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READING SOURCES AND READING SPACES IN HONDURAS

Denice Adkins, University of Missouri (adkinsde@missouri.edu)

Abstract

Though literacy is often presented as a universal and monolithic achievement, it is in fact context-dependent, and largely dependent upon the kinds of texts available in a particular community. This paper presents an observer's study of reading in Honduras, focusing particularly on the availability of reading materials and spaces dedicated to reading and literacy practices. Environments studied included bookstores, libraries, schools, and Internet cafes, as well as streets and shops. Reading books was observed to be relatively uncommon and primarily done in an educational context. Other reading materials, including newspapers, magazines, and text messages, were far more commonly used and far better integrated into the Honduran society. My observations suggest that libraries could play an important supporting role in Honduras' efforts to establish universal literacy.

Keywords

Honduras, Central America, reading, literacy, libraries

Introduction

Access to books and reading material is crucial to developing literacy. Reading researcher Stephen D. Krashen writes, “when books are readily available, when the print environment is enriched, more reading is done” (2004, p. 57). Evidence suggests this is true in international settings as well. Warwick B. Elley suggests that increased access to books increases first- and second-language literacy rates in developing countries as well (2000).

National literacy rates are highly correlated with levels of development, and there is “strong association between the extent of human development (specifically economic, education, and health) within a developing country and reading achievement levels as measured by literacy rate” (Greaney, 1996, p. 27). However, literacy cannot be proven to be responsible for development. Social historian Harvey J. Graff refers to this as the “literacy myth,” the idea that reading in itself leads to the betterment of individuals and society, and that the correlation of literacy and progress is an artifact of social inequality (Graff, 1979). Educational scholar Brian V. Street contrasts an “autonomous” model of literacy that is associated with development to an “ideological” model “inextricably linked to cultural and power structures in a given society” (1995, p. 29, 161). David Barton and Mary Hamilton (1998) used ethnographic methods to identify “vernacular

literacies,” those literacy practices that are not promoted and enforced by schools, but that are used by individuals and communities for their own ends.

If literacy cannot be understood outside of a cultural context, then people’s uses of literacy is necessarily bound to their ability to access literacy materials (books and other print-based materials) and their cultural understanding of that access (whether ‘anyone’ can access materials or if they are reserved for the use of a select few). As providers of materials and cultural institutions, Honduran libraries can contribute to the development of literacy within an appropriate cultural context. This paper takes an ethnographic look at literacy in the Honduran context, specifically examining the availability of reading materials and reading spaces in Honduras.

The Honduran Context

Honduras is the largest country in Central America, and is administratively divided into 18 *departamentos* (departments). The capitol city, Tegucigalpa, is in a hilly area and enjoys a mild climate year-round. The industrial capital city, San Pedro Sula, is located in a geographic basin, with a hot and sticky climate. Nonetheless, several U.S. manufacturers have their *maquilas*, or factories, here. Service industries are another major component of the Honduran economy, and tourism is rising in importance. Outside urban areas, farming and agriculture are the main sources of employment. Multinational corporations such as Dole Fruits grow many of their products in Honduras. Another major source of income for Honduras are the remittances sent back home by Hondurans working abroad in the United States or other countries. In 2007, remittances totaled \$2.6

billion dollars (CIA, 2009), though this number will certainly be reduced by the economic crisis of 2008-2009.

Most Honduran cities and towns are arranged in a traditional style, with the town being centered around a *parque central* (central park), with a cathedral on one side and city hall on the other. The area often houses shops, restaurants, offices, or street markets. On evenings and weekends, the *parque central* fills with people to create a vibrant public space which hosts a variety of transactions. The picture I paint here is an idealized one which overlooks struggles for access to space. In Tegucigalpa, government officials and market vendors struggled for access to downtown space. Vendors wanted to put up stalls and sell their goods, while the government was trying to maintain open and communal space, which was often used to celebrate national heritage events or community celebrations.

One of the largest issues facing Honduras is poverty. Hondurans' per capita income is \$1700 U.S. (World Bank, 2009e). There is a sharp divide between rich and poor Hondurans, though, which would suggest that most people's incomes are much lower than this. Only three days after I left Honduras, one of the newspapers revealed that the number of Hondurans living in poverty had increased to 73.4% of the population (La Prensa, 2008). Despite high rates of unemployment, most of the Hondurans I spoke to held down at least two jobs, even the university students. This poverty manifested itself also in the condition of public schools and hospitals.

Article 171 of the Honduran constitution makes the state responsible for primary education (Georgetown, 2005). Education is free and compulsory from ages 7-14, with six years of primary school and up to five years of secondary school, though most students leave school after 9th grade. In Honduras, 10th and 11th grades are college preparatory, and provide students with a *bachillero* degree. The standard four-year undergraduate degree is the *bachillerato*, with the *licenciatura* (license) added for professional degree work.

The educational system in Honduras varies widely in rural and urban areas. Rural and urban students attend primary school at comparable rates, but rural students leave education at much higher rates after about age 13 (World Bank 2009b). In my observations, rural schools tended to be less well-funded than urban schools, with older buildings and materials. The World Bank says that roughly 60 percent of Hondurans over 15 have completed primary school, and another 30 percent have completed secondary school (World Bank, 2009a). Increases in literacy and education statistics and my own observations indicate that the younger generation of Hondurans is much better educated than their parents and grandparents, though they may have lost skills and family tradition in the acquisition of that education.

The Honduran constitution declares that the eradication of illiteracy is the primary task of the State, and that Honduran citizens have a duty to cooperate with the government in achieving that aim (Georgetown, 2005). Per the 2009 *CIA World Factbook*, Honduras has an 80% literacy rate (Central Intelligence Agency, 2009). If consistent literacy measures

were used to evaluate both periods, a much grimmer picture existed only 15 years ago, with more than 40% illiteracy (Merrill, 1995), while the World Bank reports 88% literacy rates for youth (aged 15-24) in 2001 (World Bank, 2009d). However, countries and international agencies often use different approaches to measuring literacy, including completion of a certain grade level, testing, or self-assessment (Greaney, 1996, p. 6), which may encourage us to take this measure with a grain of salt. Brian Street (1995, p. 17) further notes that literacy statistics are used as “counters in a political game over resources: if campaigners can inflate the figures then the public will be shocked and funds will be forthcoming from embarrassed governments.”

Method

I spent eight months of 2008 in Honduras as a Fulbright Scholar. During that time, I observed literacy behaviors and literacy products, observed schools, interviewed university students about their use of library resources and books, and engaged in numerous discussions with Honduran librarians, booksellers, and shopkeepers about literacy. The Fulbright award was based on work with the university in establishing a program of library science education, therefore I had numerous opportunities to meet with librarians and ask people about whether or how they read.

Extended observations took place in my “home” city of Tegucigalpa (the capitol city), and multiple trips to San Pedro Sula (the industrial capital). Additionally, I made several one-time trips to smaller cities, rural areas, and tourist attractions. Facilities I observed included bookstores, newsstands, shopping malls, public squares, high-street shopping

neighborhoods, markets, restaurants and cafes, Internet cybercafés, tourist attractions, universities, bus stops, pharmacies, libraries, and museums. I kept an extensive journal of these observations.

Ten formal interviews took place with students at the university. I solicited students for interviews using posters placed in the central university plaza, and paid students a token amount (50 Lempiras, approximately USD\$2.50) for their time. Informal conversations happened at bookstores and other shops, with taxi drivers, at librarians' meetings, and a variety of other locations. Because of the length of my stay in Honduras, I did not keep a record of every conversation, though I did make notes from those conversations that were particularly meaningful and those conversations I began with the explicit intention of learning more about reading.

Standpoint and Limitations

While I was in Honduras, I was almost completely immersed in middle-class culture. Because I was situated at a university in the capitol city, I had the opportunity to see many people involved in literacy-related activities. There are probably many different types of activities to observe in either higher-class political cultures or lower-class working and farming classes. Additionally, the vast majority of my observations and interviews took place in urban areas. Visits to rural areas hinted at different uses for literacy, but I can only conjecture about the differences in literacy use between rural and urban areas.

My experiences in Honduras were framed through my American experience. Obviously, it was easy for me to see differences between American and Honduran cultural experience, and it was also easy to note actions that would be called “literacy” in the U.S. It is eminently possible that I missed some of the subtleties of Honduran literacy use.

I was obviously, visibly, not Honduran, so it is possible that my informants skewed their discussions to what they thought would be more acceptable to a foreigner’s ear.

Additionally, Spanish is my second language, and there is always the possibility that I misunderstood or did not fully interpret what my informants were saying to me. The observations I report below are my own, limited by my abilities and perceptions. While my Honduran colleagues have very generously provided their time and knowledge to assist me with this project, they may well have different opinions and interpretations than I do.

The Status of Reading

In a country like Honduras, ideas of reading seem to be influenced at least somewhat by the norms of the United States and other developed countries. Much has been written in the United States and the United Kingdom about the perceptions of reading. It tends to be held up as a ‘good’ thing, and reports connect reading with the betterment of society. The situation in Honduras is remarkably similar. Most of the people I spoke to had positive attitudes toward reading. They also seemed almost universally to lament that Hondurans did not read “as much as they should.” Many times I was told that Honduras did not have

a “reading culture.” The university students generally associated reading with education, and referred to the good information that was available in books.

The activity of reading seemed not to count as “reading” per se, unless the material being read was a book. Several people I spoke to said they did not read, but then went on to say that they read newspapers and magazines, and used the Internet to visit web sites. Taxis and coffee shops often had newspapers available for customers to read. Internet cafes were omnipresent and frequently crowded. Services were advertised via text messages sent to cell phones, and I saw several university students text-messaging their friends when they weren’t already speaking on the phone to them.

Given that older Hondurans had less access to schooling and fewer formal opportunities to read books, official literacy practices such as book reading are respected, but viewed as alien to the common culture. More common are “home literacies” such as reading newspapers and discussing that news with peers. It remains to be seen whether this trend is maintained with the increased education levels of younger Hondurans.

Reading Materials

While in Honduras, I found a variety of reading materials in a variety of places. Below I have articulated some of the main categories of materials I found.

Books

Books published in Spain, Mexico, Argentina, and other Latin American countries presented a very polished appearance, with glossy covers, heavy paper, multicolor illustrations, and a generally clear typeface. I saw several children's picture books that would not have looked out of place in a U.S. public library. Additionally, bookstores and the bookmobile made available a Spanish-language series of graded readers, published by Ediciones S|M in Spain and printed in countries throughout Latin America.

The books that are published in Honduras typically focus on Honduran or regional history, folklore, politics, or social issues. Works for children or teens were not common, and those works that I could find were often lesson books designed for students to use at home or books that were overtly educational in nature. These titles are less uniform in their physical appearance than the books coming from larger countries, and call to mind American librarians' early complaints that books purchased from Latin America did not adhere to "normal selection criteria" (Dyer & Robertson-Kozan, 1983, p. 29). Honduran presses provided books that were sturdy enough for individual use, but the binding was not strong enough to hold up to heavy use, and the paper used was not the heavy, glossy paper used by larger publishers.

I found books in many of the places one would expect to find books: libraries of course had book stocks, as did school classrooms, bookstores, school supply stores, churches, and to a lesser extent, grocery and discount stores. The kinds of books available at the grocery store were oriented toward adults, including self-help, religion, and gift books. At the discount stores, children's books were more common. Among the books available

were many fairy and folk tales which had fallen out of copyright, such as Cenicienta (Cinderella) and Blanca Nieves (Snow White). These were available in paperback, with color illustrations on low-quality paper, generally bound with nothing more than a staple and a cardstock cover. These books were strong favorites among younger children. At one discount store I visited, there were literally hundreds of these books available.

Another type of book, in markedly lesser supply, was the lesson book. These books had color covers, with black-and-white lessons and worksheets inside. They were locally published and covered a variety of elementary (1st through 9th) grade levels, on subjects including math, Spanish grammar, orthography, history, and science.

Bookstores were divided into two notable types. Popular bookstores were generally located in malls and shopping centers, whereas education-oriented bookstores were auspiciously located on Avenida Cervantes in Tegucigalpa's city center, near the Biblioteca Nacional de Honduras (the national library, abbreviated BINAH). The education-oriented bookstores were crowded with books, many of them local Honduran publications, and almost all of them oriented toward readers at a post-secondary level. Books were generally shelved spine-out, on shelves often ranging from floor to ceiling, arranged on and under tables, and anywhere space was available. While these bookstores were privately owned, their clientele were students and faculty from local universities. This was reflected in their bookstock: philosophy, the development of the Spanish language, studies of the indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica, political histories of Central America, drama and folklore, including translations of Shakespeare, Nietzsche, Marx, and others.

Popular bookstores, on the other hand, used more open space and decorative display to sell their books. Books were often shelved face-out, and popular or attractive books were displayed at eye-level to attract the buyer's attention. These books were obviously more popular in orientation, featuring religion, self-help, cooking, history, and finely-illustrated coffee table books. Popular bookstores also had specific children's sections featuring picture books, informational books, and readers, as well as “noise-making” books and posted warnings to parents to control their children in the store. Additionally, these popular bookstores sold novels – mystery, horror, suspense, and classic literature from international authors. Many of the works were translations, mostly from English but also from French and German. Popular bookstores also featured small English-language sections, mostly composed of popular paperback genre novels.

Magazines

Popular bookstores had a large number of magazines available. However, I also came across another store, called *La Casa de la Revista* or “House of the Magazine,” which sold magazines and periodicals exclusively. The typical selection of magazines included several focusing on home, crafts, parenting, exercise, health, and cooking, along with a larger number focused on popular celebrities, television shows, movies, and the music industry. Several of the magazines available were Spanish translations of English-language magazines such as National Geographic, Cosmopolitan, or People. Some magazines were imported from other Spanish-speaking countries, including a magazine from Spain called *Historia*, which focused almost entirely on European history. I found it

fascinating, though perhaps not entirely relevant to a Central American population. In testament either to its popularity or a short-sighted decision of store management, it was sold at my local supermarket along with several other magazines.

Newspapers

While the magazines I saw came from outside Honduras, the newspapers came exclusively from Honduras, and those newspapers have strong readership. One student told me, “I buy newspapers every day, if I can afford them.” In contrast to books and magazines, newspapers were far more accessible and far more affordable. Traditional newsstands could be found on many street corners, and newspapers were available for sale at the local *pulperias* (convenience stores) as well. The city center near the *parque central* (central park/plaza area) and the government offices was filled with newsstands, and those stands sold not only newspapers but comic books too, along with candy and bottles of water.

There were four major daily papers, *La Prensa*, *El Tiempo*, *El Heraldo*, and *La Tribuna*. Each of these papers reported the major news of the day, but each had its own particular focus. *La Prensa* and *El Tiempo* were published in San Pedro Sula, while *El Heraldo* and *La Tribuna* were published in Tegucigalpa, so they tended to publish crime and feature stories relevant to the local population. However, political news was a strong feature of all papers. During my stay, I noticed that *La Prensa* tended to be less favorable and *El Heraldo* more favorable to the Honduran president in power at that time. *La Tribuna* tended to report more of the news from Tegucigalpa than did *El Heraldo*, which seemed

more focused on national news. Additional news magazine formats were devoted to religion or sports, with a considerable emphasis on soccer.

Reading Spaces

Culture constrains both what kinds of materials are available for reading and the places where those materials can be read. One can read almost any type of material in private, but in public there are certain materials that are not read, and certain places where reading is deliberately discouraged or made more difficult because of environmental factors.

Susan B. Neuman and Donna Celano (2001) made an ecological study of four U.S. neighborhoods, looking at children's access to print and reading. They speculated that “regular, routine, and habitual uses of reading in public might support the view that reading is important.” When they asked people where might be a good place to read, their informants recommended “laundromats, bookstores, pizza parlors, bus stops, diners, coffee shops, and fast-food restaurants” (p. 14). However, they found that in some of these places, reading was made difficult due to uncomfortable or nonexistent seating, inappropriate lighting, lack of reading materials, and hostility to loiterers (p. 19). Similar situations were evident in Honduras.

Academic Spaces

Honduras has two major public universities, the Autonomous University of Honduras (*Universidad Autonoma Nacional de Honduras*, abbreviated UNAH) and the National Pedagogical University (*Universidad Pedagógica Nacional Francisco Morazán*, or UPNFM), and these two universities each have multiple campuses in major Honduran

cities. In addition, there are many private universities, including the Central American Technological University (*Universidad Tecnológica Centroamericana*, or UNITEC) and the Panamerican Agricultural School (*Escuela Agrícola Panamericana*, referred to colloquially as “Zamorano”). Of the campuses I visited, all had libraries and most had spaces that could be appropriated for reading.

The library at UNAH had recently moved to be under the division of Technological Development in the University's organizational hierarchy. The library made a computer lab available, along with information posted about how to use search engines, and areas of campus surrounding the library had wireless Internet accessibility. Students congregated in this area, most socializing but some reading books and others bent over their computers. This area seemed more conducive to group work and expansive exchanges of information. The UNAH library stood in contrast to this area, with signage indicating that the library was a zone of silence and discipline, with group conversation, yelling, games, and smoking forbidden. Most of the sections of the library had closed stacks, so browsing and book selection was limited. Nevertheless, the library's tables and chairs were full of students who were bent over books and notebooks.

The campus of my host university, the UPNFM, was quite a bit smaller than UNAH, and few outside spaces had been claimed for reading purposes. Classroom environments were fairly sterile, and not often used for reading outside of class. However, university librarian Nítida Carranza had recently decided to convert the library to open stacks. Tables in the first floor reference area, located conveniently close to the air conditioning

unit, were occupied almost constantly during school hours. The second floor browsing collection was unfortunately not air conditioned, but had a row of seats positioned in front of a wide bank of windows which often attracted students.

Reading at School

Unsurprisingly, my exploration of Honduran schools revealed that a great deal of reading goes on in the school environment. A project initiated by my host university and the Rotary Club provided bookmobile service to impoverished urban schools to provide students with leisure reading. The bookmobile visited five to six schools on a rotating basis, for visits of three to four hours each. The bookmobile driver was a university library employee, but the bookmobile staffers were undergraduate students trained as Reading Promoters. They used reading techniques such as drawing, writing, and dramatization to encourage students to read. After conducting a formal reading lesson, the Reading Promoters helped children choose books to read from the bookmobile, and children had up to an hour to read those books if they wanted to. Due to economic restraints, it was not possible to let the children check out the books.

I visited a few schools with the Reading Promoters, and was able to observe classrooms and libraries at the schools. In general, public schools were poorly funded, and their libraries and classrooms were equally poorly funded. Classroom spaces were reserved for school-related activities, which included but were not limited to reading. The school libraries I saw had materials available in open shelving, but those materials were often dated. Like academic libraries, school libraries were organized around tables and chairs

where students could sit and read. Urban schoolyards were either plain dirt or covered by concrete. One or two children hung at the edges of the schoolyards to read, but in general, these areas were reserved for physical and social activities and somewhat inhospitable for readers.

While public schools were poorly funded, private schools were able to rely on student fees and were able to offer more reading materials, information technologies, and spaces for reading. The Mayan School had a computer lab, a relatively well-stocked library, and a space for storytelling and programming. As it was somewhat removed from the city center, it had a spacious campus that offered several benches and seats where students could read during lunches and breaks. The Dowal School, an English-Spanish bilingual school in the midst of the city, had less space but modern computer technology and an academic-intensive program. When I visited, many students in the school's courtyard area were reading or having conversations about and around reading. I was unable to tell if this was leisure reading or conversations about assigned reading for school.

Public Libraries

Public libraries in Honduras take a variety of forms. The national library, BINAH, is open to the public, and much of the activity of Honduran public libraries is coordinated through BINAH. Public libraries have been established in all 18 departments of Honduras. Additionally, the Riecken Foundation has established community libraries throughout Honduras. Museums have reading rooms where patrons can access relevant

historical materials, and government agencies and businesses frequently have centros de documentacion for public consultation.

Closed stacks are the norm for adult collections. As a result, the public image of most libraries and information agencies is that of the reading room, with tables, chairs, and signs exhorting silence. Patrons gain access to the collections via card catalogs, or occasionally through online catalogs, and library staff work as intermediaries between the patron and the collection. Despite the lack of direct access to the collection, patrons were often evident at the national library and at museums. A staff member at the Museum of Anthropology and History (*Museo de Antropología e Historia*) mentioned that secondary school classes attended to use historical resources for their reports.

In addition to the reading rooms of public libraries and museums, *centros de documentación* (documentation centers) are attached to many government agencies. These centers were open to the public, but only during traditional business hours, and their collections were limited in scope and attracted few members of the general public. Documentation centers at the *Centro de Estudios de la Mujer de Honduras* (Center for Honduran Women's Studies) and the *Instituto Hondureño de Turismo* (Honduran Tourism Institute) were involved in selective dissemination of information projects for reporters and government officials.

Children's Collections

BINAH and some public libraries had opened their children's collections for browsing and worked to create a more child-centered environment. BINAH's children's room had mobiles hanging from the ceiling, colorful shelves, cubbies with stuffed animals, and child-sized desks. Tegucigalpa's Biblioteca de la Municipalidad was located in the city hall, a few blocks away from BINAH. The children's room featured colorful painted chairs and tables, decorations on the wall, and a puppet theatre. Shelves with end pieces painted to look like elephants held colorful displays of picture books grouped by reading level. The children's librarian, Sagrario Montoya, mentioned conducting story time programs with class groups and working with them on craft projects. However, the downtown location of this library meant that access to this library was limited.

The Riecken Foundation works to establish community-supported public libraries in rural Honduras and Guatemala. Established by American venture capitalist Allen Andersson, who served in the Peace Corps in Honduras, these public libraries have open stacks, comfortable chairs, tables, and computer labs with Internet access. When I visited the Flor del Saber (Flower of Knowledge) library in Flor del Campo, Tegucigalpa, I was struck by how busy it was. Teenagers crowded the computer area, surfing the Web and working on homework. The computer technician was a man in his early 20s, who conducted Internet workshops and supervised the teenagers to make sure they were not accessing pornography or having trouble finding results. The children's area had a lively selection of books, child-sized tables, and toys. Nearby, a reading nook with two armchairs allowed for a small degree of privacy and comfort for young adults. The book collection contained a few thousand works, loosely organized by Universal Decimal

Classification, on meter-high shelves. Children were involved in reading and writing at the tables, often seeking the assistance or approval of the librarian. She said the children affectionately called her “Abuela,” or “grandmother.”

Community Reading Spaces

Spaces like libraries and schools are often specifically designed to encourage reading. Other spaces are not designed for reading, but are appropriated and used for reading. In Honduras, two spaces in which I particularly noticed reading behaviors were the *parque central* in the center of Tegucigalpa and coffee shops across the country.

The *parque central* became an impromptu reading space for some people. Men dressed in business attire occasionally frequented the *parque central* or downtown restaurants, reading newspapers while they ate or smoked cigarettes. Children with their parents purchased comics from newsstands on several occasions, but I never saw children reading in the *parque central*. It was more common to see people involved in conversations with the proprietors of those newsstands, discussing current events and politics.

Coffee shops also seemed to become impromptu reading spaces. The Espresso Americano chain of coffee shops had a stand of newsletters available that shared jokes and wry observations. With multiple Espresso Americano facilities throughout the country, there was naturally some difference in the various locations I observed. Most locations were not used for reading, though people could often be seen reading

newspapers. Another coffee shop located in a shopping mall I frequented had a magazine stand available for customers. I did see a few people reading those magazines, though more were working on laptop computers. Rather than being appropriated by readers, this shop seemed to have been appropriated by businesspeople.

New Literacies in Honduras

With the advent of mobile ICTs such as cell phones, developing countries have in some ways been able to “leapfrog” over expensive intermediate phases of implementing information technologies. Developing countries did not have access to the previous generation of large, expensive computer technology requiring significant infrastructural support and relying mainly on text-based interfaces. However, the development of affordable mobile and wireless technologies allows developing countries to participate in the global information infrastructure on a similar level as developed countries. Because these technologies are more content-rich, with audio and imagery, the use of these technologies has implications for the act of reading.

Cybercafes

Cybercafes are available all over Honduras. Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula had hundreds of such institutions, ranging in size from a handful of computers in a private residence to fifty computers in an air-conditioned shopping mall storefront. I found cybercafés in every small town and rural area I visited. Cybercafes provide communal (yet profit-based) access to infrastructure-heavy technology like personal computers, printers, scanners, and so forth.

The cybercafé I visited most often was in a shopping center across from the university, and predictably, most of its clients came from the university. The clientele was predominantly young and male; however, while women did not predominate, there was nonetheless a significant number of them every time I visited or walked by the café.

This particular cybercafé had about 30 computers in a labyrinthine arrangement to maximize space. Because of this, I was able to observe some of the user activity that patrons were engaged in, and the results were not terribly surprising. Many of them were using chat and instant messaging packages, watching videos, downloading music, visiting news web sites or social sites such as Hi5. (Hi5 seems to be much more popular in Latin American countries than MySpace or Facebook.) However, besides merely providing access to the Internet, the cybercafé also functioned as a *de facto* computer lab for the university. I saw people composing papers for class, making PowerPoint slide presentations, editing photos and videos. The cybercafé offered a more relaxed environment with a greater variety of software than the university computer labs, but no access to university resources. Even on campus, students did not have complete access to bibliographic databases, which were only available in the library's computer lab.

Cell Phones

Cell phones are affordable, portable, and useful, and as such, they have penetrated deeply into Hondurans' lives. In urban and rural areas alike, it seemed like almost everyone had a cell phone. The two major companies, Claro and Tigo, advertised across the country,

from billboards and newspaper ads to logos painted on cliff walls. These painted advertisements added to the print environment in rural areas and along the highways, with more elaborate advertisements in urban shopping areas.

There were some “plans” available where callers would receive a set number of minutes per month in exchange for a flat fee. However, most people whom I asked used the companies' pay-as-you-go programs. Cards with airtime were available for purchase at every *pulperia* (corner store), pharmacy, gas station, grocery store, and so on. Most of these stores had large promotional materials provided by the cell phone companies, which indicated that they did offer cards.

Phone quality ranged from cheap devices that did little more than calling, to very expensive phones. Generally even the most basic phone provided text messaging service. At the time I was in Honduras, I did not see smartphones (web-enabled cell phones with personal digital assistant features), and to my knowledge, neither of the cell phone providers were offering packages that included Internet access.

Conclusion

Honduras currently ranks 99th out of 134 countries on the World Bank's Knowledge Economy Index (World Bank, 2009g). The World Bank estimated that in 2006, there were 320 mobile phone owners out of every thousand people, in sharp contrast to the 20 computers per 1000 people and the 50 Internet users out of every 1000 people (World Bank, 2009c). In the words of one of my informants, “Honduras does not have a reading

culture.” Reading is considered a foreign behavior, and one done exclusively with books. For libraries in Honduras, this might imply that their jobs are larger than merely providing books and spaces to read, but rather, changing a national mindset.

Though Honduras does not have a reading culture, it does have a social culture, a culture of exchange and interaction. Social gathering space is provided through the existence of the *parque central* in almost every town. Commercial enterprises provide access to computers and technologies in the urban areas, and also in some rural areas. These offerings are limited by ability to pay, and are not available to all Hondurans equally. However, they are widely visible. There is a great respect for learning and for the study of national history and development.

Hondurans practice and respect reading, but they do not view themselves as readers and they have a limited supply of books available to them. Much of the difficulty in creating a reading culture can be put down to an economy still in development. Books are extremely expensive. For instance, I paid the U.S. equivalent of \$15 for a translated Agatha Christie novel in paperback. Translated into those terms, the Honduran per capita income is 113 paperback mystery novels. Given the extreme expense of books and the relatively low levels of funding of most Honduran libraries, librarians are justifiably concerned about lending books. Where available, computer technology can be used to overcome this barrier. Many resources are available online for no further cost than the existing investment in hardware and software. These resources include news from Honduras and

abroad, children's reading materials, and historical resources available from Honduran and other Iberoamerican libraries.

Per the Honduran constitution, libraries are heavily invested in maintaining Honduran culture. The Honduran government supports libraries as a means of educating the Honduran population, and also to preserve works by Honduran authors and authors of other nationalities who have made contributions to the Honduran culture. This is an important element, and one that helps Honduran libraries define their missions and purposes. However, this might result in libraries being seen as resources for learned Hondurans only. Instead, Honduran libraries might consider focusing some resources on improving people's material condition, by providing "Information and Referral" type services. Urban libraries could work to gather community information such as where jobs are available, seeking legal aid, and seeking grants. More rural libraries could provide social gathering spaces where people can talk about common concerns like pollution and water rights. Riecken libraries are already creating this kind of culture, though they are doing it with teenagers rather than adults.

Another possibility for Honduran libraries is working to create a reading culture in Honduras. Libraries can work with schools to develop new readers with new attitudes toward books, as the National Pedagogical University is doing with its *Biblioteca Móvil* project. When children are exposed to books, they understand book-reading as more than just an information-gathering activity. Libraries can also work with other Honduran agencies to celebrate authors and reading. The national library, perhaps in combination

with another agency, could hold reading-oriented celebrations in the *parque central*, thereby making reading a visible public behavior.

Knuth, Perry, and Duces (1996, p. 175) wrote, “Western library models have developed over time and through adaptive processes in support of gradually industrializing, literate, and eventually information-based societies. Libraries were established on the assumption that a ‘reading population’ existed.” For libraries in developing countries, they suggest that “alternative models to traditional public libraries” would be more effective in bringing literacy to the population (p. 176). Their alternative models include mobile libraries, rotating collections, village reading corners, and community-based programming. Solutions of this nature may be more effective for Honduran libraries than following a traditional Western library model.

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