

## Reading aloud as intangible cultural heritage: A German initiative to support literacy, reading and libraries – worldwide

**Klaus U. Werner**

Philologische Bibliothek, Dept. of Humanities, Freie Universitaet, Berlin, Germany  
klaus.werner@fu-berlin.de



Copyright © 2015 by Klaus U. Werner. This work is made available under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported License: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>

---

### Abstract:

*Is reading aloud in danger? Does it need to be saved from extinction? Have we as librarians done enough to promote reading aloud in libraries and schools, organizing reading competitions and World Reading Day? However, reading aloud is not only about children nor is it only a local, regional, or national cultural technique worth protecting. It is universal. Reading aloud ought to be promoted as common cultural heritage on the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) list. Reading aloud relies on and creates, a specific social situation: Think of the physical closeness and emotional bond that develop as a parent reads to a child at bedtime, the special form of attention given to a patient or an elderly person by a reading visitor, and the group spirit and enchantment created by a teacher reading to pupils in class or around the toasty evening campfire. Every type of reading aloud has its own atmospheric charm that people share which reflects the place or the time of day, the acoustics of the room, and the individuality of voice and body language. Works of world literature also have much to tell us about reading aloud, including its erotic quality. Reading aloud is truly a cultural technique relevant in all phases of human existence. Hence, it fulfills all the criteria of the UNESCO list. Reading aloud has to be learned individually and passed on personally. It cannot be preserved or reproduced digitally, as it is traditional, contemporary and living all at the same time. Reading aloud is community-based and it has a vibrant social aspect because it needs both, a reader and a listener. This paper discusses a joint initiative together with the DBV (German Library Association) and Stiftung Lesen (German reading foundation).*

**Keywords:** Literacy, Reading, Reading Aloud, UNESCO, Intangible Cultural Heritage

---

### Introduction

Is reading aloud in danger? Does it need to be saved from extinction? Haven't librarians done quite a lot already to promote reading aloud in libraries and schools, organizing reading

competitions and World Reading Day? This paper examines the importance of reading aloud for literacy and about a German initiative to put reading aloud on the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). It is a joint initiative led by the German Library Association (DBV) and the German Reading Foundation. How can we go about obtaining international recognition for reading aloud as intangible cultural heritage under the Convention of the UNESCO? Would a heritage status be advantageous to the protection and promotion of reading aloud as one essential for the key competence of literacy?

### **Cultural heritage**

Cultural heritage is not limited to monuments and collections of objects, but also includes traditions of living expressions, oral and performing traditions, folklore, knowledge and skills. Therefore, with the new millennium UNESCO founded the register of Intangible Cultural Heritage to protect such forms of cultural expression the world over. So far it is particularly the countries and societies with an oral tradition that have been the focus for this aspect of world heritage. For instance, many African countries have few spectacular historic buildings, but they have a wealth of unique intangible culture traditions which are in danger of disappearing.

What does intangible cultural heritage mean? The UNESCO gives the following definition.

Intangible cultural heritage is the practices, expressions, knowledge and skills that communities, groups and sometimes individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage. Also called living cultural heritage, it is usually expressed in one of the following forms: oral traditions; performing arts; social practices, rituals and festive events; knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; and traditional craftsmanship (UNESCO, 2015).

This definition implies that intangible cultural heritage has to be recreated continuously and evolves as we adapt our traditions in response to our environment. To be kept alive, intangible cultural heritage must also be relevant to the community. In some cases such cultural traditions can belong to the national identity of a specific country, while in others they can form part of a country's culture or of regional culture, without necessarily being emblematic on a national level. Further features of intangible cultural heritage are its traditional, yet equally contemporary and living character; the necessity of being passed on from generation to generation in order to be kept alive; no requirement of exceptional material value; and the quality of being community-based or recognized as heritage of a community or a group that creates, maintains and transmits it.

### **The criteria for intangible cultural heritage**

Does reading aloud fulfill the criteria of intangible cultural heritage. Firstly, reading aloud is not only about children, and it is not possible to implement or recreate it digitally as it has to be performed live. While audiobooks are really fantastic, they provide a special kind of medium that is not a substitute or the same as live reading. Reading aloud relies on and creates a specific social situation: There is a physical closeness and emotional bond that develops as a parent reads to a child at bedtime. Think of the special form of attention given to a patient or an elderly person by a reading visitor, or the group spirit and enchantment

created by a teacher reading to pupils in class or around the toasty evening campfire. Every type of reading aloud has its own atmospheric charm that people share which reflects the place or the time of day, the acoustics of the room, the individuality of voice and body language. It is a unique performance. Works of world literature also have much to tell us about reading aloud. In the movie *The Reader* (2009), based on a novel by the German author Bernhard Schlink, the main character's key to literacy is reading aloud. It represents medicine that helps her to survive in prison and it has erotic quality too.

Reading aloud fulfills all the criteria of the UNESCO list of Intangible Cultural Heritage criteria. It has to be learned individually; passed on personally; cannot be preserved or reproduced digitally; is traditional, contemporary and living, all at the same time; is community-based; and it has a vibrant social aspect because it needs both a reader and a listener. Reading aloud is important in many aspects, and it plays a definite role in developmental psychology, first and second language acquisition, basic and advanced literacy, cultural education, nursing and elderly care. It is a transmitter, a medium for social integration and therefore, it is particularly important for a strong society in a world challenged by migration that needs to work on equal opportunity and participation.

Therefore, reading aloud is truly a cultural technique relevant in all phases of human existence and in all cultures. In cultures with a long tradition of writing, the function and effects of reading aloud are comparable to those of storytelling and oral poetry in cultures with a oral tradition.

### **Reading aloud and the UNESCO list**

There are already many initiatives to promote reading aloud, such as [readaloud.org](http://readaloud.org), founded in 2008, with its campaign *Read aloud 15 minutes*. Researchers are agreed that reading aloud is the single most important activity by which parents, grandparents and caregivers can foster early brain development, lifelong learning success, reading pleasure and reading skills. Unfortunately fewer and fewer children under the age of 5 are read to every day.

Libraries do a lot for literacy and reading and for reading aloud. In Germany there are very useful programs including courses for volunteers who read to children ("Lesepaten"). This program is truly a broad movement, but not well recognized in society. There is a special curriculum for these volunteers and it is even possible to achieve a certificate. However, without assistance there is a real risk that reading aloud will disappear, in both underprivileged families as well as in a well-educated, highly developed environment where digital devices are dominant: The fascination with the thrills of the digital age may be leading us to neglect the fundamental tradition of reading aloud. This trend concerns the first world as well as those countries that are developing very fast and entering the digital arena at a rapid pace. Reading aloud is an essential prerequisite for literacy development as a basic competence and literacy is a prerequisite for development.

### **Registration on the UNESCO list**

Registration can help to safeguard intangible cultural heritage, ensure respect for it, raise awareness of its importance, and to foster national and international cooperation and assistance in this field. Being on the list can also help to make advocacy easier and to encourage librarians and volunteers.

In the digital age many libraries have begun combining reading aloud with digital features, audiovisual materials and interactive elements. There are best practice examples of analogue-digital integration and those activities and toys are attractive for young people and IT-oriented young fathers, who are traditionally are not the most enthusiastic advocates of reading aloud. However, the integration of digital formats into reading aloud is not just a trick to attract this focus group, but can also be a very helpful transformation device to develop and improve our efforts for reading and literacy as librarians. To some extent reading aloud is being linked to the digital and the registration on the UNESCO list would offer an opportunity to promote the integration of reading and literacy with digital options.

### **The agenda in Germany**

In a bid to have reading aloud included in the UNESCO list, the two German initiators are concentrating on the *Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of humanity*, the longest list of three. It carries cultural “practices and expressions that help demonstrate the diversity of this heritage and raise awareness about its importance.” The other two lists are the *List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in need of urgent safeguarding* and the *Register of best safeguarding practice*. The term safeguarding does not mean protection or conservation in the usual sense, as that might lead to intangible cultural heritage becoming fixed or frozen. Rather, safeguarding means ensuring the viability of intangible cultural heritage, thereby ensuring its continuous re-creation and transmission. Safeguarding includes continuous re-creation and transmission, research, promotion and practice, as well as formal and non-formal education.

In Germany the second selection round has just started, but there is a long way to go.

- October 2015: proposals will have to be sent to one of the 16 federal governments.
- April 2016: each of the federal governments will hand over only four proposals to the convention of German Secretaries of Culture and Education.
- December 2016: The German UNESCO committee will review the proposals, and finally the German ministry of culture and media will decide which proposals Germany will formally submit for each of the three lists.
- 2017: Only two proposals will go to the UNESCO bureau for the general ICH register in Paris.

The German Library Association (DBV) and the Reading Foundation are currently preparing material for application; research papers from different perspectives; empirical evidence; supporting documents; and descriptions of projects that support reading aloud. In addition to the applications by individual countries, it is possible for several member nations to cooperate in the submission of a shared proposal. Nations working together is how falconry was added to the list. Falconry, a hunting tradition with a very long and illustrious history of more than

3,500 years, was supported by a coalition of twelve countries. Maybe that is an example that could serve to motivate and stimulate other national library associations to start campaigns in their countries to put reading aloud on the UNESCO list.

### **Conclusion**

Reading aloud is not only a local, regional and national cultural technique worth protecting, it is universal. It ought to be promoted as common cultural heritage on the UNESCO list of Intangible Cultural Heritage to ensure official recognition of its importance in the promotion of reading and the development of literacy worldwide.

### **References**

- Keller-Loibl, K. (2014). *Leseförderung in Öffentlichen Bibliotheken*, Berlin, München: de Gruyter Saur.
- Leonard, G. et al. (1987). *Read aloud programs for the elderly project: Instructional manual*. Seattle, WA: Seattle Public Library.
- Mazzoco, M. (1995). The magic of reading aloud. *Journal of Youth Services in Libraries*, 5, 312-314.
- Schramm, P. (2009). Storytelling and reading aloud: Teaching through the oral tradition. *Prism*, 1(1), 25–30.
- Stiftung Lesen. (2014). *Vorlesestudie 2014. Vorlesen macht familien stark*. Retrieved June 12, 2015 from <https://www.stiftunglesen.de/download.php?type=documentpdf&id=1357>
- UNESCO. (1992-2015). *World Heritage Centre: Glossary*. Retrieved June 12, 2015 from <http://whc.unesco.org/en/glossary/>
- UNESCO: (2003). *Convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage*. Retrieved June 12, 2015 from <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/convention>
- Werner, Klaus U. (2014). Das Vorlesen – eine bedrohte Kulturtechnik? In: *Kultur bildet. Beiträge zur kulturellen Bildung* (Beil. zu *Politik und Kultur*) 4 (2014). Retrieved June 12, 2015 from [http://www.kultur-bildet.de/sites/default/files/mediapool/dossier/pdf/werner\\_dbv\\_vorlesen\\_immaterielles\\_kulturerbe.pdf](http://www.kultur-bildet.de/sites/default/files/mediapool/dossier/pdf/werner_dbv_vorlesen_immaterielles_kulturerbe.pdf)