

# Why don't you start a Reading Club?

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**B**etty Peter of the Mwanga Education Network is a woman with a mission: she wants people to start reading and ask questions. Walk into her office, and you will find posters on the wall, books piled up on her desk and a toy to amuse children who visit her. She runs two reading clubs per week – one aimed at youth and the other at women.

“When they come here I tell them to open their eyes and shut their mouth. You have come here to read, I tell them,” she says, with a twinkle in her eye. Her soft voice and warmth make her immediately approachable.

Betty starts people off with really easy reading – posters. The posters – pictures and a few words – help to draw in people who have never had the opportunity to develop the skill or the habit of reading.

She graduates her readers to books written in a popular format – illustrated stories, comics, and simple brochures. She encourages them to draw, ask questions, discuss and write short essays.

Once they are comfortable with this level, she introduces more demanding material, like adult books and information from non-profit organisations.

She starts them off reading two paragraphs at a time, so the task does not seem overwhelming. She tells them to try and read a little bit every day.

The result? People start reading, gathering information, questioning. “They see the wide gap between people and politicians and they are ready to protest,” says Betty.

It is a great fallacy that being able to read automatically leads to reading, let alone reading “critically”. Reading is a cultivated skill, a cultural condition, a choice.

A few swimming lessons may not make you a swimmer. You may still fear water, or lack access to a body



By Veena Gokhal

of water. Your instructor may have taught you badly; you may have little aptitude for swimming. You may not know anyone who swims.

People around you may tell you that swimming is a useless, selfish, activity.

But just as being able to swim may help you to save your life some day, being able to read, and read critically, is crucial to learning and success.

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So, what can be done to cultivate a ‘reading culture’?

Consider the obstacles that many people face - low levels of literacy, limited access to written materials, and a home or work environment that does not recognise reading as a useful thing to do.

Now, examine the strategies that Betty and others are using to combat these obstacles - setting aside time and space for reading, providing people with appropriate resources, and celebrating reading as a crucially important activity – even a civic duty – that is a joy.

The fact is that people make time for what they love. We find ways to do things we value and which we feel will benefit us, and others. There are countless examples of great writers, scholars, thinkers, statesmen and others, rising out of abject poverty, finding books, reading them by a kerosene lamp or under a bright moon, and developing critical thinking skills. But perhaps somebody gave them that first little push.

Visiting Betty was a wake up call for me. It can be a wake up call for all of us who have the privilege of reading this newspaper. Rather than waiting for someone else to do something – a non-profit organisation, a school, a teacher, the government, donors - why not start a reading club yourself?

You have an enviable skill, why not use it, share it?

Start a club in your community, school, at work, in your village, in your family. A small group could meet once a week or once a month. Focus your efforts on people who lack access to books or the time to read.

Discuss the idea with friends and others who you think can help you, including your community leaders. In addition to Betty's organisation in Mwanga, a number of others are working in innovative ways to spread the love of reading.

Let us start a reading club revolution in Tanzania! As people take the lead, the government, CSOs and public libraries will follow.

There will be a day when reading rooms like Betty's and mobile libraries full of popular Kiswahili books will reach every village in Tanzania. It all starts with you.

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