

The Library of Congress Literacy Awards, 2013-2017: Finalists and Best Practices

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Abstract:

Stories abound across countries and nationalities and have always been a way to teach young and old about country and culture. Stories can be historical, fictional and factual and they can now appear in multiple formats and delivery modes. They provide a means to teach and develop foundational literacy skills. Book awards, therefore, are an important way of promoting literacy across the globe and highlighting the work of past, current and upcoming authors. They also provide a vehicle for recognising best practices, innovation and creativity. This paper examines the Library of Congress literacy awards and their impact on literacy efforts by organizations around the world.

Keywords: Literacy Matters, book awards, reading.

Introduction

Since 2013, a generous five-year donation from David M. Rubenstein, co-founder of the Carlyle Group, has enabled the Library of Congress to honor top literacy efforts by organizations throughout the world. The awards also encourage innovative ways to address literacy issues, and disseminate best practices. According to David Rubenstein, who is also a major donor to the Library of Congress itself, “Literacy spurs innovation and creativity. Literacy is one of the basic tools for making progress in life and can open doors to many joys and wonders. I am pleased to support the work of groups that help people become literate and successfully convince those who can read to read more.”

The \$150,000 David M. Rubenstein Prize recognizes an outstanding and measurable contribution to increasing literacy levels by any organization, worldwide, that has demonstrated exceptional and sustained depth and breadth in its commitment to the advancement of literacy; the \$50,000 American Prize recognizes significant and measurable contributions to increasing literacy levels or the national awareness of the importance of literacy by an organization based in the United States; and the International Prize, also \$50,000, recognizes significant and measurable contributions to increasing literacy levels by an organization or national entity based outside of the United States. The first awards were selected and given in 2013, and have been presented annually since then.

To optimize the impact of these literacy awards, I have been analyzing the applications and selection process; some preliminary results follow.

Administration

John Y. Cole, Director for the Library of Congress Center for the Book, has chaired the Literacy Awards. The Librarian of Congress named a distinguished advisory board, representing several aspects of literacy including authors, literacy agencies, librarians, educators, governmental agencies, and political leaders. Dr. Cole and three members of the advisory board developed the following selection criteria to apply to all three prizes: innovation, research/best practice basis, replicability, measurable impact, and sustainability. Applicants submit a 750- word project summary and three letters of support; they can also list their website, which might provide more details.

Three members of the board serve as chairs to select each award, who select the semi-finalists (seven to ten) for each award collaboratively. The rest of the board is split into the three award groups to recommend the finalists. The Librarian of Congress makes the final choices. At the first two levels of screening, each reviewer completes a score sheet ranking applicants on each of the five selection criteria.

Not-for-profit non-governmental organizations submitted the majority of applications. Most programs have existed for about a generation: long enough to establish a solid record of achievement and stability, but young enough to incorporate recent literacy research and tools. In several cases, long-standing groups submitted applications that featured a specific initiative, such as a Year of Reading or a program that targeted recent immigrants. Almost all applicants mentioned partnerships, which broadened their audience and support base. The number of partners ranged from one to hundreds. No pattern emerged relative to the type of applicant, although in general the larger the applicant, the more partners were involved and the larger those entities. Not surprisingly, donations constituted the most common funding source.

Literacy efforts were aimed primarily at children. Teens were the second-most popular audience, and adults were the third most commonly mentioned audience. Illiteracy was the main need identified, and endeavors focused on specific issues or reasons for illiteracy, such as physical access, or results such as academic failure. Teaching and training constituted the main effort. Physical access by itself is not sufficient, although publishing and book donations were the second most popular efforts. Third in overall popularity was access to books, including the building of libraries and other literacy centers as well as providing innovative book delivery modes such as book backpacks, delivery by bicycle or pack animal, and book boxes.

Programs incorporated technology in several ways: mobile-based reading, web-based reading and supporting materials, publicity via blogs, video and virtual training, broadcast reading materials (i.e., sub-titled songs) and instruction, as well as physical and intellectual access to computers. In a few cases, online surveys were used to assess the effectiveness of the programs. The vast majority of programs pointed out the rise in reading skills and positive reading habits. Several programs also asserted that their participants improved academically. A few programs mentioned the affective domain in terms of impact: improved attitudes towards reading and greater self-confidence and self-esteem. In terms of literacy skills, the second most mentioned skill (much less frequency than reading) was writing. One of the benefits of writing is that the target audience became producers of ideas, not just consumers of ideas.

Most programs' target audiences were recipients of the resources and service rather than co-participants. In that respect, when communities contributed to the program's efforts, there seemed to be an increased sense of ownership and a better chance for sustained programs. The main community activity was instruction: explicit teaching, specific training, one-to-one tutoring and mentoring. Communities also planned and implemented activities and events such as storytelling, reading aloud, book clubs, book fairs, awards, advocacy campaigns and reading celebrations. Other community members wrote and published reading materials (both print and digital). Communities helped build and staff reading centers. People also donated books, or ordered and processed, or distributed reading materials. Still others did fund-raising or donated money themselves.

Impact assertions were usually based on surveys. Self-reporting was also done through interviews and focus groups. Observations, tests, and sample products were more objective methods of measuring impact, though done less frequently than self-reporting. In a few cases, outside evaluators were used to verify impact, although the assessment methods were seldom detailed. Assessment remains relatively unsophisticated in most cases, and training in assessment methods would be a worthy initiative.

Hallmarks of a Successful Application

The researcher compares those nominees who were selected as semi-finalists and those who were not so chosen. As a result, the following trends emerged in terms of the application itself and the selection criteria.

General writing qualities:

- Follow directions.
- Observe the word count limit. Take advantage of website links.
- Remember that the letters of recommendation do not have a strict word count limit.
- Keep on target and provide specifics to support your case.
- Overarching organizations are more compelling than one subset.
- Include information on all literacy-related projects
- Focus on the impact – improving people's lives. You might distribute a million books, but if people don't read those books, then the initiative is not very significant.
- Demonstrate broad and deep impact over time.
- Demonstrate growth and improvement over time.
- Demonstrate how the initiative sustains itself through stable funding, staffing, and other support.

Reliance on Research and Practice:

- Cite research and how it is specifically integrated (not pro forma)
- Show how project models theory and research
- Measure impact using research evaluation tools
- Use literacy researchers as consultants and external evaluators

Innovation:

- Unique, original, creative;
- Leverage emerging technology;
- Leverage existing resources in a new way; and/or
- Present a fresh approach to community building or partnerships

Sustainability:

- Show how initiative is self-sustaining: track record of stable budget and capacity to have a solid base of operations.
- Show that initiative is institutionalized (not dependent on one person).
- Multiple funding sources
- Include local “buy-in” and participation because the project meets community needs.

Measurable Impact:

- Anecdotes can be compelling, but impact must be measurable.
- Literacy outcomes: improved reading (and writing) competence, leading to jobs, academic success, better health, better decisions, improved community status.
- Sample measures of individual improved literacy: reading and writing scores, increased vocabulary, writing sample work, participation and success in reading and writing competitions, fluency of reading aloud, minutes read, academic courses and grades, less recidivism, reading self-confidence, becoming literacy trainers
- Sample measures of community improved literacy: literacy-related legislation, improved literacy curriculum, school reform, publications by target audience, new libraries to support increased literacy demands, more literate employees, improved reading culture, book clubs
- Provide baseline data and data collected after the initiative has been implemented to demonstrate impact.

In general, semi-finalists and winners demonstrated sound planning and implementation with a clear focus and sustainable support. The majority of programs had a solid foundation and long-term reputation, which enabled them to garner stable partners and funding. Most had strong local support and volunteer engagement, even for national initiatives. Most of these programs demonstrated creativity or resourcefulness, such as teaching reading in public spaces where women congregated or using social media to motivate young people to write and share their work. Most of the semi-finalists and winners provided support materials, frequently online, to enable target audiences and other groups to implement the programs independently; this practice also fostered adaptation by other entities, which further broadened the programs’ impact.

Literacy Research and Best Practices

To optimize literacy efforts, it makes sense to conduct a literature review to ascertain research-based and other successful practices, and then plan literacy programs to match the needs and norms of the target audience. Nevertheless, fewer than half of applicants

mentioned such preliminary research efforts. In culling the applications, the researcher identified the most important research-based factors:

- Home-based early literacy (including a rich print environment, shared reading, and literacy-based interaction between parents and children)
- Physical access to a wide variety of reading materials from which the reader can choose
- Explicit instruction
- Authentic shared reading experiences

Broadening the Impact

The Library of Congress Literacy Awards Program, administered by the Center for the Book, seeks to optimize the impact of these awards and the efforts of the winners. Outreach should touch the library and literacy fields, as well as extend to other field such as health and public policy. To this end, several measures have been taken. The Library of Congress announces the winners at their annual National Book Festival, holds celebrations for the winners and best practice honorees, creates best practices publications in print and digital formats, and produces videotaped interviews with the winners to be broadcast widely. The Literacy Awards Program has also cosponsored symposia on the connections between literacy and poetry, and literacy and health.

An increased focus on outreach has led to a Literacy Awards presence at both national and international conferences in an effort to widen program recognition and create partnerships with other groups. For instance, the Literacy Awards Program has formed a partnership with UNESCO's Institute for Lifelong Learning, which held an international literacy conference in 2016. Another partnership, with USAID's Grand Challenge for All Children Reading, led to a co-hosted summit during which literacy and education promoters discussed the possibility of and need for a global digital repository for early-grade reading materials.

Several board members have participated in this outreach by distributing materials at conferences and meetings and by recommending venues for participation to John Cole and his staff. Winners and honorees have celebrated their achievements on their websites and with public events. A few winners have hosted site visits, which have been well received, and reinforced the long-distance partnership with the Library.

Conclusions

David M. Rubenstein's donation has served as a powerful catalyst to bring attention to the issues of literacy promotion, recognize significant literacy programs, and provide suggestions for other groups to address these literacy needs. A wide range of literacy programs have been nominated, in no small thanks to the publicity of the Library of Congress and its advisory panel. While the number of applications tended to be about one hundred, which reflects a small percentage of the thousands of literacy efforts occurring worldwide, the resultant pool showcased a good variety of substantive programs so that the ultimate prizes honor worthy recipients whose work could be adapted by myriad literacy groups. Each year's honoree and winner list provides a concrete standards "bar" that helps the next year's applicants determine their worthiness and guide their documentation for the prizes.

Each year's efforts by the Library of Congress and the advisory panel has also resulted in clearer expectations and refined selection process. In recognition of the administrative work involved in running the program, a full time staffer was added in 2013. More publicity, in more formats, has been added to increase the awards' presence and potential impact. The

advisory panel has discussed adding “seed” awards for new, innovative programs; they are also considering identifying specific populations or themes that merit strategic attention, such as individuals with special needs or rural residents.

As a result of the data analysis, the Literacy Awards program can provide specific tips and research-based best practices that can improve existing literacy efforts and jumpstart new initiatives. Just as literacy programs need to be strategic, so too does the Library of Congress Literacy Awards Program need to be strategic in order to take full advantage of its own accomplishments and ensure its continued growth and contribution to society. During the final year of its initial five-year funding opportunity, it plans to produce a book about the awards—including lessons learned and institutions inspired. All parties involved hope the results will merit future support.