

THE POWER OF WORDS: PROMOTING CIVIC LITERACY THROUGH WORDS

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Abstract:

Since 2003, there has been an emerging cultural phenomenon in the United States, entitled “The Power of Words”, which acknowledges and supports the impact of the spoken, written and sung words to encourage personal and communal changes. Emphasizing the core values of personal development and community building, “The Power of Words” is an appropriate tool to initiate change in the community and the greater society through language and arts. This paper firstly discusses the notion of Transformative Language Arts which is the theoretical framework of “The Power of Words”. Secondly, it examines the concept of civic literacy and its relationship with library. Thirdly, it reviews a literary movement, which is also called “The Power of Words”, launched locally at The Chinese University of Hong Kong in September 2012. Two major language arts activities of this project, namely “Blackboard/Glass Wall Poems” and “A Day at CUHK in the 21st Century”, are discussed in greater detail

Keywords: The Power of Words; Transformative Language Arts; Civic Literacy; The Chinese University of Hong Kong

1.0 Introduction

Since 2003, there has been an emerging cultural phenomenon in the United States, entitled “The Power of Words”, which acknowledges and supports the impact of the spoken, written and sung words to encourage personal and communal changes. Firstly, the author examines the theoretical framework and the core values of “The Power of Words” in order to see how this cultural movement is able to initiate change in the community and the greater society through language arts. Secondly, the author reviews the notion of civic literacy and the role of library in promoting civic literacy to library users. Finally, the author discusses a literary movement, which is called “The Power of Words”, launched locally at The Chinese University of Hong Kong in September 2012.

2.0 The Power of Words: Transformative Language Arts

The notion of Transformative Language Arts (TLA) was founded by Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg, a poet, writer and professor at Goddard College in Vermont in the United States. She has actively been participating in projects and initiatives that make use of language arts to enhance personal engagement and community building through various forms of expressive arts ranging from writing and storytelling to drama and theater arts. For more than 16 years, Mirriam-Goldberg has actively been serving as workshop facilitator for adults in transition, people living with physical or mental illness, intergenerational groups, the Kansas City Latino community, teens and children, and multi-cultural communities. Together with singer-songwriter Kelley Hunt, Mirriam-Goldberg offers writing and singing workshops and performances through the Brave Voice workshop. In recognition of her contribution, Mirriam-Goldberg was honored as the third Kansas Poet Laureate in 2009–2012 (Bio, 2014).

Aiming to provide an opportunity for better understanding of this emerging field, Mirriam-Goldberg set up a master degree level programme on TLA at the Goddard College in 2000. She remarks that:

Transformative Language Arts (TLA) is a meeting ground for those involved in social and personal transformation through the spoken, written and sung words, facilitating storytelling with people in prison, writing workshops for underserved youth, dramatic monologues for elders, or collaborative theatre for community building (Mirriam-Goldberg, 2007, p.3).

In her definition, Mirriam-Goldberg emphasizes the change brought to the society as well as to individuals through language arts. In terms of social change, Mirriam-Goldberg points out that there are three major functions of TLA. Firstly, it can bind the communities of the society together. Secondly, it helps the communities of the society to examine its core values. Finally, it catalyzes the communities of the society to take action in order to change the current social situation (Mirriam-Goldberg, 2007). These functions of TLA can bring together what Don Adams and Arlene Goldbard would call “community cultural development” which is defined as “the imperative to fully inhabit our human lives, bringing to consciousness the values and choices that animate our communities and thus equipping ourselves to act – to paraphrase Paulo Freire – as subjects in history rather than merely its objects” (Adams and Goldbard, 2002, p.15). Shelly Vermilya argues in her essay ‘Memoir: An Academic, Democratic, Political and Liberating Framework’ that “[w]riting one’s life and then framing it in a social and political context disrupts power dynamics and systems of oppression, individually and institutionally, and places a value on individual experience” (Vermilya, 2007, p.65). Writing becomes a change agent in the society. As a result, this kind of self-reflective writing can initiate change by re-examining the power structure in the society and its relationship with individuals. It is actually one of the major objectives of TLA to bring a better life to our society by studying the power-relationship in the society.

In terms of personal development, Mirriam-Goldberg claims that TLA is an essential tool to maintain health in body and soul by re-establishing confidence in one-self. She explains that:

For people who have experienced marginalization because of class, race, sexual orientation, physical difference, religion, ethnicity or other reasons, TLA not only makes visible invisible worlds, but it helps those speaking, writing, singing out loud to hear themselves more clearly, and in doing so, to cultivate and unearth greater meaning in their day to day life (Mirriam-Goldberg, 2007, p.13).

TLA provides opportunities for the individuals who have experienced marginalization to build up confidence through different forms of language arts. In his paper on the study of the relationship between writing, health and emotional well-being, Francis Charet also points out that “[e]xpressive writing as a way of healing and emotional well-being is increasingly being taken up as a practice and has developed into a growing movement that promotes its use” (Charet, 2007, p.40). After reviewing some recent research and theoretical issues on expressive writing, he concludes that the practice of expressive writing is beneficial, in measurable terms, to both physical health and well-being of an individual. However, he also alerts us that the effectiveness of TLA is culturally dependent and specific. Thus, expressive writing as a way of healing and emotional well-being is only applicable to Western culture and yet to be examined for non-Western cultural communities (Charet, 2007).

Using various types of language arts such as writing, storytelling, drama, theater performance, etc., TLA artists “envision a merger of the language arts with individual and collective liberation: writing, storytelling, theatre, and music can work towards community-building, cultural and ecological restoration, and personal development” (What is Transformative Language Arts?, 2014). As a platform for advocating TLA, Mirriam-Goldberg launched the first “The Power of Words” conference at the Goddard College in 2003. This conference has been held annually since then. During 2003-2008, “The Power of Words” conferences were sponsored by the TLA Concentration of the Goddard College. From 2008 onwards, the annual conference has become a joint project of the TLA Network and Goddard College in order to promote the concept of TLA to the global audience (Power of Words 2013, 2014). Bringing together academic scholars, literary authors, arts performers, and workshop presenters, the objectives of the annual conference are to “further develop and understand the mythological, historical, anthropological, and cultural aspects and implications of TLA” through a wide variety of genres and art forms such as poetry recitation, storytelling, singing-song writing, expressive arts, etc.¹

¹ The TLA Network is a not-for-profit professional organization started by TLA students, faculty, alumni and friends. The aim of the TLA Network is to “support individuals and organizations that promote forms of the spoken, written, and sung word as a tool for personal and communal transformation.” For details, see the TLA Network website: <http://www.tlanetwork.org/>

3.0 Civic Literacy: The Role of Libraries

“Civic Literacy” is an emerging concept and has different meanings in different contexts. Some scholars focus on the skills and competence in acquiring civic knowledge, i.e. the knowledge that citizens ought to know, while others emphasize that civic literacy is a means to initiate political change in the society..² In his paper, the author adopts the definition put forward by the Civic Literacy Project of the Youth Urban Agenda, an international civic education program housed at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. They define civic literacy as “the knowledge of how to actively participate and initiate change in your community and the greater society” (Youth Urban Agenda/Civic Literacy Project, 2013). In this definition, there are two constituent elements of civic literacy, namely personal engagement and social change. For personal engagement in a society, an individual can participate and initiate change in the society from two aspects: they can formulate their opinions in their mind and express their views by taking appropriate action. On the other hand, the structure of a society is formed by the knowledge and participation of its citizens. It is vital for an individual to recognize the importance of civic literacy before making personal engagement and initiating change in the society. As pointed out by Gerry Meek, we are now living “in the midst of a profound and far-reaching period of change” (Meek, 2012, p.41)

But the question is: What is the role of libraries in promoting civic literacy? Libraries can play an active role in enhancing civic literacy among the members of its community. For example, the Calgary Public Library in Alberta, Canada, offered a number of interesting civic literacy programmes such as “Living Library”, which helps individuals to understand the community better, and “It’s a Crime Not to Read” to their users for personal engagement and community building (Meek, 2012). Vincas Grigas also says that “[t]he library can be seen as one of the primary contributors to civic literacy by offering information freely (helping to gain necessary knowledge) and helping to form skills necessary for work with information (teaching information literacy)” (Grigas, 2012, p.2). Apart from offering information freely and teaching information literacy, libraries can also engage in the promotion of civic literacy through other outreaching activities. As stated in Barbara Clubb notes in her President’s Message of the newsletter of the Canadian Library Association that “[i]t is also important to civic literacy to promote the reading of books in general and to hold events that encourage civic engagement”. She even claims that “[t]here’s no better institution to build community and strengthen civic literacy than the great and small libraries across the county: public libraries, academic and college libraries, and school media centres” (Clubb, 2006, p.4). These are just some of the library endeavors but they suffice to show that libraries are ideal places for advocating for civic literacy which ties in with the TLA model in terms of personal development and community engagement. In the next section, we will take a closer look at how the Library of CUHK is engaging in this outreaching activity.

4.0 The Power of Words at CUHK

Co-organized by the Independent Learning Centre,³ the Hong Kong Literature Research Centre, the Office of the Arts Administrator and the Tolopoem of CUHK,⁴ “The Power of Words”, primarily a campus-wide reading and writing project at the university, was initiated in September 2012. The project is also supported by the Department of Chinese Language and Literature, the Department of English, the School of Journalism and Communication, the University Library System, and the CU Student Press of CUHK. Broadly speaking, the co-organizing and supporting units represent a good mix of different stake-holders of the university from academic departments, research and auxiliary units to student bodies. This project was the result of causal chats among several colleagues in April 2012. As remarked by Vivian Chan, Senior Lecturer of the Independent Learning Centre of CUHK and one of the organizers of the project, “the Chinese University used to be a cradle for writers, but serious readers and writers are rare now” (Anonymous, 2013). She and several other colleagues decided to launch a series of literary activities in order to promote reading and writing within the university campus. In the summer 2012, they put forward a proposal entitled “The Power of Words” and started inviting representatives from departments and units who were interested in this project. To their surprise, their ideas were well received by colleagues and, as a result, the number of supporting units started to increase. “The Power of Words” comprised a whole range of activities including

² See, for example, the discussion in one of the best works on civic literacy in this aspect by Henry Milner in his book *Civic Literacy: How Informed Citizens Make Democracy Work* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2002). See also: Milner, H. (2001). “Civic Literacy in Comparative Context: Why Canadians Should Be Concerned”. *Policy Matters/Enjeux Publics*, 2(2), 2–40.

³ The Independent Learning Centre is an auxiliary unit funded by the University for the learning of Chinese and English languages. .

⁴ The Tolopoem is a student society on the appreciation and writing of poems. .

literary talks, poetry and chorus recital, poetry and photography workshops, writing events, etc. Among all these activities, two major activities, namely “Blackboard/Glass Wall” and “A Day at CUHK in the 21st Century”, are discussed in greater details below.

5.0 Blackboard/Glass Wall Poems

From the very beginning, “The Power of Words” aims to promote art and literature across the whole campus, not just within a classroom or among a few individuals who are interested in literature. In the Fall 2012 semester, they kicked off the project by launching the first major literary activity called “Blackboard and Glass Wall Poems”. Instead of using modern technology and computer applications such as social networking tools, the organizers decided to use, to the contrary, a primitive method -- handwriting selected poems on a blackboard. In September 2012, the blackboard poems first appeared in two branch libraries in the campus, namely the Ch’ien Mu Library of New Asia College and the Wu Chung Multimedia Library of United College. Student volunteers copied a short poem or a stanza of a long poem on the blackboard by chalk twice per week. The majority of these poems were written by Hong Kong authors. As noted by Chan, “poetry represents the most refined and beautiful, and embodies the purest and the most sublime. If one wants to enter the humanistic world via words, poetry could be the most effective means. You don’t need to understand every line to be moved by a poem. I feel in every heart lives a poet and he will emerge when the conditions are right” (Anonymous, 2013). This is perhaps the reason why the news on Blackboard Poems was soon spread out in the campus and attracted a lot of attention from students, faculty and staff members. Since then, poems blossomed not only on blackboards but also on glass walls of many departments and buildings over the whole campus such as the Independent Learning Center, the Learning Garden of the University Library, Elisabeth Luce Moore Library of Chung Chi College, Architecture Library, the Learning Commons of the Wu Ho Man Yuen Building, the United College Student Canteen, Sir Run Run Shaw Hall and more. Fan Sin-piu, Director of the Hong Kong Literature Research Centre and another initiator of the project, commented that the “glass wall poems are powerful. They have caught the attention and won the approval of many staff and students, paving the way for activities that follow” (Anonymous, 2013). In a Chinese TV programme titled “Treasuring Words as Gold” broadcasted by the Radio Television Hong Kong on 5 January 2014, several students responsible for copying poems on blackboards and glass walls were interviewed. Chan Hong-to, a year-two student majoring in Chinese Language and Literature, said these poems could attract the attention of their fellow students. They would usually stop by and enjoy reading these poems. “They could experience the happiness and hardship of life through these poems,” said Chan. Luk Yin-ming, a year-two student majoring in Cultural Management Studies, said copying poems was an internalized and reflective experience. She could have a deeper understanding of the poems and the way in which the authors wrote these works. Chan concluded that the city that we were living in might not be as commercialized as it was if we could adopt a poetic attitude towards life.

6.0 A Day at CUHK in the 21st Century

Prior to the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, Mao Dun, a renowned Chinese writer, initiated a national writing campaign called “A Day in China” to record the historical, social and cultural development of China on May 21, 1936. Replicating the concept of “A Day in China”, a group of passionate CUHK students compiled an anthology *A Day at CUHK* containing snapshots that capture the lives of the university members in 1983. With no doubt, the campus experience at CUHK in the 21st century is very much different from that of thirty years ago. The organizers of “The Power of Words” decided to launch this writing event “A Day at CUHK in the 21st Century” to capture the history of the 50th anniversary of CUHK in 2013. Students, faculty, staff and alumni of CUHK could contribute articles on a specific day from March 21 to June 30, 2013. The organizers also invited students from the School of Journalism and Communication to document the minor staff work diaries to ensure that their voices could be heard and their views be recorded in the history of CUHK. Altogether, more than one hundred submissions on personal reflection or experience were received. Selected works were collected in the anthology titled *A Day at CUHK in the 21st Century* published in 2015.

There is a Chinese slogan on the home page of “The Power of Words” saying that: “Each word is a brick. Together we pave, we engrave, and we hurl.” As explained by Fan, “[t]o engrave is to record how we feel, to pave is to construct a channel for all to communicate, and at times we also need to resist, so we hurl the brick. ‘The Power of Words’ appreciates aesthetics from a literary perspective, but the kind of aesthetics must relate to our lives and society. I think we must stick to the literary perspective, otherwise, the whole project will unravel. However the literature focus does not mean we are blind to what’s happening in the world around us” (Anonymous, 2013). Fan

stated very clearly that “The Power of Words” emphasized on literary perspective as well as personal and societal experiences. Both “Blackboard/Glass Wall Poems” and “A Day at CUHK in the 21st Century” provided very good opportunities for student engagement and community building in the university. “The Power of Words” attracts a lot attention within the CUHK campus and beyond. Apart from campus publicity, “The Power of Words” was also frequently reported in mass media including newspapers (e.g. Chen, 2012; Chen 2013; Yuan, 2013, etc.), radio broadcasts (e.g. Metro Broadcast on 26 September 2012, Radio Television Hong Kong on 29 October 2012, CUHK Campus Radio on 29 May 2016, etc.) and television programme (e.g. Radio Television Hong Kong on 5 January 2014, etc.). “The Power of Words” is now one of the signature events in CUHK not only among the campus community but also to the wider cultural community in Hong Kong.

7.0 Concluding Remarks

“The Power of Words” at CUHK acknowledged and supported the use of the spoken, written, and sung words in a wide variety of genres and arts forms such as literary talks, poetry and chorus recital, poetry and photography workshops, writing events, etc. Students can enhance their personal development by engaging in volunteer work such as writing poems on the blackboards and glass walls, and documenting the minor staff work diaries. Also, “The Power of Words” at CUHK has sparked much interest in literature within the university community. As a member of the organizing team, the author notices that there is a gradual change in attitude towards literature among the campus community. Students are now more willing to engage in literary activities and staff are more supportive than before in mounting these programmes. “The Power of Words” has cultivated a literary campus which, as a result, facilitates student participation. From these perspectives, “The Power of Words” at CUHK is a desirable platform for promoting civic literary through words in a university environment.

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