

The International Literacy Association!!??: Our Thoughts on a Name Change

by Jack Cassidy, former IRA President & Evan Ortlieb, Monash University

(IRA Board meetings are open to all IRA members. Members can attend as observers but are usually silent unless invited to comment by the Board. Few IRA members actually do attend as observers. The IRA Special Interest Group, Specialized Literacy Professionals fought for open Board meetings almost 20 years ago. One of the authors of this piece did attend the recent Board meeting)

At the October 2013 Board meeting of the International Reading Association (IRA), the Board of Directors of IRA voted to change the name of the organization to the International Literacy Association (ILA) and to re-incorporate in Delaware. A temporary board for the ILA was elected, and the process was begun. Discussion was relatively brief and only one board member spoke against the change. For the final vote, nine voted for the change, one member voted against it and one abstained; one board member was absent. ***We believe this decision was too hasty, premature, and possibly wrong!***

Some History

The name, “International Reading Association,” was voted on by the founding members of the organization fifty-nine years ago. Since then, the organization has grown tremendously and has affiliated councils all over the US and around the world. Many, if not most, of the affiliated state councils also have the word *reading* in the name (e.g. Keystone State Reading Association, Diamond State Reading Association, California Reading Association, etc.). Approximately, thirty years ago a motion was made before the IRA Delegates Assembly to change the name to “International Literacy Association.” The primary impetus for that change came from some European and Canadian delegates who felt that the initials “IRA” were too often associated with the outlawed and notorious Irish Republican Army. The Delegates Assembly consisted of representatives from the various state, local and provincial IRA affiliated councils as well as representatives from national affiliates. This group was considered the

ultimate decision making body of IRA. The motion to change the name failed overwhelmingly.

Times have changed. Tensions in Ireland have cooled considerably; the IRA is no longer the pariah it once was. The IRA Delegates Assembly was eliminated in the last decade. Apparently, legally only a board elected by the entire membership can make decisions about an organization. In other words, the IRA Board, which is elected by the entire membership, can make such a change. The relatively new bylaws of IRA identify the Board as the official decision making body of the organization.

Pros and Cons for the Change of Name

At the IRA Board meeting, the major reason for the change was that the term “literacy” is more contemporary and is more reflective of the broader focus of the association to include writing, speaking and the new literacies. Also, it was mentioned that other organizations had changed their names. The National Reading Conference (NRC) became the Literacy Research Association (LRA); the College Reading Association became the Association for Literacy Education and Research (ALER). In addition, it was suggested the name International Literacy Association would be more attractive to “Gen X-ers” and millennials, two groups that have, heretofore, not been flocking to join IRA.

The lone voice of dissent at the IRA Board meeting alluded to the long history of the IRA and its name. The new name might actually cause a decline in membership since no one would know anything about the new organization. There would also be a cost in changing the name – new logos, rebranding, massive PR efforts etc. Also, mentioned was the fact that the name change could lead to changes in the names of the premier journals (e.g. *The Reading Teacher*, *Reading Research Quarterly*, etc.).

My Thoughts – Jack Cassidy

As a member of the “silent generation” (those born before WW II), I think the Board assumed that I would automatically be opposed to such a name change. In fact, at the Board meeting, reference was made to the fact that the “older” IRA members might object, but younger members would likely embrace such a change. More importantly, the new name would help attract new members. However, since I now know that middle age ends at 75 (and since I am years away from that milestone) I do not consider myself

“older.” My feelings are ambivalent. I can see the arguments both for and against the change. Recently, when I helped found a state organization, I argued for the name Texas Association for Literacy Education (TALE). I also argued for the name change of the IRA Special Interest Group, *Specialized Reading Professionals* to *Specialized Literacy Professionals*; however, neither of these groups had a 59 year history. Also, neither of these groups, like ALER and LRA, had anywhere near the membership of IRA.

Ironically, one of the arguments against the name change 30 years ago was that the word *literacy* could connote too narrow a focus. At that time, it was associated with the field of adult literacy and IRA had a much wider audience. Today, the term *literacy* has developed into a catch-all word for all kinds of knowledge – cultural literacy, media literacy, science literacy, etc. Thus, teachers trained in any area could thus be termed “literacy specialists.”

My Thoughts – Evan Ortlieb

The Board might expect that as a member of the millennial generation my opinion would be that of relief—that finally the IRA will be giving adequate attention to other aspects of literacy not reflected by the term *reading*. Yet there are a number of reasons why I feel the International Reading Association should and must maintain its original name during this critical juncture. When I was first introduced to the field in 2005, I was told that I had to go to the IRA conference because it was the mecca of all things in the field; to this day, it retains that distinction to teachers and professors alike.

This raises the question why change the name when it trumps every other organization in the field? Just as with everything else in public spheres, it seems the aim to be more inclusive and potentially not offend those who value writing or other areas of literacy more than reading. Yet I am offended at the change away from reading. Everyone who knows anything about the field knows that the International Reading Association is more than just reading; inclusive terms, though, can water down the appeal of the organization. For instance, literacy, as it is currently defined, is somewhat inclusive but not as inclusive as Language Arts or English. But those terms are integral to other organizations, so naturally those would not make sense. What about an even broader term like Education, or better yet, Learning? But that might sound too cognitive? This never-ending slope

of inclusion is laden with problems as it no longer allows the field to identify with an already established organization that has stood the test of time.

Organizational focus changes in scope with what is hot and what is not but no one felt the need to change the name to the International Print and Digital Literacies Association several years ago when these topics were in the limelight. Moreover, a name change does not correct the budgetary difficulties of the last several years; in fact, it may signal another alarm that change can compromise existing success (i.e., having the East and West IRA conferences in the same year; having presentations heavily comprised of publishing company representatives; and publishing articles on the periphery instead of on effective reading instruction).

Call me old-fashioned, but why not let the members of the organization have a say in what transpires? It may turn out that they like the change and if so, then carry on. But its members may very well feel that reading was their attraction to the organization in the first place; that they love to teach children, adolescents, and adults to read; and that they will be resistant again in ten years to another change in name when another term becomes currently in fad.

We Agree

Both of us agree that the decision to change the name was too hasty and premature. Although we have great respect for the knowledge, diligence and integrity of the elected Board, IRA has many stakeholders – members, publishers, prospective members classroom teachers, reading specialists, council members, etc. All of these constituencies should be allowed to comment. Indeed the Board should facilitate forums where this input can take place. So, what should be done immediately – **AN IRA BOARD MEMBER WHO VOTED ON THE PREVAILING SIDE SHOULD MOVE RECONSIDERATION OF THAT VOTE. HOPEFULLY, SUCH A MOTION WOULD BE SECONDED AND PASS. STAKEHOLDERS WOULD THEN HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO COMMENT.** That is our opinion.

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Jack Cassidy, a member of the Reading Hall of Fame, has received more than 40 honors and recognitions, including the A.B.Herr Award for outstanding contributions to the field of reading. He is also a former president of the College Reading Association and the International Reading Association. His yearly surveys of What's Hot in Literacy are among the most cited in the field.

Evan Ortlieb is an internationally recognized leader in the field of literacy education whose expertise centers on struggling readers. His book series and publication of over 75 manuscripts substantiate some of his contributions to the field. His current collaborations with the International Reading Association relate to redefining the role of a reading specialist/literacy coach.