

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

ELINET European Literacy Conference - 21 January 2016

Speech by H.R.H. Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands:

'A marketplace for literacy'

Introduction

Ladies and gentlemen,

Dear colleagues and friends,

What a joy it is to see you all here in Amsterdam! This conference is timely in many ways, not least because it coincides with the Dutch presidency of the EU...

I had the pleasure of meeting many of you at the inaugural ELINET meeting in Vienna, almost two years ago. I am delighted to not only see you again, but also to be joined by others working on literacy around Europe. You will no doubt exchange good practices and insights and in particular the knowledge and tools that have been compiled through the ELINET process.

What's coming together these days is the outcome of two years of very hard work by many passionate and professional individuals. The numbers speak for themselves:

- 77 organisations, and thus 77 potential connections for future collaboration;
- 150 peer-reviewed good practices and close to 100 case studies;
- 28 reports on the state of literacy and literacy policy in the participating countries;
- Over a dozen practical, ready-to-use tools to help you with fundraising and awareness raising for literacy.

This is indeed impressive... This is the first time there's such a high quality concentration of knowledge and gathering of information on low literacy from around Europe. Congratulations to you all on these achievements.

And yet... no matter how wonderful all the material, reports and tools in the world are... the question is: what do we DO with it? With 1 in 5 Europeans who have a hard time reading and writing... what matters is action. This is not a 'nice to have' in a society where inequalities are growing by the day. So the success of this conference is not simply determined by what you do between now and Friday afternoon, but by how each of us takes ELINET's work back home, and what we start doing with it on Monday. In other words: what happens outside this building is more important than what happens inside this building.

This building could in fact symbolise the way to frame and approach this issue. This building is called the 'Beurs van Berlage'. A quick language lesson for all foreign visitors: 'Beurs' is Dutch for 'stock exchange', and 'Berlage' is the name of its architect. Mister Berlage had a very holistic vision for this building: it should bring together social, commercial, and cultural functions. Quite revolutionary at the time, and in many ways it's still a radical vision: people tend to think of all those things separately.

Just like Berlage saw this building of commerce as part of a bigger context - society - we should think of literacy in a bigger context than just education. In 2016, economic, social and cultural development more than ever rely on the written word. So literacy is a 'need to have', not a 'nice to have'.

With that as a starting point, the thoughts I would like to share this afternoon revolve around two core ideas: creating demand and setting sales targets.

First: Creating demand for literacy solutions

ELINET provides an enormous supply of solutions to Europe's literacy crisis. (With over 55 million people with low literacy skills in the EU, we are indeed facing a crisis.) But having worked in this field for decades now, my conclusion - a "market analysis", if you will - is that these shocking numbers don't always translate into a strong demand for literacy solutions. So having a supply of solutions is not enough: we have to create and then expand the market.

It is key to put the issue high up on the political agenda; to make policy makers aware of the fact that whether they want to address unemployment, healthcare costs, social exclusion or crime, basic literacy skills are fundamental to each of those problems. Again, literacy is not 'nice to have' for these policy areas, it's a 'need to have'. This requires them to create cooperation mechanisms with colleagues

Every country organises their literacy ecosystem differently. In most countries, literacy comes under the remit of the ministry of Education. But it should be clear that all government departments have a stake in higher literacy rates. 2016 is the first year that the Dutch government's literacy policy is under the responsibility of not one, but three ministries: Education, Social Affairs and Public Health. I believe this approach reflects the cross-cutting nature of literacy as a policy issue. And in France, for instance, as you know, there is a dedicated national literacy agency involving the ten biggest ministries.

The Netherlands is one of less than ten countries that already have a national literacy policy. This did not happen overnight: a lot of campaigning went into putting the issue on the agenda - in other words: into creating demand. This means that over twenty countries still have plenty of potential for market expansion, and I certainly hope that you will use the many campaigning guides and tools at your disposal to increase demand for the literacy solutions that ELINET offers.

This brings me to my second point: Sales targets for a literate Europe

As we go out and make the case, it's important to incorporate a certain level of entrepreneurial and commercial thinking. When I set up the Reading & Writing Foundation in 2004, I had to explain to many people that it is not a charity, doing something nice as a sort of hobby. Basic skills are a basic requirement to be a part of modern society, so working to provide more people with those skills, like you all do, is a hard economic necessity. As we convince others of this, we have to live by that conviction ourselves. So why not set ourselves some 'sales targets'?

One such target already exists at the European level: to lower the rate of low achievers in reading and writing among 15 year olds to 15% by 2020. According to the latest Education and Training Monitor by the European Commission, the current rate is 17.8%. So we still have plenty of work to do to meet our target. I certainly hope the Commission will alert all Member States to the results of ELINET's work and encourage them to use all tools at their disposal to bring that rate down.

Looking forward, let's think about that target of 15% a bit longer. Even if we lowered it to 10% by 2025, that still means leaving up to 8 million European adolescents to their own devices. Is that really an acceptable target? Considering we have all the solutions in one place now, thanks to ELINET, I would expect a much more ambitious 'sales target' from the Commission and Member States alike: in 10 years' time, every child finishing secondary school should be fully literate.

And what sort of sales bonus do we receive if we meet our target? I think you'll like it: lower youth unemployment rates, reduced juvenile delinquency, increased tax revenues and a more productive labour force. Those are the profits we make by selling literacy.

Finally, let me share an idea about sales tactics. I have served as UNESCO Special Envoy for over six years now. In that time, I've noticed that sometimes when I visit a country, it gives the policy makers there the final push they needed to start taking literacy seriously. The national experts lay the groundwork, but somehow it takes a foreigner to get everybody into action mode. It's a reality we have to live with and adapt to if we want to get results.

Now, because I care so deeply about every single person getting the opportunities they deserve, I am happy to fulfil my role as 'travelling salesman' if it can make the difference. So if you feel like you've lined all the relevant players up but they need one final push, one last sales pitch, I will happily try my best to help you close the deal.

In conclusion

I'd like to leave you with a few final thoughts. As I mentioned, the task at hand is daunting: tens of millions of our fellow citizens have the right to participate in our society, but are currently excluded. At the same time, there are already so many local, national and international initiatives working towards a fully literate Europe. ELINET provides everyone willing to join our efforts with the knowledge and the tools to move the work forward.

I realise that to some extent, all the teaching methods, factsheets and campaign models that are presented at this conference are never finished, never perfect. But as you walk around this building today and tomorrow, let's remember a phrase from its architect: "Real plaster is better than fake marble." The results of two years of hard work by the ELINET partners are very real - so let's use those results to build a literate Europe.

Thank you.