



***“What is universal in the experience of adult literacy is that through knowledge we are helping individuals reclaim their freedom using tools that enable them to evolve independently.”***

## ***Konesans se Libète - Knowledge is Freedom Burdens and Paradoxes of Literacy in Haiti***

*Elizabeth Pierre-Louis*

*Library Program Coordinator, Fondation Connaissance et Liberté, Open Society Institute, Haiti*

### **Intro/Context**

Growing up in Haiti, I used to hear a public health announcement: *Konesans fanmi se lespwa timoun, Parents' knowledge means hope for children.* The ads talked about hygiene, vaccination campaigns and best practices to lower the alarming children's mortality rate in my country. Since fifty percent of the Haitian population is under 18, it seems legitimate to think that the other half of the population is made up of parents who should be involved in bettering their children's lives.

*Fondation Connaissance et Liberte Haiti - FOKAL  
Created in 1995, the Fondation Connaissance et Liberte, Foundation for Knowledge and Freedom is a national institution that is part of the network of Open Society Institutes created by Georges Soros in Eastern Europe, Southern Africa, Latin America and Haiti. FOKAL's mission is the promotion of structures for a democratic society, the use of education to support autonomy and critical thinking and the reinforcement of organizational processes. The Library Program works with 35 Community libraries, small structures managed by community associations and groups, and receiving no support from the state.*

For eleven years I have been working as a librarian at FOKAL, an acronym which stands for Foundation for Knowledge and Freedom. Again this is the same refrain in a larger scope. What is universal in the experience of adult literacy is that through knowledge we are helping individuals reclaim their freedom using tools that enable them to evolve independently. Acquiring skills to read and write are much more than scholarly activities, today more than ever they give access to the world. Since 1997, it has been exciting to watch the rise of digital use

throughout the world. How amazing it is to surf the world wide web, to consult an online catalog, to chat with foreign colleagues, to organize seminars via email.

But at the same time the reality of Haiti and the lack of resources make our task a daunting one, like a whirlpool quickly pulling us toward the bottom.

How to function in a capital city with four to six hours of electricity per day? Alternatives are to use expensive solutions that many small libraries cannot afford. How to access the internet when the phone network is constantly out of work? (Haiti missed the fiber optic cables connection in the 70's.) Once again, the solution is to use expensive and almost experimental alternatives that overload very quickly and block the system chronically from noon until 4 pm. And this concerns the capital city, where most of the country's infrastructure is concentrated.

Another important burden is the problem related to literacy issues in Haiti. There are two very important aspects here to consider.

### **Haiti**

- *Haiti is located in the Caribbean, neighbor to the Dominican Republic*
- *Political system: democracy with an elected president*
- *Two official languages: French and Creole*
- *Very dense population: 8.2 million inhabitants for about 27,000 square miles*
- *Very young population: 50% is under 18*
- *Population still very rural compared to other Caribbean Islands: 60% in rural or semi-rural areas*

There are two terms in French to address levels of literacy. "Analphabétisme" concerns persons that were not exposed to the school system and have no knowledge of the written word. This issue has been addressed in most countries by universal access to primary schools. In Haiti still about 40% of children aged 6 to 23 do not go to school. Out of the 60% that do go to school, only 15% have access to the public system, the rest are left to attend private institutions that are more expensive and with less controlled standards.

This brings me to the second aspect, more widely spread throughout the

world, illiteracy. Here the issue is more complex since it concerns individuals that "fell through the cracks," who went to school but either never acquired well the basic skills or progressively estranged themselves from the learning process. Here statistics are harder to gather, since once a child is veered to school, he is considered as saved and enters the statistics of the literates. The major problem is that the high demand for school is mainly supplied by private initiative, more mercantile than service oriented. In these schools, overcrowded classes and tired instructors have a delayed but equally devastating impact on literacy. Certain students at high school level cannot comprehend a simple text or write a coherent answer to simple questions. At the same time, their interest in learning is evident and expressed.

Last but not least is the language issue. Haiti has two national languages, French and Creole. While Creole is widely used by all the population, French is not totally mastered. Official documents, advertising, textbooks remain mostly in French and very little written production is done in Creole. Few schools really abide by the law to start reading and writing in Creole at the primary level, often teachers themselves do not master French or do not have the tools to teach in Creole. This dichotomy often accounts for the lack of confidence of students and subsequently their poor performances.

Well, what can be done for adult literacy in a Digital Age in Haiti?

The inventory of burdens serves to understand our context, but not to isolate or stop our efforts. It just helps to understand where we are coming from and what we are striving to achieve.

In the process of writing this article, I gave birth for the first time. While my son is not concerned by the aspect of adult literacy - and hopefully he will not be - this overwhelming and primal experience has made me think about the means of transmission of knowledge, values and practices. What is important to leave behind as a legacy to the coming generations? As librarians, how can we impact and change the dire aspects of literacy in our societies and help transcend the digital divide?

All of these questions will not be answered in my article. But let us engage in a path of discovery “*outside borders*” and my hope is that what is foreign seems more familiar, that sharing a particular experience may trigger a general outlook and that an uncommon practice will look coherent to all readers and generate a dialogue.

## Module

### 1. *The community libraries*

#### Libraries in Haiti

- *National Library and 18 municipal libraries*
- *French Institute and 6 Alliances Françaises*
- *10 CLAC Centre de Lecture et d'Animation Culturelle (Centers for Reading and Cultural Activities)*
- *35 Community Libraries supported by FOKAL*
- *Academic Libraries*
- *Private School libraries*
- *Private research libraries*

Since 1997, the Foundation has been working with associations and groups interested in promoting reading in their city neighborhoods or villages. None of the staff were trained, the collections were sparse and developing, the buildings often ill-equipped. Nevertheless the motivation for a wider access to books and by extension knowledge was contagious. Libraries were needed to support the failing school system. While schools provided the tools, libraries were the training place to expand literacy skills. The experience started slowly, by supporting three libraries, within cultural centers, association headquarters and community centers.

No library was created by the Foundation, it was more important to support and expand existing efforts. Yet, everything needed to be

thought of: training, collection building, furniture, and budget. With the help and guidance of the Mortenson Center for International Librarian Programs - University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, it became possible to structure the Foundation's vision and prepare strategies for the existing library program. It took several years to establish a training program adapted to small community libraries, but through a trial and error process, we are still learning from our mistakes and improving our practices.

#### *a. Local history to foster visibility and literacy*

One important emphasis for these libraries was to give them a solid ground within the communities they were established. In 2000, for the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the capital city

of Haiti, Port-au-Prince, the idea came to create a Festival in each library in the city, 13 in total. This was not the first Festival. In 1998 three libraries celebrated renown 17<sup>th</sup> Century French Fabulist Jean de La Fontaine and in 1999 the great writer, poet, thinker Aimé Césaire. This time ten more libraries participated in by this local history Festival. The title was “Port-au-Prince, our city our neighborhoods.” Each library received a questionnaire, in order to start researching about the history and landmarks of their neighborhood. It was important to focus on the history, of course, but also on the actual inhabitants and how their actions were shaping the locality in which they were living. Bios with pictures were presented and the whole community was invited to a week of conferences, exhibits, workshops. The attraction was undeniable, and the outcome was measurable on the renewal and new memberships. The local press took notice of this event and the local community was able to use the library as a place of gathering as well as living legacy. What was truly important was that even those who could not read were able to recognize their neighbors and even themselves on the pictures and bring their family to see their accomplishments. This event also helped structure and define future programming within the libraries.

#### *b. Library involvement in Literacy*

These libraries, generally managed by youth groups supported by their communities, are located in the capital, small country towns and in rural areas. In a country where the majority of school-age children has no access to school or receive education without books, the goal is not to preserve documents, or to create an impressive collection of books, but rather to promote reading and research, provide access and thereby spread the use of the written word. The mission of community libraries should be the promotion of literacy and in fact many of them try to incorporate some aspects in their daily activities. Nevertheless teaching basic literacy skills should be the prerogative of skilled professionals not untrained library staff.

#### *c. Using new technology, a slow process*

##### **What should the role of Libraries be?**

*There should be real involvement of all libraries in Haiti in the literacy process.*

- *To offer space*
- *To support tutors*
- *To offer materials susceptible to interest newly literate persons*
- *To offer activities that touch a large range of people*
- *Introduce new technologies*

Out of the 35 libraries, about 10 of them offer multimedia services. Only 3 have internet access. At the end of the 90's there was a great demand for the internet in Haiti, mainly for international calls. The wide development of cellular phones since 2000 created a lesser demand for the internet. As a result the library computer labs are less thriving but still offer space for surfing, text editing, downloading and other practices.

At the same time, all libraries are still manual. It was important for us to enforce the practices of library work before offering online catalogs and databases. Since there is so little infrastructure, this was a good approach for the past years. But the Monique Calixte library, main library of the system is now ready to go to another level, circulation rates are up every month, which means that envelopes and cards are piling each day at the circulation desks. This is a great opportunity to refocus on the

collection, do important weeding and prepare for training the staff as well as the patrons to cope with this new information literacy.

## 2. Training and literacy

### a. Training adults coping with literacy issues

One of our biggest challenges was training. The staff of the community libraries was motivated but there is not a culture of library use in Haiti. There are very few municipal libraries and few children are exposed to this public service. Though I grew up with books within the private realm of my family, the first time I entered a public library in Haiti I was seventeen and it is one of the lasting memories of my life. I kept thinking: "It does exist!"

The library program had to deal with staff that is not used to books or reading. One of the first initiatives was to create a training video at The Frederick Douglass Library Branch of Champaign Public Library (Illinois). This small but complete library was ideal to show different spaces and service without being overwhelmed by the size of a public library. The training video was then shown at each training session, an entertaining way of breaking the routine and stimulating discussion.

Another important training lesson was to use children books for adults. There are many great books for children, the print is large and the style simple. To interest the trainees, we had them simulate exercises with children and these methods were equally useful for the staff as well as the patrons at a later time.

Finally we realized that competition within the training session was an excellent incentive. Grades and exercises for adults are a great stimulant especially if the outcome is practical and based on daily activities.

### Reading for pleasure

*"What research tells me is that if children and less literate adults start reading for pleasure, however, good things will happen. Their reading comprehension will improve, and they will find difficult, academic-style texts more comprehensible. Their writing style will improve (...) Their vocabulary will improve at a better rate than if they took one well-advertised vocabulary building courses. Also, their spelling and control of grammar will improve."*

· Krashen, Stephen. 1993, The Power of Reading, Insights from the Research, Colorado, Libraries Unlimited p. x.

A colleague from the Bibliotheque Departementale de Pret in Guadeloupe recently held a workshop about literacy and library practices. She used very down to earth methods such as using popular magazines to write stories. While there are no specific classes for illiterate patrons at the library, it is possible to think about new activities that will include literacy development.

The use of thematic programming has had a great response in the past. For six months in 2006, a literary genre was showcased: mystery, adventure, poetry, great love stories etc. Exhibits, discussion groups, conference, movies were chosen in relation to the theme. The activities touched every age group and were centered around the collection even if reading wasn't required to enjoy the activity. This year, the program contains: "One month, one book." One person from the library chooses her favorite book to read to the public. Before the reading, excerpts from the book are displayed as well as information about the author and other books. This familiarizes the public with the upcoming activity.



One very exciting prospect is coming to light, the possibility of opening a library within a botanical garden project in the southwest of Port-au-Prince. This botanical garden will be situated in an abandoned luxury hotel where the international jet set used to party in the 70's. The whole neighborhood was in the middle of political unrest and gang violence for the last five years. Now the government and local associations with FOKAL as lead agency, are working together in peace to create the first botanical garden in Port-au-Prince. The garden-library will serve a community that has been completely abandoned by city officials. Collection development as well as programming will have to be designed in order to serve very special needs, to reconcile the demands of the community and those of the project. Literacy will be the cornerstone of this library's goals.

## Conclusion

### Tips for literacy development within a library

- *Have a core staff that really shares your vision*
- *Invest in training*
- *Remember the pleasure of reading and spread it around*
- *Develop the sense of public service*
- *Have activities that you would enjoy attending, but also that your children or siblings would enjoy*
- *Ask questions of other colleagues*
- *Adapt practices from other libraries*

Through the experience of the small community libraries we work with, it has been possible to reflect on the impact of literacy and the diffusion of knowledge. Even though our primary target group in these libraries is children, it appears that the 15-30 age group is the most represented. Also new technologies in communication have made contacts much easier and at an international level it is possible now to consult with librarians throughout the world to share experiences. This international informal information database has been very helpful in orienting strategies and practices. Many of the activities presented here were gathered through library visits, professional articles or informal discussions with international colleagues. The most important asset in "thinking outside borders" is that we

are not constantly reinventing the wheel, there are years of experience for us to acknowledge, rethink, use and then share again. This constant process is the fuel of our literacy endeavors and librarianship.

The most important lesson to be learned about our experience is the pleasure of reading and the will to develop public reading. Literacy will take years to settle in Haiti, but with some efforts it is possible to offer an alternative, a breathing space that can be emulated at a later time. A country that doesn't invest in literacy cannot go forward. Likewise a society that divides through the monopoly of knowledge opens the door to violence and unrest. Libraries can be a haven of knowledge and freedom, *outside borders*.

## ACTIVITIES:

### Icebreaker

This activity is very simple.

There should be a photograph that illustrates the text where the student is shown doing his favorite activity or is with his family.

- Write a short text presenting yourself
- Think about one or two things that define you to the outside world
- No more than four lines
- Very simple wording

This exercise is inspired by the literacy work text *Collaborations, English in our Lives* by Donna Moss, Cathy Shank and Linda Terrill, Heinle & Heinle Publishing, Boston.

It brings a sense of reality to the writing experience. The student is thinking about very basic things that define him or herself.

### **Organizing a Local History Festival**

This activity is very inclusive for all the community. It can be done once or regularly. It is surprising how much information can be gathered very quickly and attracts other patrons to the library.

- Prepare a questionnaire or guidelines for research about your community/neighborhood
- Identify key living personalities
- Write short bios, take pictures, live recordings
- Organize a program related to your findings (an art exhibit if your locality has many artists, etc.)
- Invite the whole community, contact the press
- Make follow-up programs throughout the year

### **A specific program at the Pyepoudre Cultural Center: Theater and Literacy**

This activity is an example of how, sometimes, illiteracy can prevent people from telling their own story to others and how it is important to rethink the whole process of learning in order to share powerful experiences.

- Working with women victims of rape
- Library served as a place to receive the testimony
- Then these oral histories were written into a play
- The women had to be taught their lines orally since they could not read.
- The play was also filmed and subject of a documentary