

WORKING PAPERS

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LABORATORIUM SOSIOLOGI
FISIP UNIVERSITAS ATMA JAYA
YOGYAKARTA

Volume 7 nomor 2, Mei 2017

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LITERACY, INSTITUTION, AND COMMUNITY

LITERACY PRACTICES IN AN AMERICAN PUBLIC LIBRARY

Kristian Tamtomo

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Undang-Undang Republik Indonesia Nomor 28 Tahun 2014 tentang Hak Cipta

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1. Hak Cipta adalah hak eksklusif pencipta yang timbul secara otomatis berdasarkan prinsip deklaratif setelah suatu ciptaan diwujudkan dalam bentuk nyata tanpa mengurangi pembatasan sesuai dengan ketentuan peraturan perundang-undangan.

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1. Pencipta atau Pemegang Hak Cipta sebagaimana dimaksud dalam Pasal 8 memiliki hak ekonomi untuk melakukan: a. penerbitan Ciptaan; b. Penggandaan Ciptaan dalam segala bentuknya; c. penerjemahan Ciptaan; d. pengadaptasian, pengaransemenan, atau pentransformasian Ciptaan; e. Pendistribusian Ciptaan atau salinannya; f. Pertunjukan Ciptaan; g. Pengumuman Ciptaan; h. Komunikasi Ciptaan; dan i. penyewaan Ciptaan.

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2. Setiap Orang yang dengan tanpa hak dan/atau tanpa izin Pencipta atau pemegang Hak Cipta melakukan pelanggaran hak ekonomi Pencipta sebagaimana dimaksud dalam Pasal 9 ayat (1) huruf c, huruf d, huruf f, dan/atau huruf h untuk Penggunaan Secara Komersial dipidana dengan pidana penjara paling lama 3 (tiga) tahun dan/atau pidana denda paling banyak Rp500.000.000,00 (lima ratus juta rupiah).
3. Setiap Orang yang dengan tanpa hak dan/atau tanpa izin Pencipta atau pemegang Hak Cipta melakukan pelanggaran hak ekonomi Pencipta sebagaimana dimaksud dalam Pasal 9 ayat (1) huruf a, huruf b, huruf e, dan/atau huruf g untuk Penggunaan Secara Komersial dipidana dengan pidana penjara paling lama 4 (empat) tahun dan/atau pidana denda paling banyak Rp1.000.000.000,00 (satu miliar rupiah).
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Pasal 114

Setiap Orang yang mengelola tempat perdagangan dalam segala bentuknya yang dengan sengaja dan mengetahui membiarkan penjualan dan/atau penggandaan barang hasil pelanggaran Hak Cipta dan/atau Hak Terkait di tempat perdagangan yang dikelola sebagaimana dimaksud dalam Pasal 10, dipidana dengan pidana denda paling banyak Rp100.000.000,00 (seratus juta rupiah).

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Universitas Atma Jaya Yogyakarta

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LITERACY, INSTITUTION, AND COMMUNITY:

Literacy Practices in an American Public Library

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TENTANG LABORATORIUM SOSIOLOGI

Laboratorium sosiologi, Program studi Sosiologi, Universitas Atma Jaya Yogyakarta didirikan pada tahun 1998. Letupan gagasan yang mendasarinya adalah kegiatan untuk menerapkan teori dalam mewujudkan kerja-kerja praktikum penelitian.

Seiring dengan dinamika dan perkembangan aktivitas, Laboratorium sosiologi pun semakin menemukan posisi institusional dan fokus kegiatan. Secara institusional, Laboratorium Sosiologi adalah organisasi dibawah program studi Sosiologi, yaitu proses belajar mengajar, penelitian dan pengabdian. Penerjemahan pihak ketiga fungsi tersebut adalah kerja kerja seperti pengumpulan data, praktikum penelitian pemnuatan film dokumenter, diskusi bulanan, seminar dan penerbitan. Secara khusus, sebagai bentuk pengatuan dan pendalaman akan aktivitas pengabdian, laboratorium sosiologi selalu mengedepankan kerja jejaring.

Dengan demikian, tak berlebihan kiranya jika keberadaan pengembangan sosiologi, baik ilmu maupun institusi.

LITERACY, INSTITUTION, AND COMMUNITY: LITERACY PRACTICES IN AN AMERICAN PUBLIC LIBRARY

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Abstract

In understanding literacy as a social practice, it is important to explore the social contexts surrounding the enactment and sustainment of literacy activities. One important aspect of the social context of literacy is what Long (1993) calls as the "infrastructure of literacy." This covers various institutions and actors that support or act as "sponsors of literacy" (Brandt 1999) at the group or community level. In the context of American society, in addition to schools, public libraries have historically taken the mandate of being a key institution that acts as an infrastructure and sponsor of literacy activities within the community (Harris 1975). As an institution that sponsors literacy, the library has a certain vision and mission about the kinds of literacy activities it would like to promote and the kinds of social effects these literacy activities should achieve. Nonetheless, as a space and context for literacy practices, the library also becomes a site for various types of literacy activities, each with their own social or personal purposes.

Keywords: libraries, institutions, literacy practices

1. Introduction¹

In understanding literacy as a social practice, it is important to explore the social contexts surrounding the enactment and sustainment of literacy activities. One important aspect of the social context of literacy is what Long (1993) calls as the "infrastructure of literacy." This covers various institutions and actors that support or act as "sponsors of literacy" (Brandt 1999) at the group or community level. In the context of American society, in addition to schools, public libraries have historically taken the mandate of being a key institution that acts as an infrastructure and sponsor of literacy activities within the community (Harris 1975). Libraries not only provide space and opportunities for the enactment of literate activity but they also shape the form and ideals related to these literacy practices.

As an institution that sponsors literacy, the library has a certain vision and mission about the kinds of literacy activities it would like to promote and the kinds of social effects these literacy activities should achieve. Nonetheless, as a space and context for literacy practices, the library also becomes a site for various types of literacy activities, each with their own social or personal purposes.

This paper seeks to understand the relation between libraries as a literacy institution and the literacy practices of library users. It will present data from an ethnographic investigation, part of a graduate class assignment, that I conducted in 2009 at the public library in

¹ This paper was originally a graduate class assignment for the Ethnographic Field Methods at the Department of Anthropology, University at Albany, State University of New York. I thank Professor Robert Jarvenpa for his guidance and comments as class instructor. I also thank John Edvalson and Jenn Crowley for their comments on an earlier draft.

Hudson, a small city in northeastern United States.² The paper will focus on discussing the way different spaces and events held at the public library become the social contexts for various sorts of literacy activities. Regarding events, the paper will specifically focus on a series of book discussions that draws a certain group of library users. This group of users, together with their ideas and discussions in these events, plays a part in shaping not only the form of literate activity but also the values associated with the activities. Meanwhile, the other public spaces of the library, such as the book collections, reading room, and computer room, becomes the setting for various forms of personal literacy activities.

2. Theoretical Framework

The paper's ethnographic approach to investigating literacy follows the anthropological perspective on literacy studies, particularly the framework of the New Literacy Studies (e.g. Street 1993, 2000, Barton 1994, Baynham 1995, Barton and Hamilton 1998). Investigating literacy as a social practice involves focusing on the relations between literacy and various aspects of the social context in the enactment of literacy activities, such as social networks and social institutions. This presents a shift in perspective compared to the dominant perspective that literacy is a discrete set of skills of reading or writing that an individual either has or does not have.

The perspective of viewing literacy as a set of skills posits it as an autonomous cultural item that is separate from oral

² All names of locations, persons and groups are pseudonyms to protect the identity of participants who agreed to be part of this study. This practice is in accordance to standard research ethics in social research widely practiced in North America.

communication in culture. Literacy is seen as the cultural item that divides modern civilization and pre-literate society, bringing about consequences such as changing the cognitive and social orientation of society (Goody and Watts 1968). However, subsequent ethnographic studies (such as Scribner and Cole 1981, Street 1984, Street (ed.) 1993) have shown that this "literacy thesis" is problematic. In particular, Scribner and Cole's (1981) study of local language in Liberia has shown that literacy in itself does not have clear cognitive consequences. In fact, Scribner and Cole identified that cognitive consequences appear to be related more to the social practices through which literacy is learned or put into use. For example, Arabic literacy, which people learn through rote learning, appear to be correlated to improved memorization. Whereas literacy in the local language (Vai), learnt through language socialization, correlated with improvements in expository communicative skills. Scribner and Cole conclude that literacy in these different languages involve social practices of communication that combine differing skills, script and knowledge (1981:237).

Following this insight of viewing literacy inside social contexts of practice, many ethnographic studies of literacy has taken a socially-situated approach of looking at literacy in connection with social networks, institutions and various socio-cultural activities. A pioneer in this perspective, Street (1984, 1993) outlines the ideological model of literacy, an alternative perspective to the skills-based understanding of literacy, which seeks to understand literacy not just as skills but as practices within cultural wholes and structures of power. Studies conducted in this perspective are interested in how various populations utilize different forms of literacy for their own specific purposes. This "social turn" in the

study of literacy places networks (of people, technologies, symbols and acts) as the locus of social practice from which knowledge and meaning emerge (Gee 2000:184).

The ethnographic approach of seeing literacy as a social practice involves focusing on social occasions where literacy plays a role (Baynham 1995:58). For example, Kulick and Stroud (1993) describe how villagers in Papua New Guinea learnt to become literate from missionaries. However, they use their literacy not just for the purpose of religion but also for the purpose of negotiating interpersonal relations that need to be indirect due to their notions of a person's strong sense of autonomy. Similarly, Besnier (1995) reports how Christianity and literacy become an important aspect of public life in a Polynesian Atoll but at the same time this literacy is used for letter writing that expressed emotions in a very local way, different from the original practices of literacy at schools and church. Studies on literacy practices in educational settings in developed countries (such as Shuman 1993 and Moje 2000 in the U.S., Kramer-Dahl 2005 in Singapore) have also shown how students often negotiate between school sanctioned literacy and their own personal or peer group oriented literacy practices.

These studies show that people can appropriate literacy and modify its form and uses for their own specific purposes. At the same time, they also show that social institutions such as schools, governments and religion have authority in influencing the form and meanings associated with certain literacy practices.

Paying attention to the social aspect of literacy means that literacy activities should be seen as being located in events of social interaction and not just in the isolated formal properties of skills or texts (Barton and Hamilton 2000:9). One fundamental concept of viewing literacy as a socially-situated practice is the

notion that literacy is enacted in "literacy events": occasions where written language is integral to or which mediates the social interaction and the process of social interpretation (Heath 1983, Barton and Hamilton 1998). Focusing on literacy as social events requires attention to the social settings surrounding these literacy events and also to the social institutions that support them (Barton 1994:42).

One aspect of this social setting is the social network in which literacy practitioners are located (Baynham 1995:39). The type of people and their purposes often shape the kind of literacy activities that emerge. Another aspect of the social setting is the institutional context of the literacy activities. Understanding the role of institutions is important because often social institutions define and influence the literacy activities being conducted and how people participate in those activities (Barton 1994:42). Institutions such as schools and religious organizations can often act as "sponsors of literacy" (Brandt 1999) that provide people support to engage in literacy activities. Long (1993) also argues that literacy and reading requires a social infrastructure in the form of institutions that distribute and disseminate textual material.

In addition to shaping the form of literate activities, social institutions such as libraries can also influence people's evaluations, ideas, and discourses on literacy (Barton and Hamilton 1998). Street's (2000) concept of "literacy practices", as an extension of his ideological approach to literacy, argues that we must also view literacy events as being situated within structures of cultural evaluations and power regarding the social meaning, value and purpose of literacy (cf. Barton and Hamilton 1998).

Furthermore, the view of literacy as existing in social events opens up the analysis to recognizing and acknowledging that there

can be diverse forms of literacy events and practices. Barton and Hamilton (2000:10) argue for the notion of "multiple literacies", which can occur due to the use of different media (and languages) or due to the presence of different domains (contexts, settings, institutions) of life.

I will thus use the socially-situated perspective on literacy as the analytical framework to discuss the following analytical objectives of this paper:

1. How the public library acts as an institution that supports literacy but also seeks to define it based on their values and conceptualization of literacy.
2. How the social network around certain library events shape not only the form of literacy activity but also the ideas and evaluations surrounding literacy.
3. How the library as a public social space also enables it to become a space for various multiple forms of personal literacy practices.

3. Methodology

I conducted the data collection for this paper at two main branches of the Hudsonston public library. The data collection utilized the methods of observation, participant observation and interviews. I conducted data collection for a period of around 5 months, from the summer to the fall of 2009.

I conducted pure observations on the daily activities that occurred within the public library, writing my findings in the form of observational field notes. The observations focused on the different types of literacy activities that happened in different areas of the library, the different types of people engaging these activities and the purposes of their literacy activities. The intent

of the observations was purely descriptive, thus I was not paying attention to the frequency of activities and more towards the different types of activities occurring within the library's public space.

I took part in participant observation predominantly in library events that are open to the public, such as book reviews and film discussions. In these events, I could sit as a participant and observe the way the event unfolded and how people interacted, writing them down in ethnographic field notes. I was able to attend five events in total, three of which were book reviews. For most of the events, I focused my observations on the type of people that attended these events and whether there were any social networks present. I also focused my attention on the topics that people discussed in these events and the type of literacy activities associated with the events and their topics. In this way, I was able to illustrate the different types of literacy activities, topics and social groups each event represented.

Finally, I was able to conduct three interviews at the public library. I interviewed two members of the group associated with the book review events. The third interview I conducted with the vice director of the library as a representative of the staff. With regards to the book review group, I initially contacted the organizers of the event to ask whether I could interview audience members and book reviews. The head organizer, an elderly gentleman named George, who was always present at the events, offered himself to be interviewed as a member of the audience. In addition, he also referred me to a book reviewer, Nora, to spare some time to talk to me after the end of her book review. I also contacted the library staff to ask for permission to talk to one of their staff members. They referred me to contact Edward Bradley, the vice director of the

library, who had agreed to an interview. All of the interviews were all conducted during the summer of 2009 and transcribed as part of the overall field notes of the research project.

4. The Hudsonton City Public Library

The public library as a sponsor of literacy reflects the history and ideology of public libraries in American society (Harris 1975). However, the mainstream perspective of the public library as the "people's university" is different from the way public libraries historically developed. According to Harris (1975), the founding of the Boston Public Library as one of the first public libraries in the US was not based on the progressive liberal ideas of "the people's university". The "public library myth" (1975:3) developed based on historians' misunderstanding of George Ticknor's (a prominent Boston intellectual) suggestion to the Mayor of Boston in 1850-1851 that the planned Boston Public Library be aimed at the common man and provide a range of popular and contemporary works to the general citizenry (Harris 1975:4). Many historians basically believed that this suggestion by Ticknor come from his commitment to egalitarianism and democracy.

Harris presents a different take on this history. By focusing on Ticknor's social background, Harris argues that the public library was actually thought up as a means of controlling the "dangerous classes" such as the working class and newly arrived immigrants so that they will conform to the social order and be more disciplined (1975:6). At the same time, the library should also function as a source of information for a select few who will become future civic leaders. The idea that libraries should function as the "conservator of order" was partially reflected by the way the upper classes of American society have tended to play a dominant role in the

historical development of public libraries (Harris 1975:9).

This story of using the printed word as a means of social control bears similarity with the findings of historical studies on the social significance of literacy in Western society: literacy was often seen as a powerful force. For example, the European clergy and ruling class considered that commoners who became literate in 16-17th century Europe as being dangerous since social authorities, particularly the clergy, did not control the commoner's literacy (and how they used it) and thus had the potential to disrupt the social order (Collins and Blot 2003:72). Conversely, in 18th-19th century North America, upper class Americans saw illiteracy as a social problem since it proved to be an obstacle for commoners and immigrants to be able to learn the moral rules of social order (Graff 1987:341-342). Thus the library, just like schools, became a part of the broader institutional effort to control the power of literacy so that it would serve the dominant social order, by controlling how people learn literacy, what people learn from it and for what purposes they used it (Collins and Blot 2003).

The development of the city Public Library followed a similar course to the development of the Boston Public Library. According to Edward Bradley, the vice director, the library was originally funded by the upper class citizens of the city

It was... way back when it was a couple of the higher minded people that had means and said this was one of the things that a city needs. And again back in the 1800s that was something that measured the success of the city. You know, it had libraries, museums, things that had cultural importance. That was why it was created. It was not a purely grass roots kind of thing where people said we need book for everybody. It was more the higher minded people higher up in the city that said we

need to do this for the city.

There were actually a number of separate public libraries operating in Hudsonston up until the 1920s, when the city merged the libraries under city government management to become the Hudsonston City Public Library. This managerial arrangement remained until 2002, when the library held a public referendum, which decided that the library should be independent from the city government. Since then the Public Library has been a financially independent organization with the ability to tax the people in the surrounding area that it serves.

As it stands now, the City Public Library has six branches spread all over the city. The Main Branch, where I conducted much of the participant observations and interviews, is located in the downtown area of the city. It is housed in a three storey gray façade building; the first two levels are open to public and house the book collections and other public facilities such as computers and archives, while the third level is closed off to the public and houses the administrative offices of the library.

The main services that the Public Library offers, just like any other public library, is its book collection. At the Main Branch, the book collection is divided into three sections. The lower level of the library houses the main collection of fictional and non-fictional books, while the second level houses the reference section and the children's collection. In addition to the book collection, the library also offers audio-visual materials such as DVDs, audio CDs as and audio books. On the second floor, the library also has computer stations that are open to the public.

The most important service that the public library provides, according to vice-director Bradley is access to information. While

the library mainly does this through print media in the past, it now also makes use of electronic media to deliver information to its users.

What I like to say is that what libraries do is connect people to information. That's what libraries do. That's what we do. It's not about computers or DVDs or story time or cultural programs or book reviews. It's all has to do with connecting people with information. Certainly the concept of connecting people to information didn't change from then to now. What we changed is the different mediums that we use to share that information. Obviously with the internet, you can be in touch with almost impossible amount of information. We've used that rather than be limited to the printed word in the building.

In providing this access to information, the library has an underlying mission it hopes to achieve for its users. Bradley describes the ultimate aim of the library is to create long-term and life-changing improvements in its users, or what he considers as empowerment.

Well, there's the long term effect of... our mission statement is that the Public Library educates, entertains and empowers members of the community. The long term effect is we want people to be empowered. We want people to know that they have free unfettered access to the information they need. That means we tell people that public libraries across the country change people's life every day. People learn how to read, how to become a better parent, how to start a business, how to speak a foreign language, how to overcome an addiction. All these life changing things.

Note here that Bradley not only lists aspects of cognitive learning but also life practical benefits, such as parenting, self-help,

that he believes literacy can also provide to library users. While Bradley explicitly states empowering users as the main goal of the library, he also implicitly understands that information, reading and literacy can have equally important entertainment aspects. It is the significance of entertainment for library users that leads the library to create outreach activities and events that are not purely centered on text or information but more to generate interest in the library and attract new potential users, as Bradley explains:

There's always a chance that somebody comes through the library for story time with their child and see, "Oh they have books here for me, I'll take a book out." Once you establish that connection, you hope you've created a regular user. Once they do that once and say that this library has something for me, you've created a regular user.

Creating new users and providing both services and entertainment that the community is interested in is also important in ensuring that the community still values the library. Thus, by continuing to provide informational services and also offering entertaining events and material, the library balances its activities in both trying to achieve its mission of empowering people yet also generating community interest for continued financial support, as Bradley explains:

Obviously what we want the community as an organization to value what we're doing. Because we rely on the community for direct tax. So if we're useful for them they'll say, I'm willing to give money to fund it. So it's about creating an essential community resource and it's about that educating empowering the community.

Since library events are designed to generate interest in

the library, the paper will turn to discuss how library events are conducted and their social significance for literacy activities in the library.

5. Library Events

The Main Branch of the Public Library has a number of events regularly scheduled every week such as Story Time for Toddlers, Book Reviews, and Film Viewings. There are also other events that are held once in a while, such as Computer Classes, Finance Workshops, and also Garage Bands.³ Unfortunately, I was not able to observe a large part of these events regularly. The events which I was able to observe were the Book Reviews and a number of Film Viewings. While these may not be a representative of all the events conducted at the Main Branch, I will use these two events as examples how social groups play a role in shaping the nature of literacy activities, the topics discussed in these events, and the social evaluations of literacy of these events.

The Book Reviews are regularly held on every Tuesday, at 12:15 pm at the Auditorium of the Main Branch of the Public Library. The event is organized by the Friends of the Public Library (FPL), a group that supports the Library and organizes activities in connection to the library. According to FPL, this Book Review series is conducted around 50 weeks a year.

Members of the FPL tend to regularly attend this event, some even take turns to come early to serve beverages and snacks before the event begins. George, the head of the FPL, describes the audience of the Book Reviews as being "a club".

³ The latter is a music concert open to local teenage bands, so that they have a platform to perform.

Well, it's like a club, they're regulars. They come back every week. We can always expect 30 people sometimes more, depending on the amount of publicity. And also the quality of the reviewers, sometimes we have celebrity reviewers, we get more in. Sometimes people have a lot of interests in particular things.

In my observations of the regular Book Reviews, most of the audience members are composed of the elderly (above the age of 40 or 50 years old). George's explanation for the timeslot of the Book Review also confirms the fact that most of the regulars to the Book Review events are the elderly.

Most people who come here are retired, or unemployed. So they have the leisure to come here at this time. And if they're older people, they prefer a noon program over an evening program.

In conducting these events, George often plays the role of the moderator who introduces reviewers and handles the timing of the event. He explains that he usually allots 30-40 minutes for the reviewer, which would leave around 30 minutes for questions from the audience before the event is closed at 1:15 pm or 1:30 pm at most. George likes to stick to this schedule and format as much as possible. Sticking to the schedule is particularly important since many audience members may have other activities to go to and George will close down the discussion if it goes over the time limit. Similarly, George will also interrupt reviewers who do not follow the general format of the event. In one Book Review on a book about health care reform, George interrupted the reviewer who was not explicitly discussing the health care plan discussed in the reviewed book but instead was explaining the health care initiative that the reviewer was supporting at the time. Also important to note is that the FPL are the ones who decide on the topic and book to be reviewed, as Nora, a reviewer explains:

But it's interesting, when I do them here, they give me the book to read, they select the book. But it's often a book that I would like to read, so it's good because it pushes me to read it.

Thus as a social group, the FPL plays the role of the dominant social network that influences the type of texts and topics discussed in the collective literacy activity of the Book Review. The regular attendants of these book reviews bring their personal backgrounds in asking questions to the reviewers as well as bringing experience and a widely read knowledge to the Book Reviews, as Nora, a book reviewer, explains.

Well, what I know when I come here is that there are smart people who know things and have been around for a long time. And so they have their own history and they're very well read and very bright. It's just a great place to come because you know that these people, they're going to say something that you didn't think of. Like when Sylvia mentioned the Fountainhead, why didn't I think of that? I read that 35 years ago. And of course that was Frank Lloyd Wright. And always somebody says that. So even though I think I've researched it, there's always something that comes out of this that's a new thing for me and adds to my appreciation of the books that I've read.

The Book Review itself thus also functions as a collective literacy event in which people congregate around a text. Their interaction and commentary of the texts forms "the voices around the text" (Boyarin 1993) that adds to and enrich the meaning and interpretation of the text. Nora, a book reviewer, describes why book reviews such as the ones organized by the FPL are important for her reading activity.

Every week you can get insight into a book without having to read the book. And if you see a book you like then you can go

out and read it. But it's more personal than reading a book review in the newspaper because you hear one person talk about it and other people's reactions to it too. Some books you don't want to just read it by yourself. You want to talk about it with somebody. You need some help with it, in a way.

Thus, reading and literacy are often a social activity in which discussions with one's social network help to shape a "collective interpretation" of texts (Long 1993) as well as shaping people's opinion of books. In addition, reading also becomes a social activity in which sharing books and discussing it with others serves as a way for people to socialize.

Other social events in the library also feature a text which serves as the focus of the social gathering and discussion. While some of these texts may not be print based, they also highlight the way social networks play a role in shaping the topic and discussion at the event. For example, a Film Discussion was organized by the Hudson's branch of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)⁴ where they showed a film on free speech in the U.S. In the ensuing question and answer section, the members of the ACLU lead the discussion by framing it on the two topics they saw present in the film: (1) that the U.S. government and law enforcement are limiting free speech based on concerns of security after the 9/11 attacks, and (2) that after these terrorist attacks, civil organizations and private citizens are now clamping down on other's free speech. While some members of the audience present their perspective

⁴ The American Civil Liberties Union is a Non-governmental Organization (NGO) that focuses on monitoring, observing and ensuring the maintenance of civil liberties and freedom of speech in American society.

that the government is ultimately behind all the censoring of free speech, the ACLU members return to the original two topics they raise based on the film. In addition, they use examples of free speech court cases that they are handling to push forward the notion that maintaining social order must not limit people from voicing their opinion.

These examples of social events at the library show how the type of social network that congregate at these events play a large role in shaping the topic and discussions that emerge. These public events also serve to link these collaborative literacy activities with broader socio-political issues and ideas circulating in society. Additionally, these events and social networks reflect the kind of users the library seeks to have: empowered individuals who know how to use sources of information (both print based or otherwise) to pursue goals of personal as well as social improvement. It is therefore interesting to contrast the collective practices represented in these events with individual practices observed in the public spaces within the library.

6. Personal Literacy Practices

Individual activities at the library occur in the public spaces where the book collections are located. On the ground floor, individual activities generally occur in the form of people browsing books as well as various audio-visual materials. On the reading desks at this level, one can also see people reading books or using their own laptops computers, usually connecting to the internet via the wireless connection provided by the library.

On the second floor, the main area for individual literacy activity is located in the reference section which also houses the public computer sections. Here we can see people either reading

books, newspapers or material from the reference collection or waiting for their turn to use the public computers. An electronic board displaying the order of the queue organizes the way the public take turns to use these computers. One has to take a number then wait for the number to come up, and then use the computer for an allotted amount of time. People mainly use the computer to access the internet. This includes using the internet connection to check emails, look up items for sale through sites such as Craigslist, or for entertainment purposes such as watching videos on YouTube, checking networking sites and even playing online games. While the library does not regulate what the people do with the internet connection, they do regulate how people should behave while using it: they need to follow the queue and also maintain minimal noise. A security guard is present to enforce the regulation of this behavior.

These individual practices of making use of the library's facilities show a different patterning of literacy activities. There are no clear social networks present in these public spaces that influence the way people use the libraries informational facilities. While the library as an institution is present in its role to regulate the order of access to these facilities, it does not regulate the topic and purposes of how people use the informational facilities. People are more or less free to appropriate the informational resources to pursue various form of literacy activity for their own purposes. This contrasts with the practice at library events where there are social networks that decide the topic, purpose and even behavioral format of the activity.

The library thus provides two different kinds of social space for literacy activities. On one hand, the space it allocates for events provide a space for collective literacy activities that often follow the library's institutional expectations of the use of information.

On the other hand, the library's public space also provides space for individual activities where the practice of literacy may not necessarily follow the library's institutional expectations.

7. Conclusion

As a social institution that sponsors literacy, the library has institutional expectations of how library users utilize their facilities. These institutional expectations reflect the historical belief that literacy and information are powerful cultural items that can improve people's lives. In the past, the upper-class backers of public libraries (such as Ticknor in Boston) express this improvement in the ability of the common people to use literacy to adopt mainstream moral standards and take their place in the social order as envisioned by this upper class. In contemporary public libraries, this institutional expectation has shifted to a more liberal democratic notion that literacy has the capability of empowering the public. Yet, just the same, this new expectation is predominantly defined in the form of certain "life changing" uses of literacy.

This is what researchers using the socially situated perspective on literacy view as the ideological nature of literacy (Street 1993, Gee 1996). The above expected consequences of using the library often reflect the valued ideals and practices of a certain social class or institutional perspective. Gee (1996) views this as the dilemma of literacy in which there is always a social need for an authoritative (correct/ideal) version of literacy, both in form and purpose, to balance out the wide variety of literacy practices that actually exist in society.

In the public library, the institutional form of literacy is sometimes supported by the social groups, such as the Friends of the Public Library, which organize the library events. These social groups and networks have direct influence on the types of topics

and discussions that are conducted in the events, thus they have a stronger role in shaping the literacy activities associated with these events and the wider social purposes these activities should have. Though the library forms an over arching framework for these events, it does not exert direct behavioral control on the activities conducted in the events as these social groups do.

On the other hand, the lack of direct control on the conduct of literacy activities by the library opens up space for people to practice different forms of literacy activities in other areas of the library. The library acknowledges this fact by also emphasizing the entertainment aspect of reading and using informational resources as an integral part of the service it provides to the public.

As a sponsor of literacy, the library thus provides resources for people to conduct literacy activities. While the library intends to sponsor and develop certain literacy activities which it considers as productive or empowering, it also provides space for alternative forms of literacy activities which may not necessarily fit the library's institutional expectations.

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