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Reading and democracy

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Introduction

One of the several aspects included in the study of reading is that related to the daily life of individuals, as well as their inclusion in a country's political life, or else in the society as a whole.

Specialists usually study problems in reading learning, as well as those represented by a specific way to teach reading or writing for the educational process. It is very common to address this issue merely considering certain aspects related to learning of reading, such as the acquisition of instruments for the comprehension of words and phrases.

A different approach will be presented here, an approach where several social issues related to democracy have been separately addressed. This in order to understand how reading abilities may have important effects on a society's democratic life. The paradoxical attitudes of some states which, on the one hand, pretend to stimulate reading and, on the other, prevent the individuals from getting access to information, by means of the control of reading instruments.

Definition of reading

Defining reading is not a process as easy as it may seem. Some reading historians think that the mere act of knowing how to sign a marriage certificate is enough to establish the reading level of a society. For another group of scholars, reading is something more complicated and has to do with an individual's ability to recognize the letters of a word and the set of words that give a phrase a sense. As can be seen,

the second explanation is more complex than the first one. However, there is still another one to be analyzed herein: that related to individuals giving a practical sense to reading, which will be incorporated as a way to access information for daily life and to more elaborated processes, such as understanding the instructions to take a pill, updating, and looking for a job.

This way to understand reading is strictly related to the social life of individuals, and some of the important aspects of the life of a society and of individuals are those related to a democratic life, which is related not only to election issues, but also to the ways to live together that make people respect the laws and their self-imposed costumes. Life within a community should have the sense of respect to the rights and likes of others, and should **appreciate/appraise** the difference as something which makes our life richer and not as something which divides and separates us, so that no individual or community will be capable to live with other individuals or communities with different ways to understand the world, the society, the government, the education, the religion, and many other aspects faced by society's daily life. According to Bleich (pp. 66-67), reading means to understand other person's mind, for it allows us to reach her/his way of thinking. Reading is, thus, a means for life within a community, and such means can only exist within a society. Should man exist isolated, reading would be meaningful only as a way to keep thinking from one generation to another. But why is it necessary to learn reading? How to learn in a world where man or woman are isolated? These are the reasons why reading has a social standing from which it cannot be easily separated; otherwise, it would be left as an incomprehensible activity. We write for ourselves and write for others, we read ourselves and read what others have to tell us as individuals and as members of a society. All this affects the life of all.

Reading and education

A society that is mostly illiterate cannot be an educated or prosperous or developed society. A society where most of its members are ostracized from educational improvement cannot be transformed into a fair and homogenous society. If this cannot be done because an important sector of it has no access to education, then there is another fundamental distinction between those people with and those people without access to reading, in addition to all distinctions generated in society based on the economic or social difference. Therefore, if we are to talk about the digital breach that separates different social groups, it will be necessary first to worry about the reading breach. Those who are capable to read are better prepared than those who are not capable to improve their educational and, therefore, social or economical status through reading. This is the first breach to be eliminated, since this would allow women and men to have more justice for the transformation of their lives and for society in general.

Where and how is the problem of the social, educational and economical difference produced by illiteracy to be dealt with? The answer is indisputable: everywhere and with all the resources available to a society and its government. A society with a high number of illiterates is unfair not only to them; rather, it will carry a load too heavy which will not allow it to develop in a more fair and democratic way.

Developed societies have a low number of illiterates. This does not make them necessarily democratic societies, as can be seen with dictatorial and totalitarian governments that reached high levels of economical development, with a very low democratic participation of individuals and no organized participation of such individuals in political parties or civil organizations which give civil society a voice. The members of a community should participate not only as in the old democratic assemblies, where citizens took part and expressed their opinion. They can also do it, and perhaps in a more productive way, if the opportunity arises for them to access a text by themselves, reading it as many times as necessary to have a reasoned and meditated opinion.

Access to information

One of the basic principles of librarianship/**bibliotecology** is the free access to information, for which purpose the best instrument to be used is the public library, which allows all the individuals to look for, obtain and freely use the information they need for their education and professional and personal improvement, or else for entertainment. This would not be possible if library users were not capable enough to obtain the information and interpret it. If library users are not able to read at a proper level, it is just as if information were written in another language. Therefore, free access is one of the main values of our activity, and it should be seen in its relationship with democratic life. This means that in order for a society to be democratic, individuals need to have free access to information, by means of the existence of materials in a library, and also the ability to understand such information through reading.

So, if it is possible for educated people to acquire, organize and diffuse broad information and impossible for illiterates to use it, then illiterates will also be ostracized from many of the social benefits offered by the government and social organizations. Studies in France show how many people in many other countries do not enjoy these benefits, since they cannot read and correctly fill in those formats that would allow them to enjoy such benefits. Bureaucracy sees them with the same underestimation applied by society to ostracized people and does nothing or very little to help them.

It is the ultimate purpose of reading to equalize individuals to be educated, to be trained, to learn. Hautcourt stated that illiteracy is a kind of jail for individuals who are obligated to remain in orality, which leaves them in a disadvantaged position and prevents them from accelerating their processes for personal improvement, educational liberation and social justice. Reading is the way to access the information we need, it is a way that allows us to be equal in the use of information. It is not the only element to do this, but it is a very important one, so it should receive all the importance it deserves.

Life-significant reading

Reading is a process not exclusively limited to understanding letters, joining them into words and grouping such words to make sentences. Reading has to be a deeper process; this is why we say that reading has to be an activity significant for people. It should be seen as an instrument useful to improve many activities in life, such as: improving people's education, raising their training level for their job, which helps them understand ideas and opinions different from theirs which, otherwise, would not be understood. It can be said that if reading does this, it will become an activity which will create free men who can be independent and, at the same time, live together in society, getting benefits from it and making it greater. If it is true that reading creates free women and men, it means that reading will generate more democratic societies.

This does not imply that reading uniforms human thinking. Rather, it develops diversity and improves the society, which reflects into a higher democratization. Those individuals who are capable of giving value to information will be responsible for all this, but this can be achieved only by those individuals who have access to information through reading.

In the last few years, the use of information technology has been applied to open the access to information. However, there are a lot of facts indicating that there is a breach between those having access to digital resources and those without such access. This breach does not seem to close; on the contrary, it seems to generate bigger breaches. The base of this problem is not in the use of technological resources, but in the ability of some people to read. This is the true breach to be closed; other breaches will not be closed if we do not decrease the differences between those people who read and those who do not. Another way to see reading is the one presented by Hautcourt (p. 10), who asserts that literacy is an act

related to the right to education for the whole life, and it is defined as a political act “which helps most excluded people to be aware of their rights and to organize themselves in the proper way to exert them.” In order to eliminate the ostracism suffered by non-readers in life, it is necessary that the government’s formal and informal educational programs fight for the reduction of this phenomenon. Society must also participate, especially the civil society, who frequently fights to eliminate the consequences of ostracism. However, governments do not seem to realize that fighting against the causes of ostracism is a priority, since illiteracy prevents citizens to actively incorporate to society and become not only the origin of problems, but also a part of the solution.

It was established, at a seminar organized in Toronto, that the nature of illiteracy is related to poverty and social discrimination based on race and genre. Illiteracy is not a disadvantage per se, but an evidence of unequal education between social groups (Hautcourt, p. 9). These groups should be treated in a different way, so as to allow that, at the end of the educational process, different groups are in conditions similar to deal with life from the standpoint of the proper management of those abilities necessary for reading to be significant in the life of citizens. This is because learning to read and write is not the mere union of letters and words to have an idea of the message to be transmitted. Learning to read and write should be complemented with the ability to discuss the written message, an element which is considered to be essential for the survival of readers and society (Hautcourt, p. 15).

One of the criteria to consider one or more groups of individuals as ostracized is represented by the fact that such group(s) are not able to have an active life as citizens and negotiate with the authorities, communicate in public and fight for equal rights and opportunities, since such individuals lack the knowledge and the abilities to work and oppose to the authorities exerting the power. Ostracized people are those who do not understand that they have a role and something to say in the democratic process, and also that there is no better mechanism to protect them than their participation. It is also necessary to understand that reading is the best way to be integrated to this stream of social participation. When authorities do not understand this, it can be supposed that they do it because they are not aware of the problem, or else because it is not convenient for them that a significant sector of the society is not prepared to exert its rights (the right to criticize, among others), so as to deal with less problems than those which would be generated by a society which is educated and, therefore, best prepared for democracy.

Ostracized within ostracized

There are certain groups within illiterates who face a situation of double ostracism: they are excluded because they do not know how to read and write, and also because they belong to one of the minority groups of society, all of which makes both social and educational ostracism increase. They are excluded because they are a minority or because they are different, and also because they are illiterates. Here we are talking especially about women, children, and the minority ethnic groups.

This ostracism limits the participation of such people in the democratic life of a society: they do not participate in the most important decisions taken by the official or civil entities of society. Therefore, a double effort is necessary to incorporate such groups, by means of reading, into the democratizing stream of society.

The press

One of the important elements of the democratization of society is the press, which plays an important role in the creation of a democratic culture. It is responsible for choosing the main subjects for discussion in a society, and it should present the different points of view within the society, along with their advantages and disadvantages. The press is the source where those subjects that may democratize a society can be known. A democratic society cannot please everyone, but it can reach those agreements which are most advantageous for the majority, and it will do so only after taking the minorities’ standpoints into

consideration. This can be made only through reading, and only this way will citizens be informed about the complete and not summarized points of view, as these are presented by the radio and TV stations. Only this way will individuals have time to ponder and read the information again and again until they understand its meaning. Keeping a society informed is one of its most important aspects. As Thomas Jefferson put it in 1787: “(...) and were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter. But I should mean that every man should receive those papers and be capable to reading them.”¹ Not all governments consider the press and books a means for the improvement of democratic life. Therefore, limits are established to reading and writing, especially when both present perspectives differing from the official way to see and face problems.

Censorship

Censorship is applied to both writing and reading processes. In the case of the writing process, there is control over the production of ideas which oppose the political, religious or moral orientation of a government. It is also limited when the truth is considered to be included in a work or in a set of works, whether these are about religion or politics. These limits restrain the development of literary production in the most extensive sense, limit criticism and the participation of individuals and represent a barrier for democracy and tolerance.

Reading is also censured, the distribution of some works is prohibited, those who possess these works are prosecuted, and reading them is morally condemned. These measures limit the development of a democratic society. How can this problem be analyzed from a certain perspective if reading it is prohibited? How is it possible to find new solutions if other individuals cannot be read and other ideas cannot be confronted? How can we advance in the construction of a democratic society, including eventually more and more inhabitants of a country and not excluding them on the basis of their age, sex, race, economical position, sexual preferences, etc.? How can a democratic society be more tolerant with those who think different to majorities? There is only one answer to all these questions: by means of reading, which must be fostered on a daily basis as the best vehicle to succeed in the attainment of this conference's subject: a more democratic and more tolerant society.

¹ Carta al coronel Edward Carrington, 16 de enero de 1787 (Documento 8, en *Papers*, 11:48-49; http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/amend1_speech8.html).