

Building Bridges Through Literature: A Practical Example and Ideas about Resource-Based Learning as Teamwork Between a Teacher, a Librarian, and Students in a Project about African History and Literature

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The main purpose of this project was to study African history and how it can be traced in literature. It focused on early African kingdoms and both the colonial and post-colonial periods in West Africa and South Africa. The project was carried out in a group of thirty 17-year-old students, four of whom were from Africa and many others from the Middle East. The four main goals of the project were to (1) allow the students to experience other countries and cultures through literature, (2) build understanding between students with different backgrounds, (3) train the students in information literacy, and (4) develop cooperation between teachers and librarians.

Background and Ideas That Led to the Project

Mr. Rådström:

Many of my students are interested in non-European History or cultures in the world outside Western Europe. National curricula are always more or less ethnocentric as far as the study of history is concerned. One way of breaking that ethnocentric perspective is to give the students an opportunity to study more deeply the history of India, for example, with the purpose of seeing India from its own perspective. Over the years I have also noticed that many students are interested in African history simply because they do not know much about this subject except for certain things like the slave trade. Africa is the unknown continent for many young people in Sweden, and that perhaps makes it more interesting and arouses their curiosity.

In the autumn of 2002 I attended a seminar at the University of Uppsala about modern methods of teaching and writing history. One lecture had the title “Decolonization and history writing, an African perspective.” The lecturer, Kerstin Keen, gave examples of the traditional ways of studying African history and also new ideas and angles. She mentioned, for instance, the possibility of seeing African history through the eyes of one country, like Ghana and thus reflecting the continent. To look at 20th century history from the South African perspective was another example. Kerstin Keen also emphasised the new possibilities that the Internet gives and gave tips of good web sites such as *The African Union*.

An important annual event in Sweden, other than except for the Nobel Prize, is the annual International Book Fair in Gothenburg with hundreds of authors from all over the world presenting their latest books in exhibitions and lectures. African Literature was a central topic in 200. Among many other authors the Somalian writer Waris Dirie visited the fair and presented her latest book, *Desert Flower*. For the first time in my life I had the great pleasure to visit the Göteborg Book Fair. I went in the company of Marianne Ageberg, the librarian at my school. We both participated in a seminar on African literature held by Karin Ruuth-Bäcker. Her book on the history of African Literature called *Bakom Maskerna* (*Behind the Masks*) had just been published. Karin, who has lived and travelled in Africa, was quite inspiring. She gave a survey of African literature and themes from early oral traditions (*griots*) and the Négritude in the 1930s to the literary revolution in the 1950s and new tendencies in present-day literature.

Back at school Ms. Ageberg and I started to discuss if we could go further with our new experiences regarding African literature and the idea of co-operation between history-literature and the library was born. We decided to call the project "Building Bridges Through Literature." In one of my classes I teach both history and the Swedish language, doing most of the studies such as social science and history in the English language. Five of the students have African roots, so in many ways this particular class was ideal for the project.

The Realisation of the Project

In class, we started to discuss positive and negative views on Africa through Swedish media. On the positive side was sport: Sweden met both Nigeria and Senegal at the latest World Cup in football, and the students also knew about track-and field stars. Other fields were cultural activities such as music and dance. Some also noticed that Africa is very rich in natural resources. Nelson Mandela was a person they knew well. After this introduction we continued to look at Africa and its geographical setting. I described the different regions and the importance of the Sahara desert. The students were able to identify a number of nations and their location on a blind map of the Africa.

At the second lesson I lectured on African history mainly by giving the students a chronological time-line and the possibility to divide the history into certain specific periods. The purpose was also to give them ideas that they could select for their deeper study. Concentrating on Africa south of the Sahara desert, I gave my students the main outlines in the different regions: West African history with the early great kingdoms (which many students found very interesting), East African history with early city-states, the southern region where Great Zimbabwe was of great interest, and the history of Congo representing Central Africa.

The next steps were for the students to form a group, choose a subject, write down basic questions in the logbook, and start working in the library. Students wanted to work on the following themes:

1. Morocco through history
2. West African History
3. The slave trade
4. Women's situation in African history
5. Nigeria and the slave trade
6. South Africa
7. The role of the Boers
8. Great Zimbabwe
9. The history of Rwanda
10. Tanzania and its history
11. The history of Kenya

The School Library at Rudbecksskolan

Ms. Ageberg:

Our library is located in the oldest part of the school, in the old castle, more than one hundred years old. The library is rather big compared to other school libraries in Sweden. Its 350 square meters are divided into four rooms plus two rooms for the staff. In one room the ceiling is "heavenly," as one student wrote in a questionnaire several years ago when we planned to remodel the library after 30 years. The student was anxious for us to ask the builders to promise not to destroy this very old and beautiful room where you can get a feeling of being in another world, so different from the ordinary classrooms or the school corridors. The 100-year old bookshelves in three storeys are original, just like the grand oak table in the middle. Teachers had their meetings here, and no students were allowed to enter this very "secret" room until the day they had passed their exams and were given their certificates.

The Modern School Library

Today it is different. In the Senior High School Reform of 1967 it was decided that all schools should have libraries for their students. At Rudbecksskolan three more classrooms were added to the beautiful Gallery room, one of which was divided into four study sections. At that time our school was a Technical School for training engineers. Our students today are proud of the school's heritage and still call it "Teknis". It is a completely different school for our students today, and more changes in programmes and methods will be introduced in the near future. Since 1998, when I became the librarian of Rudbecksskolan, many innovations have been made in programmes, curricula and methods partly due to the revolution in information technology. The use of computers is, of course, universal, and the World Wide Web has greatly changed the school library and the daily work for a school librarian.

A School Librarian's Role

In the summer of 2001 I was fortunate to meet with Professor David Loertscher at San José State University in California. Among our inspiring discussions, he said to me, "Remember, Marianne, you are a professional librarian and guide to the information resources; you are the one to capture the information space for your students in your school. Someone else will do it otherwise. Be sure to capture it!" This is a great challenge for school librarians! We have the opportunity to be seen and to put into practice our professional qualifications. Our role in students' learning process is important.

In the modern school, where the focus is on students' learning and independent study, there must be well-equipped libraries, active school librarians, and teachers willing to cooperate and integrate the library in their teaching. Teachers and librarians should not give students too much independence or let them drift aimlessly. It is important for tutors to have to help them to structure a project and supervise them through the working process. The logbook is an excellent way to keep track of how they proceed. Let me give you two examples I came across just as we had started our African History and Literature Project.

Some students came to me in the library and asked where they could find something about political conflicts in Africa and about slavery in 17th century Africa. Another group wanted to know where I had all the books written by African writers. They were supposed to choose one. This, of course, happens all the time in the library: students come with their questions and ask me to point to, or even pull, books from the shelves or find articles on their specific subjects. This time I was very happy since I knew they were students in Mr. Rådström's class and I was therefore already prepared about the assignments to which their different questions referred. I also knew I was going to meet these students and support them on more than just this special occasion. It is important for the librarian to become part of the curriculum and what is actually being taught in the school: they can then become more engaged, know better what books to collect or media to use, and contribute to the students' learning process in a much more qualified way. Students notice when the librarian is familiar with their assignment, problems, and questions, and they feel more confident to ask questions when they know that their teacher has planned the work together with the librarian.

Sometimes students have come up to me saying in frustration, “Is it really true that you don’t know that we are two classes working together in a big project about the Holocaust and that it will continue for several weeks,” or “We need lots of books, materials, articles, web sites and stuff... and you don’t know anything about it!” A week later I read about the project in our local newspaper and the students and teachers visiting the concentration camp in Auschwitz. Then I suddenly understood why so many of my students had asked if they could check out *The Diary of Anne Frank* from the library. We have quite a few copies, but there were still not enough. I realised I had to remind the teachers strongly again that they should not forget to tell me about their plans, especially their big projects.

The Importance of Co-Operation

As long as I am the only librarian at my school with about 1200 students, 40 classes, and 100 teachers, it is unrealistic to believe I can serve all the different projects and fields there are in the curriculum each term. Nevertheless, there should be better co-operation between principals, teachers, and librarians. At the Hulebäck Senior High School on the West Coast of Sweden, there is one librarian for each of the school’s programmes, one librarian co-operating with one principal and one group of teachers. The students are positive, and the teachers feel they get support in tutoring large groups of teenagers. Since the teachers often plan projects together with the librarians, they know that the librarians are prepared when the students are sent to the library to look for information. The school librarians can serve as links between research and learning.

The Senior Project: A New Course and Method

In 2000 it became compulsory for all senior high school students in Sweden to carry out a certain amount of research as part of their learning—a Senior Project in third grade. No matter whether this project is theoretical or practical, it must be presented together with a written report showing procedures, results, and a final evaluation. A general model for the Senior Project includes basic ideas, a plan, procedure, a presentation and an evaluation. As Mr. Rådström and I planned our African Project, we decided to use this model to structure the work with the students as well as for our own co-operation. We refer to it as a “Mini project” that prepares the students for the “big thing” in the third grade.

In the curriculum of this 100 points-course there are three student goals in which the school librarian can have a role:

- how to choose a field and define a particular problem within that field,
- how to choose relevant materials and method as well as relevant tools, and
- finally how to evaluate the procedure and the result in either a specific report or an oral presentation.

In the first two stages the students brainstorm, explore, focus on a subject, and finally formulate a problem or a question, discuss different methods, and determine where to look for useful information. School librarians can support the students in these stages but only if they are involved from the start and the teachers keep them informed about the chosen subjects. I had that opportunity with the African Project. Mr. Rådström and I discussed the work together from the beginning: he showed me the text books and gave me his schedule and the planning for his lessons.

Practical Workshop in the Library

When the students came to me in the library, one group at a time, I felt prepared and I could answer their most important questions. I could start a discussion, help them sift and sort information, evaluate their sources, especially those found on the Internet. In this “library workshop” I could catch their curiosity, train them in efficient search strategies to save time, and help them find more valuable web sites, articles, or books. I could also help them plan and structure their project. It is so enjoyable to have a group of students more motivated than usual to tutor in the library, students who know what they are looking for and who are about to formulate a question or solve a problem. Some have perhaps decided to tackle the problem by either trying to get in contact with an expert or finding written material. Some have decided how to present the work as an exhibition, a *PowerPoint* presentation, or an essay. This is so different from meeting the students in a vacuum, where the librarian is not at all involved in the curriculum or even their courses or studies. It is pointless to give lessons in information literacy if they are isolated and not connected to the subjects.

As we know from research and theories by experts like Dr. Carol Kuhlthau, information literacy is not a general process that follows a strict order. It is instead an integrated part of the learning process as a whole. School librarians have to think in a different way, and one way to help students through the process is to meet individually with them in “library workshops” now and then when they need information and resources of different kinds. Be there to help the student in that very moment when s/he is curious, motivated, and eager to grab and swallow the information s/he has been looking for – it is so rewarding to see the gleam in students’ eyes!

A Structured Checklist

In our African Project I had the chance to experience this with our students and I am convinced that we are on the right track. I test different models and feel my way by pinching bits and pieces from colleagues and others. My goal is to create a model with materials just for Rudbecksskolan that can be used by our students and teachers. I am planning this with two teachers’ colleagues, and we want to stress that this quick list is to be used in connection with tutoring students who are working on a project. It is not a self-instructional tutorial for students to follow step-by-step without support and a dialogue with their librarian. It could be part of the logbook that every student keeps to show how his work is progressing.

After the students registered for a library workshop but before they came to the library, I gave them the following questionnaire:

- What is your project about?
- How much do you already know about the subject?
- What more do you want to know?
- Make a list of keywords for your research.

Their answers were an excellent aid for me in preparing for the workshop, and they gave me an opportunity to create a tailored workshop specific to the subject.

When I met with the students in the African project for the first time, I demonstrated how to find information on the Internet by using keywords such as the slave trade, female circumcision, the political situation in Somalia, the Boers, imperialism, and animism. I showed them how to use our school library web page to find books, articles, useful databases, and links in categories. I also mentioned public authorities, such as the National Social Welfare Board (Socialstyrelsen) and the Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA), and private organisations, such as Rädde Barnen (IUCW) and Solidaritetshuset, where they can find material or talk to experts within specific areas. We also examined web sites together to make the students aware of how important it is to be critical of sources and not believe that all on the Internet is true. There can be many different approaches to one particular issue.

In our school there is an extra meeting-room close to the library, so that it is possible for workshop students to use both traditional media and web sites. If a student wants to read about the history of slavery, for example, it can be easier and quicker to go to books and articles instead of surfing the Internet. Some students discovered this after browsing on the Internet for an hour or so. When they turned to the books, they quickly and happily found what they were looking for: surveys, whole chapters, historical dates, and pictures. Students are actually “detectives” when they start their serious research. What they also need is patience. They should not worry if it takes time before they find a valuable clue in their searching process.

The Literary Part of the Project

Mr. R dstr m:

When the students started to study African history, I began introducing African literature in their Swedish lessons. Since reading poetry is often a good way to become familiar with a new literary tradition, I chose some poems that were not only easy to understand but also represented different fields of African poetry. We read "Ijala poetry" from old Nigeria, representing the oral tradition, and poems by Léopold Sédhior and Michael François Dei-Anang. The most appreciated poem was Okot p'Bitek's "Song of Lawin" where the students could see the typical conflict between the African and the European way of living and thinking.

The next stage was to read excerpts from novels: Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* from West Africa, Peter Abraham's *A Night of Their Own* from South Africa and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* from Kenya. The students were touched by the apartheid system described in the book by Peter Abraham. We discussed the literature in groups of five or six which enabled each one to have an opinion and to take an active role in the discussions.

After these preparations the students selected a novel from the country/region that they were studying in history. It was not easy to find the Swedish translations of African novels in the book stores or to get publishing firms to supply several copies for a group of students. The groups studying South Africa found authors like André Brink and J.M. Coetzee, the West African group found Buchi Emecheta from Nigeria, and the Moroccan group found Ben Jelloun, and many of the girls wanted to read Waris Dirie. Parallel to this the class also studied African literature with their English teacher, and many read a complete novel in English. One can say they got quite a good view of African literature.

The Presentations

The history groups presented their work both as a written report and in front of the class. They used various forms of presentations: *PowerPoint*, video films, different forms of dialogues such as role-playing, interviews, and one "news programme" on TV. In the literary part, each student wrote a review discussing how African history and society were reflected in their novel. Another overall question was to consider whether literature can contribute to an understanding of people from different cultures and thereby build bridges between people. After I had read their reviews, we had "book talks" and discussions in groups. I must say it was really interesting to listen to their opinions and reflections about the role and possibilities of literature.

An Invited Expert

In February a visitor, Karin Ruuth-Bäcker, came to our school and gave two lectures on "a literary journey through Africa." She is an expert on African literature who has recently had a great deal of attention for her book *Bakom Maskerna (Behind the Masks)*. It is an introduction to modern African Fiction south of Sahara that has filled a gap in Sweden, since most texts about African writers are either in English or French. Karin Ruuth-Bäcker, who is 79 years old, has worked for many years in Africa commissioned by the United Nations and the Swedish International Development Authority.

Ms. Ruuth-Bäcker has lived in several different African countries and has gained an insight into the rich culture and literature as well as into the inhabitants' natural surroundings. She discussed the local African authors less well known in Sweden such as Chinua Achebe, Ferdinand Oyono, Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo, Ben Okri, Camera Laye, Alex La Guma and Yvonne Vera. Her book gives a very clear and interesting survey. All listeners were very impressed by her deep knowledge and her telling of stories, poems and proverbs out of the rich treasure of writings from this part of the world. She also pointed out connections between the history and literature. Many of us were inspired to read more texts by African writers and learn about the special features typical and unique for this literary tradition. We were told about the *griots* playing on the *cora*, having the gift for telling stories and their importance in passing on the oral tradition. Many Swedish children today are familiar with some of the so called "Dilemma Stories," since they were translated into Swedish by Janne Lundström, a famous author of books for children; they have a very special touch with a lot of wisdom as well as humour. It was interesting to hear that Amos Tutuola's book *The Palmwine Drinkard* (translated

into Swedish in 1958) was one of the first African novels to attract much attention in Europe, largely because of an enthusiastic review by Dylan Thomas! The “been to-syndrome” as a background to and explanation to the famous poem “Song of Lawino” was another fascinating memory from the lecture by our guest and expert on African Literature.

A Literary Seminar in Stockholm and Ideas for the Future

Mr. R dstr m and Ms. Ageberg:

Later in March we had the opportunity to meet Karin Ruuth-Bäcker again in Stockholm. We attended a course arranged by SIDA especially for teachers and librarians all around Sweden. The theme was “Literature from the Warm Countries in the World” (Africa, Asia and Latin America). There was overwhelming interest in the seminar, so we felt lucky to have been accepted among 250 of 500 persons! At the seminar we were introduced to two young African writers now living in Sweden, Yeshiwork Wondmeneh from Ethiopia and Cletus Nelson Nwadike from Nigeria. They both gave a vivid picture of their native countries with their stories, humour, music and customs, sometimes so different from ours and sometimes so very similar.

As we continue to work with our project we realise how much it has grown from the start last autumn. Just like our students, we learn something all the time and get new ideas. We are convinced that we want to develop this project and continue to co-operate. One of our plans is to create a section in the library where we can present the literature from Africa, Asia and Latin America. The authors of these continents are often forgotten in our Western world. One reason, of course, is that very few translations exist. Although our literary focus has in the past been focused on Europe and the US, we now want to let our students meet more of the richness in history, culture and experiences in the “warm countries” through fiction. We have confirmed that through novels and poetry students gain knowledge and understanding. Young people in Africa live different lives compared to Swedish teenagers. Still, as Karin Ruuth-Bäcker says, it is fascinating to observe that in spite of all the differences, there are so many similarities in the way young people experience their own situation and the adult world wherever in the world they live.

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Biographical Notes

Marianne Ageberg is a Senior High School Librarian in a town called Örebro with around 120 000 inhabitants, not far from Stockholm in Sweden. Rudbecksskolan has 1 200 students and five national programmes, mostly theoretical such as the Natural Science Programme and the Social Science Programme. She enjoys working in co-operation with teachers and believes that if the school library is well integrated in the curriculum the students will get better and richer learning situations and a more qualified education. She has also worked in public libraries and in the library at a Teacher training college in Malmö. Since 1990 she has been a member of IASL. This will be her fifth conference. Last year in Malaysia she was a presenter for the first time.

Lars-Göran Rådström lives in Örebro, an average-sized town in the central part of Sweden, roughly between Stockholm and Gothenburg. He teaches the Swedish Language and History at Rudbecksskolan, an upper secondary school. He teaches most of the history in English, which is part of the international profile of the school.