

READING PROMOTION ACTIVITIES IN LATVIA LIBRARIES: FOR INSPIRATION AND INITIATIVE /

ACTIVITĂȚI DE PROMOVAREA A LECTURII ÎN BIBLIOTECILE DIN LETONIA: PENTRU INSPIRAȚIE ȘI INIȚIATIVĂ

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Abstract:

Maintaining and developing the culture of reading in the local community is a constant priority for the public libraries of Latvia. Why is reading important? The answer to this question lies in two related aspects: the interest of whole society and the personal development of each individual. Society that reads is capable to make wise and analytical decisions, which is one of the foundations of the democratic society. At a personal level, reading is very important for individual development and serves a basis for lifelong learning. Libraries play an important and invaluable role, having all the tools they need to create and sustain public interest in books, in authors and in written word.

Keywords:

reading culture, book, library, reading promotion, creativity, social networks, librarians Latvia.

Rezumat:

Bibliotecile publice din Letonia introduc mereu noi metode pentru a dezvolta cultura lecturii ca stil de viață comunitar. Ca obiect fizic, cartea își afirmă din ce în ce mai mult rolul central în serviciile bibliotecare și în activitățile creative. Se acordă multă atenție

atât apropierea cărții de cititor, fără restricții de accesibilitate, precum și oferirii de oportunități de discuții și schimb de opinii. Este de asemenea important ca informațiile despre o carte să fie ușor de găsit, atât fizic în bibliotecă, cât și pe platformele de socializare. O altă modalitate utilă de lucru pentru biblioteci este organizarea de întâlniri cu autorii cărților.

Cuvinte-cheie:

cultura lecturii, carte, bibliotecă, promovarea lecturii, creativitate, rețele sociale, bibliotecari, Letonia.

For the overall picture – some statistics. The library system of Latvia consists of 1400 libraries, of which 725 are public libraries. In 2023, the Latvia libraries were visited 8 334 817 times in person and 20 989 971 times virtually. The average number of loans per capita is 5.2 books, and the average number of loans per active library user – 13 books. In 2023, 40% of the Latvia population visited the libraries of Latvia.

Maintaining and developing the culture of reading in the local community is a constant priority for the public libraries of Latvia. Why is reading so important? The answer to this question lies in two related aspects: the interest of the whole society and the personal development of each individual. Society that is reading is capable of making wise, analytical decisions, which is one of the foundations of a democratic society. At an individual level, reading is very important for personal development and serves as a basis for lifelong learning. Libraries play an important and invaluable role in this, since they have all the tools they need to create and sustain public interest in books, authors and the written word. We are on the way to making the library and the book an everyday habit and value for everyone in Latvia.

The public libraries of Latvia are introducing ever new methods to develop the culture of reading as a community lifestyle. As a physical object, the book is increasingly asserting its central role in library services and creative activities. Much thought is given to bringing the book as close as possible to the reader, without restrictions on accessi-

bility, as well as providing opportunities for discussion and exchange of opinions. Last but not least, it is important that information about a book is easy to find, both physically in the library and on social media platforms. Another useful way for libraries to work is to organise meetings with authors of books.

Initiatives above are closely linked to the activities at the national level. The National Library of Latvia (NLL), with the support of the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Latvia, in cooperation with partners, is launching a broad public involvement movement „The Restart for Reading” in 2024. It is a public involvement movement to support reading at the highest level, to strengthen reading traditions in society and to improve the reading skills of the new generation. Within the framework of the movement, the NLL continues to implement national-level programmes such as „The Children, Youth and Parents Jury”, „Book Start” and „Reading Aloud Competition”. One part of the programme is the Book Purchase for Public Libraries, within which Latvia public libraries collections will be replenished by purchasing from publishers original works of literature, cultural publications, dictionaries, encyclopaedias, reference editions, as well as high-quality translations into Latvian, thus giving every reader in the regions access to the latest books.

Similarly, within the framework of the „The Restart for Reading” movement, the messengers of reading nominated over the years from all regions of Latvia, who through their example motivate the younger generation to read, will be also addressed.

Conversations about books and current developments in society

In recent years, the public libraries of Latvia have seen a boom in „Book clubs” – the work of existing clubs is being improved as well as new ones are being founded. Creative and appealing are also the names of the „Book clubs”, for example: „At a white leaf”, „The Happy ones read...”, „When book lovers meet...”, „The Flight”, „1000 and one pages”, „Book GURU”, „Reading pleasure”, „The Mood”, „The Book lovers”, „The Word”, „Happy readers read books and drink coffee”, „The Impulse”.

„Book clubs” bring together book-lovers who enjoy reading and want to share their impressions of what they have read; in parallel, the library’s news is being introduced and various thematic events are organized. Discussions about the books one has read are organised regularly – usually monthly, except for summers. The personalities of the book club leaders play an important role in the success of the book clubs – their enthusiasm, common understanding of literary events and conducting interactive conversations are undeniably a guarantee to the clubs sustainability. Book clubs are run by both library staff and knowledgeable volunteers. Several libraries have also developed good cooperation with book bloggers and Latvian language teachers.

For several years, the Kuldīga Main Library has been hosting two „Book clubs” – the face-to face „Book club” and the online literary discussion club SHELF. The face-to-face Book club is organised once a month from October to May and has an average of 20 participants. As part of the meeting there is an introduction to the library’s new acquisitions, followed by a discussion about one of the previously read books. Afterwards participants are offered a preview about a local writer or a conversation about literary highlights. At the end of the session „The Book club recommends” list is created together and posted on social networks. A book exhibition appropriate to the conversation is displayed in the premises of the library.

The online discussion club SHELF is held remotely on the last Thursday of every month. A *Facebook* group has been created for the club which posts information about the current topic of each month. The topics are selected at the beginning of the year, after listening to and summarizing suggestions from the participants. Topics for the discussion range from literary classics to original works by Latvian authors, poetry, translations of works by foreign authors, etc. As the guests often are young people from the local community who prefer to read books in the original languages, popular English language books from around the world are also discussed. The online club has several advantages – not only the possibility to connect from anywhere, but also the evenings as the time of discussion, which is a friendlier offer for working people.

Books outside libraries

The public libraries of Latvia increasingly offer activities for the inhabitants of the communities outside the library premises. This helps to reach out to new users, expand the target audience as well as provide reading pleasure to people who find it difficult to get to the library.

Outdoor reading rooms

During the summer months, library users choose to spend as much time in fresh air as possible. This circumstance prompted the libraries to think actively about the provision of outdoor reading rooms and their technical arrangement. More and more libraries have purchased shelters, brought tables and chairs outdoors, arranged shelves for books and magazines.

Libraries have also thought about the content of the outdoor services: a wide range of books and magazines, wi-fi connection, tablets, photo exhibitions, meetings with writers. There are also various other activities: board and outdoor games, theme events, theatre performances and creative workshops. It is also a good alternative to indoor events, especially if the library spaces are too narrow or inappropriate for organising events.

Libraries think a lot about the quality of the outdoor reading room services to be rich in content and captivating. For example, the Gulbene County Library offers a different thematic title for each outdoor reading room day: Monday is the magazines day, Tuesday – the book day, Wednesday – the games day, Thursday is creative day, and Friday is dedicated to board games.

Riga Central Library offers its Beach Reading Room services to Riga residents and the city guests during the summer months. This library is not located next to the branch premises, but in the Lucavsala Recreational Park in Riga territory, where there is a tent especially set up for the library's needs offering entertaining and educational books from the library's collection of donated and duplicate books as well as magazines and board games. The service is complemented by various thematic activities.

Cycling library

Sigulda County Library offers the „Cycling Library” service during the summer season. Young people with a special book bike „SIGULDA PEOPLE READ” deliver books and other publications to people’s homes. This service is used on a regular basis by 12 library users who have difficulties to get to the library, mostly seniors and families with small children. The Cycling Library is open on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 11.00 until 15.00. Requests for necessary items are made by telephone. The Cycling Library service is provided in partnership with the summer employment programme for schoolchildren and is an opportunity for young people to earn their first small amount of money. In winter months this book delivery service is provided by the library staff.

Reading in front inside and outside the library premises

Jēkabnieki library in Svēte parish offers a service – reading in front at the users homes. The service is available not only for the blind and partially sighted persons, but also for people who are unable to read on their own due to health problems. The works of the favourite authors, articles from newspapers and other types of publications are read to the library users. A reading session lasts up to 2 hours and takes place on average once a month or at the users request, after which the text is discussed. This service is very relevant and particularly useful in rural areas where the librarians know the users for many years and have gained their trust.

The reading to someone activities are also organised as special campaigns, involving readers and other people in the community. For example, the branch libraries of the Latgale Central Library are organising the reading in front of an audience campaign „Give joy to others by reading!” during the Advent period. Participants have the opportunity to both – listen to the readings by various well-known, popular people from the community, as well as to read excerpts from their favourite books themselves.

It has become a tradition for the Chairman of the Jelgava City Council to visit Jelgava City libraries to read a fairy tale to the chil-

dren, for example, the book „The Grumbletroll” by Barbara van der Speulhof and Stephan Pricken, which tells the story of a little troll who could not control his anger, about friendship and forgiveness. The conversation then turned to the fairy tale. The Chairman of the City Council encouraged children to read books because they help to learn more about the world.

Ogre Central Library invites all schoolchildren to a lesson of common reading in the library during the summer holidays. It takes place on Tuesdays at 11.00 and on Wednesdays at 16.00. Each participant chooses the most interesting book from his/her own bookshelf or from the library's bookshelves and takes it to the moment of co-reading. Readers gather at the Ogre Central Library and, accompanied by a librarian, go to a nice place in or around the library. Everyone reads the book for at least 20 minutes. At the end, they discuss and talk about what they have read, play games and do other activities. The total number of visitors is around 230. The highest number of readers per reading is 18, the lowest is 3. On average, there are around 7-10 readers each time. The highest participation is among pupils in grades 1-4.

Books in the urban environment

It is essential that the book is visible, accessible and touchable, regardless of library opening hours and other factors. Therefore the initiatives that promote the book in the urban environment are welcome. For several years now, from May to mid-September „Book Cages” have been installed in the square opposite the Balvi Central Library. These cages contain books donated to the library which, for various reasons, are not included in the library collection but are still too good to be disposed of. The „Book Cages” are very popular among the city's residents. Books are read both simply relaxing on the benches in the square and while parents spend their free time with their children in the playground, where they flip through books while lying on the grass or playing. The inhabitants of Balvi are actively involved in replenishing the „Book Cages” by placing books they have already read and would like to pass on to others. Similar book shelves can be found in many towns and rural areas of Latvia.

Involving the local community

More and more reading promotion activities are planned in cooperation with the local community. This is an opportunity to involve library readers in the promotion of the collection, to foster common reading pleasure and mutual exchange of experiences, to encourage positive mutual contacts. One of these tools is the creation and maintenance of „Recommended by a reader” and „Recommended by a librarian” sections on library websites or social media platforms. Gaismas Library – the branch of the Latgale Central Library presents a literary exhibition „We recommend” created by the readers. It offers the opportunity to place there a book the readers recommend to others. The exhibition is very popular among library visitors and is regularly updated with books of different genres. The library readers are very interested in the books recommended by other readers; attention is paid also to previously unknown authors and topics.

Ludza Library offers its users a survey „What book would you recommend to read?” The results of the questionnaire are compiled by a library staff member and posted once a week on the library’s Facebook account under the heading „The Reader recommends”. Most of the recommended books are fiction – detective stories, historical novels, romance novels, etc. Thanks to the recommendations of other readers, users come to the library and ask for the recommended books. Librarians have observed that readers become more motivated to read when the books are recommended on the basis of personal experience. This activity provides an opportunity to get acquainted with books that readers would otherwise pass by.

Individual cooperation with the reader has been developed in Jelgava city Pārlielupe library. Twice a month, a library reader posts a review of a book on the *Facebook* platform under the heading „Reader’s rating”. Book reviews can be read in one place at www.facebook.com/parlielupe by selecting #lasītāja_vērtējums.

Librarians can inspire people also with their personal stories to read, to choose a book. An example from Ogre Central Library – what is the librarian reading now? What does she recommend? What will she read next?

It is always interesting to find out what the people in the local community (teachers, medics, creative personalities, entrepreneurs, etc.) are reading, what are their reading habits and their favourite books. The Central Library of Balvi is organising the event „A Reader meets a reader. Mystery Guest”, inviting popular people from the local community, without revealing their identity beforehand, and only from the clues on the poster let the participants to guess which of the celebrities it might be. The identity of the mystery guest is carefully concealed and revealed only during the event. If you want to find out who will be attending the event, visit the library. The event has the effect of reviving people's interest in reading and visiting the library, as well as increasing the number of books checked out and the number of new readers registered. Discovering a new and exciting book is also a great opportunity to get to know the people of your community and their interests.

The book as an element of mystery is used also in the activity „A Book as a Surprise” carried out by the Madona County Library. It takes place as a part of the „The Family Saturdays” programme and is aimed at both, children and grown-ups. When visiting the library, the reader receives a wrapped, unknown book to read at home. Once the book has been read, the reader brings it back to the library and shares his thoughts on what he has read. In most cases, the readers admitted that they would not have chosen the specific publication themselves but, in general, they were very positive about the activity. Other Latvian public libraries organise similar surprise activities.

Book authors in libraries

The opportunity to meet one's favourite authors in person is an essential prerequisite for revitalising reading habits, which is the reason why public libraries regularly organise meetings with authors - writers, poets, translators and artists. These meetings increase the readers' interest in the original literature, help them to learn about the book creating process, and give them the opportunity to express their opinions or talk about current issues in society. It is very com-

mendable that the authors themselves read excerpts from their books in front of the public at these meetings.

Conclusions

1. The public libraries of Latvia have proven to be important cultural and educational institutions that support the development of reading habits in communities through a wide range of services.

2. Libraries create a link between books and readers, developing their reading habits and reading culture.

3. The librarian plays a key role in these cultural processes, helping readers to navigate the diverse literature offer, acting as a support and mentor between author, publisher, book and reader.

4. It is important to involve the local community in reading activities. A personal approach and a personal story about the book someone has read addresses and persuades others to read as well.

5. It is important for libraries to be creative, purposeful and persuasive to respond to the needs of the community and to make their services relevant to them.