

## **The social use of reading through informative texts**

### **O uso social da leitura por meio de textos informativos**

### **L'utilisation sociale de la lecture au moyen de textes informatifs**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

*"What meaning do informative texts bring to AlfaSol<sup>1</sup> neo-readers?"*  
The question presented here is the focus of an action-research project aimed at helping new readers practice their recently acquired skills through real quotidian situations. The project is based on bibliographic research and the development of reading workshops in the Dendê community using texts on social integration, civic engagement, health care, environmental protection and quality-of-life improvements. The project focuses on the community's needs, according to the Law of Social Responsibility that led to partnerships between private enterprises and state government. Visits to the Dendê community were conducted and contacts were made with local leaders. The objective of these visits was to present and discuss with local leaders the viability of the project and to identify the most adequate place for the reading workshops. The people of the Dendê community received a great contribution in the form of improved reading techniques; text interpretations that included useful information; and the creation of the habit of reading among adults who have graduated from other literacy programs and reading with family, friends and neighbors. All of these literacy exercises promoted harmony and solidarity among the residents of Dendê, for they were centered around brainstorming collective solutions to community problems.

**Index terms:** text, reading, neo-readers.

#### **RESUMO**

*"Que sentido os textos informativos têm para os neoleitores egressos do AlfaSol?"* é um projeto de pesquisa-ação que tem por objetivo exercitar a leitura dos adultos recém-alfabetizados em situações concretas da vida

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<sup>1</sup> "AlphaSol" is short for the "Solidarity in Literacy Program," combining the words "alfabetização (literacy)" and solidariedade (solidarity)"

cotidiana. O projeto se apóia em consultas bibliográficas e realização de oficinas de leitura na Comunidade do Dendê, utilizando material informativo sobre integração social, exercício da cidadania, cuidados com a saúde, conservação do meio ambiente e melhoria da qualidade de vida das pessoas. Atende a necessidades específicas da população, segundo a Lei de Responsabilidade Social que levou as empresas privadas a atuarem em parceria com o Estado. Foram realizadas visitas à Comunidade do Dendê e feitos contatos com os líderes locais. Essas visitas tinham por objetivo apresentar e discutir com os líderes a viabilidade do projeto e selecionar o local mais adequado para funcionamento das oficinas de leitura. As pessoas da Comunidade do Dendê vêm recebendo uma grande contribuição no sentido de aperfeiçoar as técnicas de leitura, interpretar textos com informações úteis, criar o hábito de ler entre os adultos egressos dos programas de alfabetização, ler conjuntamente com os familiares, amigos e vizinhos, exercitando-se todos para uma convivência harmônica e solidária, em busca de soluções aos problemas atuais que afetam toda a coletividade.

**Palavras-chave:** texto, leitura, neoleitores.

## RÉSUMÉ

*“Que senti les textes informatifs ont pour neolécteurs sorties de l'AlfaSol? ”* c'est un projet de recherche- action qui a l'objectif d'exercer la lecture des adultes récent-alphabétisés dans des situations concrètes de la vie quotidienne. Le projet si basé à des consultations bibliographiques et à réalisation d'ateliers de lecture dans la Communauté du Dendê, en utilisant matériel informatif sur l'intégration sociale, l'exercice de la citoyenneté, des soins avec la santé, la conservation de l'environnement et l'amélioration de la qualité de vie des personnes. Il fait attention à des nécessités spécifiques de la population, selon la Loi de Responsabilité Sociale qui a amené les sociétés privées à agir dans partenariat avec l'État. Des visites à la Communauté du Dendê ont été réalisées et des contacts avec les chefs locaux ont été faits. Ces visites avaient l'objectif de présenter et discuter avec les chefs la viabilité du projet et sélectionner le lieu le plus approprié pour le fonctionnement des ateliers de lecture. Les personnes de la Communauté du Dendê viennent en recevant une grande contribution dans le but de perfectionner les techniques de lecture, interpréter des textes avec des informations utiles, créer l'habitude de lire avec les adultes sorties des

programmes d'alphabétisation, lire communément avec les parents, amis et voisins, en s'exerçant tous pour une convive harmonique et solidaire, à la recherche de solutions aux problèmes actuels qui touchent toute la collectivité.

**Mots clés:** texte, lecture, neolécuteurs.

## 1. Introduction

The action research project "*What meaning do informational texts hold for neo readers who have graduated from the Solidarity in Literacy Program*"? This project is nearing completion in the Dendê community, with the hope of perfecting the techniques necessary to help neo readers incorporate reading into their everyday lives.

This project is based on research of the literature on corporate social responsibility (CSR) and the social use of reading in a globalized world, which shows a scene of transition in concepts and values, focusing on action and revealing the face of contemporary capitalism. Before, there was a very sharp demarcation between the competencies and roles of the private and public sectors. Today, with the enactment of the Law of Social Responsibility, private companies started to engage in areas that previously were exclusively government-led. "Today, given the relevance of the theme [of social responsibility], social responsibility is no longer optional as a factor in companies' strategic policies" (LEVY, et al., 2005, p.15).

Companies act strategically, outlining goals for meeting social needs while simultaneously meeting their own interests. Partnerships between private companies and government institutions are gaining strength in the application of norms shared by society at large in the social use of reading and in the decision-making process, having in mind the goal to improve quality of life across the board.

In this paper, we define the social use of reading as the information that the reader acquires continuously through printed materials in his day-to-day life. Contact with the literate world imposes on people the need to master the linguistic code prevalent in their social environment. However, reading is not limited to providing useful information; it also forms the reader's critical consciousness to know and understand the reality in which he lives. According to Paulo Freire, "[R]eading of the world precedes reading of the word [...] Comprehension of text through critical reading implies perceiving the connections between text and context " (1997, p. 11).

Reading is one of the surest means of continuous exposure to information and knowledge. People with low purchasing power often lack reading and writing skills. This disconnect with the literate world subjects them to a constant ignorance of useful information that could improve their quality of life such as basic hygiene and health care, their rights and responsibilities as citizens, and long-distance communication via letters, email, text message, etc. In general, they obtain information through radio, TV and phone, but they do not have the habit of reading newspapers, magazines, books, pamphlets and other printed materials.

## **2. Research Methodology**

We made some visits to the Dendê community, which included meetings with local leaders. These visits were designed to present and to discuss with the leaders the feasibility of the project and to select the most appropriate place for the reading workshops. We opted for the headquarters of the Council on Community Social Action because its location and physical state were fitting for our work. In the first meeting, we presented the objectives of the project and the expected results for participants through the use of social reading.

We worked with informational texts (pamphlets) on preventative health care, the environment, citizenship (such as citizens' rights and responsibilities), culture, leisure and other topics of interest to the group. In each reading workshop was a banner containing the text selected with the participation of the neo readers. Then, each student read the passage out loud, following the rules of punctuation and diction, so that there would be no concerns or doubts as to the process of interpretation, reflection and discussion of the topic. The next reading was done as a group.

An open debate followed the reading of the passage. Unfamiliar terms were explained by way of examples taken from the readers' context so that the transmitted message was well understood and students could make analogies between the text and their own reality. Each participant expressed his point of view, as well as his belief as to what the message of the text was. After the debate, the participants highlighted the words or the phrases that most caught their attention. One at a time, students would stand at the front of the room and point to the words or phrases on the banner that intrigued them and explain why. Following that, the students would write their passages on the blackboard. Most of the texts used were taken from pamphlets and handouts produced by institutions that specialized in the various topics discussed (health, education, environment, citizenship, etc). When texts such as poetry, stories, legends or other literary genres were used, comments were shared about literary genres, authors and the messages the authors wished to transmit to readers.

In other reading sessions, different dynamics were used. The neo readers wrote on a sheet of paper something that interested them. After the sheets were collected and transcribed onto the blackboard (in whatever form the students used, e.g. words, phrases, drawings, and signs), the class engaged in a lively discussion about their peers' contributions.

Diverse methodological dynamics were used to make the workshops more interesting and attractive. The participants wrote on the blackboard, on

sheets of paper or on strips of construction paper. When using the strips of construction paper, each student read aloud what he wrote and then he exchanged his strip with his neighbor, who, in turn, read what was written on the paper strip and both commented on what they wrote.

After this dynamic exercise, the text was rewritten. Each one said what he understood, what they liked and disliked and why. As they spoke, the teacher-researcher, advised by an undergraduate fellow, rewrote the text on the blackboard. Afterwards, the teacher-researcher read the reconstructed text. Immediately after this individual reading, a collective reading was done involving the entire class.

Copies of the original text were distributed to the participants to be read again at home and to be discussed with neighbors, friends, relatives and others in the community so that they, too would read the text. During the next session, each participant received a copy of the reconstructed text. They received positive feedback in order to be motivated to continue reading and producing texts.

### **3. Data analysis / results**

The Reading Room, which adopted the methodology of reading based on text, was inaugurated on March 8, 2007, International Women's Day. The pedagogical activities began with the reading of the collection of poems entitled "*Ser mulher*,"<sup>2</sup> written by Gilka Machado and "March 8 - Women's International Day," by Ilsa da Luz Barbosa, each of them studied in different one-and-a-half-hour sessions. The Reading Room was open once a week from 6:30pm to 8:00pm.

Other selected topics were related to information in which participants expressed interest, such as preventative health care; what to do around those who are ill; personal hygiene; food; and environmental and

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<sup>2</sup> N. T.: *Ser mulher* may be translated as "to be a woman" or "being a woman."

especially water safety. Other themes such as citizenship, culture, leisure, etc. were also studied. We highlighted the aspects of these topics that were most striking to participants and they were discussed and interpreted by all participants. These aspects were represented by everyday expressions, terms and conditions that were extracted from the texts and represented well the basic needs of the students as they made their way in Brazilian society. Sample themes included security and freedom, which lead the group to reflect on the uncertainty in which we live today. Inevitably, these issues cause insecurity and oppression. Freedom, even though it is a human right, is governed by legal and social norms that impose certain limits on action to promote respect and harmonious coexistence among citizens. Security evokes the question of violence that can be physical, moral and structural. In today's society, people are afraid of the abundant violence that governs the streets, such as assaults, homicides, thefts, vengeance, kidnappings, killings, and domestic violence practiced against women and children by parents, stepfathers, husbands, boyfriends, partners or ex-partners, etc. There is also structural and symbolic violence that is represented by public and private negligence of services critical to the citizenry, generating a climate of tension and insecurity in all sectors that induces moral violence, which is understood in this work as the lack of respect for people, and is expressed through insults, slander, defamation and the denial of rights.

The culmination of the discussion was the realization that security and freedom are not only related to police work, but also relate to other aspects of human life: work, health, and education, among others.

The term citizenship, when it was brought up in the discussion, was no longer just a word, but the subject of vigorous debate about the true meaning of being a citizen. It became clear for the group that being a citizen was not just about paperwork and documentation. It involved complying with one's responsibilities and respecting others' rights. All citizens, as members of a society, contribute to the common good; they participate in

the community's development through collective decision-making. In this discussion, we highlighted participation and individualism as antagonistic terms, coming to a consensus that people who participate civically are not attached to individualism, thinking in terms of the collective, rather than the individual, in determining solutions to community issues.

The question of social prejudice was analyzed through various forms of discrimination, first with a focus on women and then extending to age, race, social class, profession, and persons with disabilities. In the context of these discussions on women and gender, the point was raised that women have been fighting for rights, recognition and respect for their role in society through the feminist movement and other social movements.

In discussing the text under consideration, the term "to look for" had the connotation of decisiveness, dynamics, and perseverance in the struggle for a more egalitarian, more just, less selfish, less violent and more humane society. In this context, woman reveals herself with all of the strength that she has always carried hidden inside of her. If she has the power to generate and nurture life within her, that same power will emerge even stronger in regards to defending herself in a society that for centuries has disciplined females through repressive education founded in discrimination and sexism, which attempt to downplay her creative potential in defense of life, family, education, love, understanding, affection, career, work and social peace.

Today's society still sees women as sexual objects, sold through propaganda as merely human machines made to manufacture pleasure. Within this mistaken view, exclusionary stereotypes of female beauty are created as to physical appearance, clothing, language, fashion and other forms of manipulation and control that distort the true role of women in society.

The women's movement is considered the most creative and revolutionary movement of modern times (cf. ALAMBERT, 2004). This



makes us confident that no society can survive without the creative potential of women.

Aspirations and dreams, within the context of the poetry studied as introductory texts, showed the need to have a positive attitude in facing the world. It is essential to be willing to fight and have hope for things that we wish to achieve in life. It is equally important to be true to an ideal that gives this temporary life meaning. The words “love” and “to be understood” resonated deeply with neo readers, bringing to light women’s emotional side and her docility in driving domestic and humanitarian issues. Her biggest asset is her affectivity and her love in assuming the charisma of being a woman and in fulfilling her responsibilities and commitments in her mission as mother, wife and professional. The three functions invariably overlap and represent the litmus test of the modern woman. There are three daily work shifts: one on the job and one at home with her family as administrator of domestic affairs, as educator of her children and as companion to her husband. Most women work full-time to support their family’s income. Her work occupies the three shifts of the day - morning, afternoon and night. Does women’s unique capacity to balance it all demean men, provoking in them envy, discrimination, violence and disrespect for the female gender?

In the poetic context, the terms partner and mister have an ambiguous repercussion: the woman, as a female, needs a mate to procreate and to live with her, sharing her joys and her sorrows, her victories and her defeats. But in many cases, reality frustrates this dream. A high percentage of women, rather than having at their side good men as husband, companion, friend, brother, has instead a mister, a boss, an oppressor who, in addition to sapping their energy, take away the opportunity to grow and realize their ideal as women.

Another topic studied was "organ donation," in which the reading material focused on donor conditions and what kind of organs can be transferred between living and dead persons, arousing much interest among

the students. The discussion culminated with the construction of the following text: *If you donate your heart, you revive another life. The donation is important because it makes us happy to share health with others. If more people understood what organ donation was, many more lives could be saved. Giving is sharing life with others. It is an act of human solidarity.*

The original text was well assimilated by providing information that encouraged concern for the welfare of others and solidarity with those in need.

Another theme discussed in the workshops was "high blood pressure." The participants contributed with other information about health care, healing teas and body care. A man said, "I've been a waiter and the manager taught me that when we take a shower, we should rub coconut soap over our legs and arms from the bottom up, let it dry a bit and then rinse." We asked why. He replied, "Because we spend the entire day on our feet."

This answer made clear that the manager's advice was meant to improve circulation. Other people engaged in the debate and a woman said, "Three months ago, I was bleeding and I had tried everything to make it stop and nothing worked until someone told me to make tea from the leaves of a specific tree called "*castanholeira*."<sup>3</sup> I made the tea, drank two cups and was healed." Another person said that the tea from the bark of the pomegranate is also used to cure bleeding.

As we can see, people have knowledge from popular culture transmitted orally from parent to child, rather than through scientific evidence; it serves to aid in healing of the people who use them. This helps us understand the intertextuality between popular and scientific knowledge in certain areas.

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<sup>3</sup> N.T.: Castanholeira is *Terminalia catappa*.

The text on "respiratory diseases" explained how contamination occurs, how to cure these diseases and how to protect one's self through vaccination. In the view of the neo readers, the ease of contamination was also due to the question of access to information: *Today, people eat poorly, consuming foods filled with preservatives. This text was very important because it showed us how to take care of one's health and we learned how to protect ourselves from the various types of pneumococcal disease.* Filled with knowledge on respiratory diseases, the participants were now empowered to protect themselves and others.

In another session, we studied our authorship poem entitled "Mother," Which was read close to Mother's Day. This poem drew extensive participation from both the women and the men. They read it with enthusiasm and then all participated in reading and writing exercises. A TV crew from UNIFOR<sup>4</sup> was present to do a story about the project and reading workshop.

Another issue studied was the "dengue fever mosquito."<sup>5</sup> We shared a poster with twelve items that guided students on how to take care of water and *prevent Aedes aegypti's* reproduction in places that gather rainwater. This debate centered on how to take care of the environment. This discussion was very fruitful, as everybody was concerned about the news on TV about global warming, deforestation, pollution of the seas and rivers, and the harm that trash and pollution caused for human health, etc. The debate concluded with a reflection from one of the participants: *It is a lack of awareness that causes people to devalue people, things and nature. It is as if our generation has no continuity through our children, grandchildren, and other descendants. We must think about the future and not only about the present. The individualism of so many people is sad!*

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<sup>4</sup> UNIFOR: University of Fortaleza, Brazil.

<sup>5</sup> N.T.: Mosquito da Dengue is the *Aedes aegypti*.

The text "the occupational hazards and their prevention" was studied by means of a dynamic discussion involving all participants. At the end, copies of the text were distributed to neo readers to take home, with the task of reading them with others in the community.

#### **4. Prospects for continuation**

The project is ongoing with positive results regarding attendance, participation, development of critical reflection, development and use of reading related to everyday life. Therefore, we will not speak of completion but of the prospects of continuity.

Reading informational texts motivates neo readers to make use of the formal knowledge that surrounds them, expanding their understanding of social relationships that are created between people in the community, while at the same time, these informational materials are guides to personal health care, the environment, family, community, and citizens' rights and duties.

The reading workshops are characterized by neo readers' participation throughout the process, giving us the opportunity to observe, discuss and record the learning and behavioral changes regarding the use of social reading. They are abundant sources of information and are also a means of socialization, recreation, and reflection on life, its problems and their possible solutions through personal and collective achievement.

Through this project, people from the Dendê community have received a major contribution towards improving the population's reading techniques, text interpretation using meaningful information, and habits of reading independently as well as with others, all of which is fostering greater harmony and unity among community members, contributing to active engagement in finding solutions to the community's current problems.

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