clearly:

This library has helped me to know how you can speak with different people. For example, as per now I am speaking with you. You came from different country, and other people, so I've got this chance because of this library simply because I got some books, I read, and I understand some vocabularies, so if you talk with me I can just talk only vocabularies simply because of this library. (Kitengesa boys group interview, 19 May 2007).

Similarly, the director of the Caezaria Library, who took part in the group discussion together with the students and is on much the same educational level as them, said: "I read different books or different magazines when I am about to talk to different people ... I tend to get there certain words which ... I can use [?]" And when I responded by telling the group about what the Kitengesa students had told me about using novels for learning language, everyone agreed that they did this too. (Caezaria group interview, 17 May 2007)

A striking feature about these remarks on language learning is that **they make a close connection between reading and oral interaction.** Nor is this connection characteristic only of learning English, for the students in both libraries asserted that such interaction was an essential part of studying their exam subjects too. The young woman at the Caezaria library, for instance, declared that the best way to learn something was to teach it to somebody else (Caezaria group interview, 17 May 2007). One of the Kitengesa boys likewise explained that one way of using the information acquired in the library was to "take [it] to [a] friend for help with [a] certain number," whereupon another chimed in, "It's the same case for us. We have discussion groups at our schools. You get some information from the library, you go and you discuss with your fellow students." (Kitengesa group interview, 19 May 2007).

At Kitengesa, the library is itself seen as providing opportunities for instructive and valuable social interaction. The young man just quoted said in response to a question about how the library had helped them in the past,

According to me, Professor Kate, this library has enabled me to create some

good relationship. For example, since it is a gathering place, a lot of students come from different schools, they come and read their books. Then afterwards, if you go for some rest ... I go and contacting them, so, during that process, I create some good relationship with these other students because of this library.

Others spoke of the more structured social activities that we organise at the Kitengesa Library: the Newspaper Reading Club, which meets at lunchtime during school days, and in which students read newspaper articles aloud to one another; the Straight Talk Club, which focuses on a newspaper pullout called *Straight Talk* that is devoted to sex education; the Children's Days, when children from primary schools are invited to come to the library to listen to stories, read on their own, paint or draw pictures, and play games. In short, one of them said, speaking of his own experience, "The library has promoted [a] reading culture," and they all seemed to consider that such a cultural development was entirely desirable:

So, Professor Kate, somewhere, somehow, this library has helped us control our behaviours in such a way that if we have a library for this place instead of going, gathering in unnecessary activities, you just come, you get a book, you read, and you understand . So, we spend a lot of time in this library in order to control our behaviour. Because you may find a student going and gambling instead of coming and reading. So because of this library, we get access for reading our books.
(Kitengesa boys group, 19 May 2007)

The Kitengesa Community Library has been in existence, as a building, since 2002, and the Caezaria one is slightly older. In light of this short history, testimonies such as those given above are quite remarkable. Of course, I must acknowledge that by interviewing library members, I was selecting those students for whom the libraries work; I have not had an opportunity to talk to anyone for whom they don't. Nonetheless, the experience of these students clearly shows that a library can indeed be a place for learning, even in a country where people say that there is "no reading culture". Certain

conditions, however, have to be met for the library to work in this way. First, and most important, **it must offer material that is seen by the students to be relevant**—which means that it must address their obsessive concern with exams, however much we may deplore the obsession. Second, **it must offer a variety of other material**—story books, newspapers, reference books—that the students find easily accessible and that can be read in the odd few minutes that they feel they can take off from their studies. Third, **library managers need to take account of the fact that learning involves social interaction**. Reading is itself such an interaction, but it becomes far more meaningful for students like those I've been interviewing if it leads naturally and easily to talking. Thus, while libraries need to be quiet so that people can read, they also need to allow people to talk, whether in a separate room or at certain designated times. In this way, **a library can offer space for learning not only in a physical but also in a social sense**, and thus students will have a chance to become independent of their teachers and of the notes that their teachers give them.

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