

**LITERACY FOR  
SUSTAINABLE  
DEVELOPMENT  
IN A KNOWLEDGE  
ECONOMY**

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*Edited by*  
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# **Literacy for Sustainable Development in a Knowledge Economy**

*Essays in honour of*

**PROFESSOR RASHID ADEWUMI ADERINOYE**

**edited by**

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## Establishing a Reading Club for Neo-literate Adult Learners: Challenges and Benefits

S.I. Odiaka

### Introduction

One interesting feature noticeable among adult learners, particularly, those in the neo-literate class (JSS 1), is the strong desire to acquire and perfect their reading skills. Not only that, they want to be able to read and understand sophisticated presentation of information in content areas. This positive attitude to reading obviously stems from the fact that adult learners, in this category, believe that they have missed out on a large portion of knowledge which they should have acquired at a younger age were it not for circumstances that prevented them from taking such opportunities. In concrete terms, for those attached to extra-mural and literacy centres, they aspire to read extensively and pass any examination that can earn them good certificates.

These adult learners desire to speak the English language fluently, and obtain and maintain white collar jobs. Apparently, such adult learners have, based on their daily experiences, acknowledged the fact that illiteracy has been responsible for the social, economic and political exclusions they have had to contend with. According to Mohanty (2010), "second chance schools afford adult learners the opportunity of attaining the status of employability, active citizenship, self-fulfilment in Danish Lifelong Learning Programmes." In Nigeria, many adult learners have obtained certificates from such schools and are gainfully employed.

To widen the horizon of adult learners in literacy centres or extra-mural centres, the establishment of reading clubs is a necessity. The versatile nature of

adult learners' curriculum makes the establishment of reading clubs an obligatory issue. It is very common to find clubs such as, Young Farmers Club, Palmwine Drinkards Club, sports clubs, and others among young adults, but reading clubs are not easily organized and sustained among this age group. This paper, therefore, examines the issues associated with the establishment of reading clubs for adult learners and points out the benefits of such clubs. The meaning and importance of reading as well as the place of reading in adult literacy programmes are equally examined. The stages involved in the establishment of a reading club for adult learners are also identified.

### **Who are Neo-Literate Adult Learners?**

Neo-literates are adult learners who have just acquired basic literacy skills. According to Joshi and Ghose (n.d.), neo-literates are adults or adolescents who did not or could not make use of available educational opportunities on time, and who at a later stage acquired the skill of literacy through formal and informal approaches. In a typical extra-mural Nigerian school setting, neo-literates can be found in classes that equate to primary six or junior secondary school one (JSS1) of formal schools. At this stage, literacy acquisition must be nurtured properly by experienced facilitators and club leaders so that students do not relapse into illiteracy. Such nurturing can be done in the following ways:

1. Creating a rich literacy environment both at the literacy centres and at home.
2. Enriching the schemata of learners through excursions and vicarious experiences.
3. Providing primers and follow-up reading materials for the neo-literates.
4. Co-opting resource persons to present talks on different life activities including professions or occupations.
5. Practically engaging the learners in the act of reading and monitoring their reading habits.
6. Ensuring that they are well grounded in the four language skills – listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Even though the neo-literates are engaged in a form of continuing education or formal adult learning, the activities listed above cannot all be done within the classroom. A reading club that can augment cognitive learning in such centres would bring about holistic learning. Both extensive and intensive reading can be

carried out by neo-literates to consolidate their learning experiences and ensure that they do not regress to illiteracy.

### **The Meaning and Importance of Reading**

Reading has been defined in many ways by both experts in the field and professionals in other fields. According to Goodman (1967), reading, as a psycholinguistic guessing game, involves interaction between tough languages. To him, reading starts with scanning through the lines of books, relating what is read to one's previous knowledge, regressing to find out more meaning, and testing reading materials to know if they can be stored in the reader's memory. The reader is, therefore, constantly forming hypotheses from read items and these hypotheses are either verified or nullified depending on what a reader's schemata endorses. It is in this sense that reading can be described as a "psycholinguistic guessing game". This implies that adult learners must be properly exposed to reading activities to the extent that the ability for critical thinking is developed as independent readers.

Reading is a meaning-building process which involves a critical analysis of words, phrases and sentences using previous experiences as clues. It can be orally or silently done. While oral reading is done to check pronunciation, intonation, and modulation, silent reading appears to engage the concentration of the reader more than oral reading or reading aloud. Carrying out meaningful reading implies that a reader should possess some knowledge of grammar, vocabulary skills, and reading speed. These, of course, are the sub-skills of reading. Coupled with these are comprehension skills which include identification of details, main ideas and thought patterns among others.

Each reader is expected to achieve literal, interpretive, and critical comprehension after going through a passage. Through retelling, pre-reading, and post-reading activities, adult learners can be taught how to enhance their reading comprehension skills. When adult learners attain high levels of comprehension, they can process large portions of texts at a given time instead of processing words or phrases in isolation. Mature readers among adult learners can also react naturally to read items by passing judgement after engaging in critical thinking. However, both lower level and higher level word processing have been known to enhance reading (Hannon, 2012).

The importance of reading lies in the fact that it is an essential receptive literacy skill – a window that enables every reader to empower himself or herself

with knowledge about his or her environment, his or her career, and the world at large. Much of what we know, particularly the details about various issues got or acquired through intensive and extensive reading, becomes internalized. Becoming an educated person would be an impossible task without a the ability to read. Reading is, therefore, important for the following reasons:

- It helps people to acquire basic literacy skills.
- Reading enables us to obtain important information from textbooks, newspapers, and even computers.
- Through reading, we have contact with various cultures across the globe.
- It is an important communication skill which makes a recipient to evaluate the message of a source or sender.
- Reading, in the mother tongue, helps readers to have in-depth knowledge of their cultures.
- It enables students to acquire knowledge in different disciplines.
- Reading is a therapeutic exercise because it can help readers to divert their attention from worrisome situations to things that are beneficial.
- Through reading items like cookery books, work manuals and newspapers, readers are spurred into ventures that can be of benefit to them and the society.
- Reading can make an individual become proactive and functional. It, therefore, means that reading and language learning are underlying factors for successful literacy skills acquisition. For one to be a good writer (writing is an important literacy skill) one is expected to have been exposed to intensive and extensive reading.

### **The Place of Reading in Adult Literacy Programmes**

It has not been possible to state precisely the universal purpose of adult education. Perhaps, the goals of adult education vary from country to country and from culture to culture. However, if one examines the meaning of adult education, it will be possible to decipher the objectives achievable through the programme. According to Nafukho, Amutabi and Otunga (2005), adult education refers to “activities intentionally designed for the purpose of bringing about learning among those whose age, social roles, or self-perception define them as adults.” In the context of this definition, ‘activities’ leading to learning among adults could be-

cognitive reading, writing, listening, and even speaking. It could also be non-cognitive as in the case of imparting work literacy to learners. These two forms of learning activities require reading albeit at different levels of intensity.

Adult education can take the form of formal, informal, or non-formal learning. The formal learning is purely cognitive and it requires intensive reading. The informal and non-formal types of education are situated outside the classroom and they can combine both cognitive and non-cognitive learning approaches. It is, therefore, obvious that reading, which is a cognitive skill, is an essential aspect of any adult education programme. Through extensive reading, an adult learner can understand the politics, economy, and culture of his or her community and participate fully in same.

### **The Essence of a Reading Club in Adult Education Programmes**

A club is an assemblage of individuals who have the objective of performing a particular activity for their benefit and the benefit of their communities. In our society, different clubs abound – sport, relaxation, and reading clubs. Most reading clubs are established for children and adolescents. It is interesting to note, however, that the majority of adult learners are in dire need of reading clubs judging by this author's experience. Even at the neo-literacy level, most adult learners feel unfulfilled in terms of gaining maximally from items read. Establishing a reading club (particularly within a given literacy centre) can be of immense value to adult learners in this respect.

Whether the neo-literates are in informal education centres, extra-mural centres, or work education centres, one thing is common to such learners – they have missed out on proper teaching to develop good reading habits and a reading culture. The limited comprehension exercises done in the English classes are not enough to rescue them from this limitation. A more relaxed, out-of-the-classroom reading activity should be carried out to correct this anomaly, that is, the inability to construct meaning adequately from items read. Such reading clubs should meet consistently ensuring that attendance of members is recorded and that concrete reading activities are carried out based on learners' needs. The club organizer must carry out a comprehensive situation analysis of the learners and learning centres before bringing in the resources needed to help such learners.

### **Stages in Establishing a Reading Club in Adult Literacy Centres**

Learning among adults can be frustrating if it is not well planned. This is because there are different categories of adult learners who have various backgrounds and varying levels of literacy skills. Establishing a book club in the first instance may seem like a herculean task but the reward will be long-lasting. The following stages should be adopted in establishing a book club in any adult education centre.

- (1) As the organizer of the book club, inform the community of your intention, particularly if it is a rural community.
- (2) Have a record of likely participants, academic associates, and friends who are interested in the venture. These will form the nucleus of the club. Note the goals that participants want to achieve through reading.
- (3) Identify a comfortable place, possibly with demarcated apartments for various learning activities.
- (4) Together with the group, you have to identify or decide the nature of the reading exercise – should it be very serious, relaxing, or purely academic.
- (5) Make arrangements about funding and purchase of books. Such books should deal with learning in various fields, including ordinary daily activities like baking, cooking, sewing, and speech delivery.
- (6) Discuss and arrive at a suitable time for the reading exercises. Present rules about borrowing and reading of books. For instance, any book borrowed should be thoroughly read and well-kept, and feedback on the reading should be given or shared with members.
- (7) Penalties for absenteeism and loss of books should be well spelt out to members.
- (8) Dues can be introduced to create a purse for the club.
- (9) All the literacy skills – reading, writing, computation – should be learnt in the club. In addition, speaking, listening, and role-playing should be practised.
- (10) Learners can collaborate with the club founder to choose the various forms of learning that can be incorporated in the book club according to their needs.
- (11) From time to time, the club organizer should co-opt resource persons who can groom these adult learners on the acquisition of life skills and social learning needed for their survival in the society.

(12) The club's activities should be evaluated from time to time, with a view to overhauling them and enriching the exercise.

From the foregoing, it is obvious that establishing a reading club would place a lot of demands on the organizer. The following would no doubt constitute some challenges:

- Getting enough financial standing to foot the bill of buying books and paying ad hoc workers may be a problem.
- The club organizer may face some opposition from the community, particularly in communities where strict religious practices are observed.
- Literacy centres may not have extra space for a reading club.
- The club organizer may experience attrition especially where those in the club are self-employed.
- The readability levels of books bought may be too high or too low for learners. This implies that the readability levels of books should be worked on.

Irrespective of these challenges, establishing a reading club is a worthy venture, particularly among adult learners. It will enable them to examine current issues in their communities, and at the same time, develop problem-solving skills. The following benefits are derivable from book clubs among adult learners:

- Discussion and contributions done on books read will enhance adult learners' thinking abilities, including problem-solving skills.
- Ample knowledge can be derived from extensive reading about politics, marriage, science and technology. These will enhance different literacies.
- Adult learners, through book clubs, will be empowered to produce write-ups like primers, story books, and reports on various events.
- They will develop the ability to talk intelligently among their peers when issues they have read about are discussed in the society.
- They will exude a great deal of confidence in speaking, reading, and writing.
- Their mode of relaxation will take a different form. Rather than spend time on trivial matters, as a form of leisure, they can read books.

## Conclusion

Reading remains an eye-opener in the adult learners' world. It is a literacy skill the value of which cannot be overemphasized. It is therapeutic and leads to proactive behaviour among readers. Adult book clubs are essential in literacy centres to boost the confidence of the learners. To achieve this, a book club organizer must source for funds, purchase a large number of books, and engage adult learners in planning the activities of the club. The benefits of establishing a book club are long-lasting and a community that has a book club will ever remain a learning community – this is the idea of a good community.

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