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| **DENMARK  “Shared reading”: old technology in the era of new  digital media** |  |  |
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Accessibility to books, and recently other media, has been at the core of library services since their foundation. In this article I argue that digitalization and computer- meditated technologies cannot stand alone in making literature accessible to those not familiar with library services and reading; it takes such old-fashioned technologies as books and human contact. To enable new readers to enter the world of literature is not merely a matter of accessibility, at least not in its physical or digital form only. In Scandinavia all citizens enjoy free access to public libraries and thus potential unconstrained accessibility to an almost infinite number of reading experiences whether by eye or ear. The issue of accessibility is thus not located in the existence of technologies through which reading experience can be mediated; rather it is to be found in the minds of readers. For some people, making it into the library itself is a barrier that cannot easily be crossed. In some cases, this is because reading has become associated with a history of educational failure and exclusion – through unemployment and poverty – from society at large, and the institutions that form it. For others, it is mental or emotional struggle that prevents them from engaging in reading and human interaction. Thus, getting people into reading takes more than providing the physical or digital space in which reading can be accessed. It takes, I argue, a reader to make a reader.  It might seem far away from the traditional territory of library services to venture into the mental territories of people’s minds. However, this is, as the cognitive revolution has long proclaimed, the only territory still to be claimed. Despite centuries of reading we know next to nothing about the complexity that goes into the making of a reading mind. One thing we do know is, as the American neuro- scientist Maryanne Wolf says in her fascinating book Proust and the Squid, “we were never born to read”. There is no such thing as a reading faculty. To read is to make new use of brain functions that have evolved for other purposes, and create circuits and connectivity across vast functional areas of the brain. The reading brain as a result differs fundamentally from the non-reading brain, as shown by evidence that Wolf has gathered from years of studying the dyslectic brain. Reading, she argues, is the greatest mental leap achieved in the history of any single individual, a leap that changes forever the organisation of the brain. The shift is somewhat comparable, though on a different scale, to the change from oral to written cultures; or the change that we witness nowadays with the shift from print to e-reading which again will substantially alter the way in which our brains and, with them, our society are organised. So how do we enable the mental leap into reading, and, once this is achieved, ensure the existence of deep personal engagement and slow reflection of self through literature in a society where easily distracted, hyperlinked e-reading is soon to be the norm?  I shall in the following suggest a model that might just do both.  **Get Into Reading**  Reading aloud, at first a mere accident to overcome the obstacle of forming a reading group with readers that struggled to read, has become the trademark of the ‘Get Into Reading’ (GIR) programme. Ten years ago Jane Davis, from the School of English, University of Liverpool, now founder and director of The Reader Organisation, set out with a small grant to explore ways in which to bring great literature down from the library shelves, out of the university, and into the hands of people who needed it most. After the first pilot had run in a public library over a five-week period the project had already laid out what turned out to be a very successful model for engaging people in reading. Now there are more than 300 weekly shared reading groups just in the Liverpool area alone, involving a great number of library services spread over the country. The shared reading model is very simple: a group meets every week for an hour and a half, year out and year in, summer and winter. Some might drop out, others will join, but the weekly meeting spot and time is never changed.  Here is what The Reader Organisation says about their mission: “We find people who are not readers, or who have lost their connection with literature, people who are isolated, lonely, or who could otherwise benefit from reading books, and bring them together for the simple pleasure of reading aloud and discussing the thoughts and feelings that are evoked.”  “Shared reading” represents an interesting mixture of various models and forms of reading. On one hand, it draws on our concept of “reading for pleasure”, where you read by yourself for your own pleasure, often in a private space, alone and silently. On the other hand, it draws on our idea of “reading for formation” according to which we read together, aloud at times, in order to gain knowledge or otherwise (in)form ourselves, often in a public space, with formal education being the most dominant setting. “Shared reading” is placed somewhere between these two models. It is “reading for pleasure”, yet it is read aloud, together in a public space, and it does imply some kind of (trans)formation. I call it a “personal- instrumental” form of reading based on identity and selfreflection, which involves the cognitive ability to form analogies and create models of self and the world. As a form it draws on a practice already familiar to most of us: reading aloud to children. As in the classic bedtime reading scenario, the reading group facilitator reads aloud and pauses to allow for reactions and shared reflections. The shared reading is thus made up by the totality of the various responses, ranging from sighs and giggles – if not outbursts of crying and laughter – to discussions of ethical concerns regarding choices and behaviour in fictional and real worlds alike.  Dan Hutto, professor of philosophical psychology, argues in his book Folk Psychological Narratives that reading aloud practices are the most significant elements in the develop- ment of a folk psychology by which we learn to reason about other people’s behaviour. Furthermore, research in autobiographical memory suggests that such “socially situated reminiscing” as reading together or engaging in storytelling about the past over the dinner table are important elements in the formation of identity. Thus the ability to learn how to read other people and form self-identity might explain why The Reader Organisation, turning to the last paragraph of their mission statement, experience that “over time, people build up a confidence that enables them to tell their own stories, as well as to forge close relationships with fellow readers”.  These latter aspects – the shared reading group as not just a way into literature but into one’s self and other people – account for the fact that shared reading has an effect on mental health. The Reader Organisation has over the years gathered evidence that shared reading is beneficial to people who suffer from depression and other mental disorders. Presently, “shared reading” is being used to great extent within the NHS mental health sector, with more than 40 weekly reading groups in the Merseyside area alone, several of them led by psychiatrists who claim that shared reading has proven the most efficient way to establish dialogue with patients who would otherwise refuse any kind of human interaction.  The ‘Get Into Reading’ programme thus offers a model that builds partnership between library services, the health sector, and the third sector in an effort to form a triangle between literature, health and readers. A recent project founded by the Danish Agency for Libraries and Media called “Læselysten voks(n)er” is implementing the shared reading model to get struggling adult readers into reading. As part of this project Tårnby librarian Laura Michelsen has successfully integrated the shared reading model within a back-towork programme at Amager ‘Skov- hjælperne’. In a first evaluation of the project, Mads Madsen, the local leader of the ‘forest workers’ emphasizes “the importance of the reading group in creating points of shared reference, which help group members to strengthen social connections within the work programme itself” thus demonstrating the advantage of such cross sectional collaborations.  I am well aware that for many librarians enabling mental and emotional access to literature through readings groups connecting people with what they read might seem like a task that should perhaps rather lie in the hands of social workers, teachers, or therapists. I could not disagree more. Only when these reading groups are led by trained and dedicated librarians, or volunteers trained in this particular practice and with in-depth experience of reading, can they become a way of connecting libraries with their users and the larger society, an important role which more and more libraries turn to these years. And rightly so, because within the advances of new technology lies the inherent paradox that as library services have succeeded in providing everexpanding accessibility through digital space, those very digital platforms threaten to put the physical library space out of use, unless re-invented to facilitate, as I have suggested here, a new form of accessibility mediated by something as low-tech and oldfashioned as contact between humans beings and books. Let the reading revolution begin!  Mette Steenberg Postdoc Technologies of the Mind Group Department of Anthropology Aarhus University  http://splq.info/grafik/Mette_Steenberg.gif |  |  |