



UWISPEAK

The Enduring Importance Of Libraries

by Daisy St Rose, UWI Open Campus Librarian



What then is a library?

The Concise Oxford Dictionary (1982) defines a library as “a room or building containing books for reading or reference”. However, it is important to note that one can create a home library by designating a room in their house for books. The modern definition of a library is not limited to traditional book formats but can also include a collection of films, compact discs (CDs) or even a collection of audio books saved in a folder on an iphone or other smart phone or computer. Most libraries today also provide computer access to its patrons as well as free wireless connections (wi-fi).

The different types of libraries?

There are four main types of libraries. They include public, school, special and academic libraries. Public libraries such as the Central Library in Castries and its smaller branch libraries in the various districts around the island serve our communities and the general public “from cradle to the grave”. In St Lucia, these libraries are government owned and maintained and fall under the Ministry of Education and Culture headed by a Director of Library Services .

Public libraries usually have various departments or sections that focus on different areas of service such as children’s section, teen and adult sections and reference section. Most libraries will engage the young with story hours and sing along programs so parents are encouraged to visit their local libraries to enquire about these opportunities.

The school library is part of the school system and serves students in the infant, primary and secondary grades. Many school libraries will have a teacher librarian assigned to them to teach students information literacy skills and provide assistance with the proper use of audio visual and other media formats. At many schools on the island, a teacher usually volunteers some of her spare her time to maintaining the library and keeping it functional for the students. These dedicated teachers are to be applauded for trying to provide alternative leisure opportunities to students to help them take flight into new imaginary worlds.



An avid user of the Open Campus's "Childrens Corner"

Academic libraries serve College and University faculty, staff and students. Large universities such as The University of the West Indies (The UWI) Cave Hill Campus may have several department libraries which serve their various departments such as the faculties of Medicine and Education. Librarians in academic libraries usually have a specialist qualification in a particular subject area.

In St. Lucia a number of special libraries exist. The music library at the St Lucia School of Music, the St. Lucia National Archives, the Ministry of External Affairs Library, the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States Library and the Eastern Caribbean Supreme Court Library are all examples. These libraries offer persons unique opportunities to work in very specialized areas of interest.

Worldwide, special libraries can serve particular segments of the populations such the blind and physically handicapped, while other are dedicated to special collections such as the Library of Congress Library which is located in the USA.

Why then are libraries important?

Libraries promote life-long learning and can be an excellent community gathering place. The power of libraries to issue springs of literacy and knowledge and seeds of democracy cannot be overstated. Research has found that libraries make significant contributions to the effectiveness of the education process. They have enormous power to propel human progress and fuel productivity of our people. It was Confucius who stated that ***"no matter how busy you think you are, you must find time for reading, or surrender yourself to self-chosen ignorance."*** Reading to increase knowledge and awareness can be the most effective weapon against intolerance and ignorance. What we learn can never be taken away from us, but will stretch our imaginations and help us make sense of our own lives. It will also encourage us to reach out toward others whose lives are quite different from our own.

A library can also be a place for storing documents in print or electronic formats for historical posterity. This is the case with the St Lucia National Archives and the National Library of St Lucia which are both repositories of all locally produced documents. The value of these documents is increased through professional processing, storage and dissemination by librarians. Documents and other information resources would be useless if libraries and librarians were not there to gather, indicate the significance of the information, classify and catalogue them as well as provide access to their use and reuse to satisfy recreational, commercial, educational and cultural needs.

They also perform the role of social inclusion by serving all facets of the population whether poor, elderly, young, old, or unemployed. In fact, the above mentioned groups are usually the ones least likely to be able to acquire such assets now available at most libraries. By extension, libraries can also be great civic centres that assist with voter registrations, posting of proposed changes in local ordinances, provide availability of forms such as those needed to file ones income tax returns. A number of libraries also provide recreational activities such as local exhibitions throughout the year which are open to the general public and a host of other activities.

Research has also shown that libraries - especially public and national libraries - are valued as physical assets and a source of community pride. The Carnegie or Central library in the city of Castries is an important landmark with historical significance to the island.

Conclusion

The above preamble does not encompass every single value that libraries can provide. What I hope it has done is provide the general public with an understanding of a library and its importance in our lives and by extension our communities and nation. If I could change anything, it would be to make books free for all. It is my fervent hoped that the recently held National Library Week of activities helped increase awareness of local libraries as well as motivate our population to read. Let us all support and use these local libraries and other available resources such as the world wide web to obtain resources worth reading, which can improve our incomes, our health and help us develop strong and happy family lives.

Persons of all ages love to listen to stories. Below is a selection of **links to free resources** available on the internet which provides access to a wide variety of audio books for your enjoyment.

<http://www.booksshouldbefree.com>

<http://storynory.com/>

<http://www.free-books.org/children.php>

http://speialed.about.com/od/freechildrenciaudiobooks/Free_MP3_Childrens_Books.htm

<http://www.audiobookscorner.com/free.html>

<http://www.audiobooktreasury.com/free-audio-books/children.htm>

<http://www.emediapress.com/free-childrens-audio-books>

www.starfall.com