

EMBEDDED LITERACIES AND PRODUCTIVE SKILLS TRAINING¹

Traditional literacy learning and vocational skills training: The combination of literacy with vocational training has been tried in developing countries many times but it has rarely been very successful. When non-literate trainees on vocational skills training programmes are given the choice, as many programmes in Afghanistan have discovered, most of the trainees do not feel the need for literacy training. Those who provide training under the various emergency programmes in Afghanistan such as the DDR (demobilisation, demilitarisation and reintegration) programme or the Alternative Livelihoods and New Beginnings programmes regularly report a reluctance of trainees to go off for literacy learning. The same has been observed in other programmes in other countries. REFLECT in many countries, for example, has reported that in some instances, when local community groups are engaged in development projects of their own choosing, literacy is relatively rarely chosen.

The reason for this failure would seem to be two-fold. First, the kind of literacy training offered to them is not regarded as relevant to the vocational training. Most vocational training programmes, finding non-literate trainees, turn to national or major literacy learning providers who offer a standardised school-type learning programme of the ‘cat sat on the mat’ variety – i.e. simple words building up over time to more complex words. In other words, the training programme informs the non-literate trainees that they need to learn literacy *independently* of the vocational training before they can apply their new literacy skills to their chosen occupation. The second reason is that trainees realise that it will take them a long time (at least nine months and in reality a good deal longer) before their literacy can be useful in their productive activities. It is therefore no matter for surprise that such an approach does not appeal to non-literate trainees.

Embedded literacies: But most occupations contain within them a variety of literacy practices. A tailor often will keep a note book of customers’ names and measurements, lists of materials, designs etc. A carpenter too will have a record of materials, designs, orders etc. Shopkeepers have lists of goods, prices, names of customers and credit offered and repaid. These are relevant literacies, embedded within the productive activity; these are the most useful literacies for all forms of occupations.

The New Literacy Studies (Street 1984, 1993 etc) have revealed that literacy is not a single uniform competency which can be learned in a neutral environment and then applied to every situation. Rather there are many literacies. UNESCO has recognised the pluralities of literacy (UNESCO 2004), and this view is now spreading widely: most recently, for example, the Deputy Minister of Literacy and Non-formal Education in Afghanistan wrote about “a national workshop [in March-April 2004] to design and develop the literacy and NFE curriculum, *taking into account such things*

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as new approaches to the literacies (as against the old idea of literacy), transformation and changes within communities...” (Afghan MoE 2005:1).

Some of the key literacy categories are religious literacies (the person who can read the Koran or other religious text but cannot read anything else), occupational or livelihood literacies (often called commercial or economic literacies), family literacies (ways in which members of the family interact by texts) and standard or schooled literacies, the official literacy which the educated offer to non-literates. Non-literate persons already engage in many of these literacy practices (for example, by mediation or by limited recognition, etc). Current research focuses on discovering the literacy practices of different groups and finding ways of using these literacies for helping to develop their literacy skills (e.g. SOUL 1996).

The literacies embedded within every occupation are of course specific to each occupation. And many of them are also highly personalised. Each tailor will have his or her own method of recording, each car mechanic will develop particular reading lists. Some of those working in particular sectors will create their own form of shorthand. But equally there are certain items shared by all or most of those engaged in the same activity. Lists of components, of woods, of furniture, of costumes etc will be shared between craftsmen; trade magazines and catalogues will be common to all members of the trade concerned.

Learning through embedded literacies: The use of such literacies to help adults to develop their own literacy skills is often opposed for a variety of reasons. First, there is a common assumption drawn from schooling that *a basic standard literacy is the foundation of all further learning*. Such a standardised literacy is certainly the foundation of formal study, but it is not the foundation for learning an effective occupation. The assumption that such a literacy is necessary for all forms of development – for health, wealth and happiness, as a celebrated poster once put it - is of course not true; there are many healthy, wealthy and happy non-literates, just as some literates are the reverse of all three of these. And the assumption that adults, like children, need to learn first before they practise any skill (including literacy) does not hold in the field of adult learning; adults learn through doing, not in preparation for doing. Adults can learn these embedded occupational literacies without first going through the formal schooled literacy offered through educational programmes.

But the main objection to such an approach is that every literacy learner needs to *start with easy words and work up to more difficult words* and that these literacies contain some ‘difficult’ words. This again is drawn from the learning of children. Now this does need careful attention, for it does not appear to be true.

First, recent research has shown (Rogers and Uddin 2004, 2005; see for other examples of similar learning M Rosen, *The Mind at Work*) that many adults learn literacy skills without going to school or to adult literacy classes. Almost all of these learn through the texts involved in their occupations or some other immediately relevant activity. And they learn difficult words from the start – simply because they are words which they know and can relate to in their experience – car components, building contractors materials and design tasks, names of customers and items for sale, etc. The difficulty of learning such words – as again research has shown (Moon 1993) – lies not in the words themselves but in the experience of the readers. Where

difficult words lie within the regular usable experience of the learners, they can easily cope with them – the learners recognise the word in print as something they use frequently. Where even so-called ‘simple’ words lie outside the experience of the learners, the learners find these difficult to learn.

Secondly, some experimental programmes have indicated empirically that this assumption (that for adults, simple precedes complex learning) is not true. The use of embedded literacies for learning literacy skills has been tried on occasion. In India, for example, a group of women, many of whom were non-literate, who wished to learn how to maintain hand pumps, developed their literacy through the hand pump manual without using a literacy primer/textbook. REFLECT and other literacy learning programmes which have been using learner-generated materials (LGM) (where the literacy learners choose the words they wish to learn) show that the literacy learners choose words relevant to themselves, some of which may textually be ‘difficult’, but that they cope with these easily. In Jaipur, a group chose to use cinema notices as their learning texts – which demonstrates what has been revealed elsewhere, that it is easier to learn to read words the meaning of which is known than unknown words, so this is the best starting place for learning literacy skills. In Bangladesh, one project helps women sewing groups to learn relevant literacy skills through pattern books. In Sri Lanka, farmers have been learning literacy through booklets about pest management. But such participatory learning programmes have been very occasional, experimental and have not been developed in any systematic way.

Such an approach needs to be justified, for the kind of literacy learned in such programmes do not tend to increase the national literacy statistics by which developing countries’ move towards achieving the various targets set by international agencies under the EFA and MDG approaches. There are several reasons for justification. In particular, this form of literacy can be said to be increasing the literacy environment as urged by the most recent GMR on Literacy (GMR 2005).

The main justification for this approach is that it is a form of learning that is particularly appropriate for adults – and adult learning calls for very different approaches from those used when helping children to learn literacy skills. It is both experiential learning and purposeful; it fulfils the aspirations of the literacy learners in a way more formal approaches cannot. The main advantage of using the literacy practices embedded within the productive skills activities to help the trainees to develop their literacy skills is that the trainees see this learning as immediately relevant to their own set purpose – to become a (better) welder or a vehicle mechanic or construction worker etc. These literacies are part of the necessary skills to become a proficient skilled worker; they are not an ‘add on’ to the main task of skills training. Secondly, there is no delay between the learning and the application of the learning to the skill training. And thirdly, the trainer will him/herself be using such literacy practices in the course of their own skill practice, so the trainer becomes a role model for the trainee.

There are however some further considerations.

First, such literacy practices have sometimes been seen as ‘informal’, perhaps even as ‘proto-literacy’; their users are on occasion called ‘semi-literate’. This of course

implies that the formal schooled literacy in a dominant language is the standard and everything else is inferior. But to the craftsman or worker, such literacies are not inferior – they are part of the essential tools of the trade.

A second point is that such literacies do not separate literacy from numeracy. Numbers almost always form some part of the texts they use or create. Numeracy is embedded within literacy and does not need to be learned separately from literacy.

However, these literacy practices are seen to be limited; they do not always lead on to the ability to read other forms of texts – newspapers, magazines, books and booklets, formal government notices, commercial advertisement etc. They can in fact be viewed like a series of ever widening concentric circles. Some can only be used by one person – as they form memoranda to oneself. These may be highly abbreviated, symbolic literacies, often in a form of personalised shorthand. A shopkeeper's notebook is often unintelligible to anyone else. Other embedded literacies however relate to communication between the inner circle of the trade or craft concerned – an in-house literacy. The way hotel management give written instructions to their staff may be idiosyncratic (Rogers et al 2005). A third form of embedded literacies can be described as the esoteric literacy of the wider community of practice – for example, the way motor-cyclists create their own terminology and literacy to identify members of that community to each other. Newsletters, catalogues which are in more general use but restricted in practice to the members of the trade or productive community, order forms, price lists etc are the materials of that literacy. And then there are the literacies which communicate with the general public outside of the specialist trade or industrial community – invoices, letters etc. Here too are the more generalised forms of reading and writing materials – articles in the local press about (for example) trade in clothing with China or a fire in a carpentry workshop, or successes such as awards being given for good or innovative work.

From informal to formal literacies? It is this concept of ‘different circles’ of embedded literacies which could perhaps provide the opportunity for the use of embedded literacy learning within skill training to lead on to wider more general literacy learning. It is however important that we do not see these as ‘stages’ or in any linear fashion, for adults do not often learn in linear stages. Some learners will learn to use catalogues but not to keep their own personal literacies, for they feel they can keep all such ‘records’ in their head. Rather, these different literacy practices can be seen as milestones, indicators of areas to be covered, with the unusual proviso that they do not need to be completed in any set sequence. But one form of literacy can lead almost naturally onto another. Thus the personalised literacy practices of the skills being taught can move on to using catalogues, magazines etc directly related to that craft or trade, just as catalogues can lead to making individual notes of materials needed. The trainer can be encouraged to identify references to that trade or craft in the national press or otherwise and use these immediately relevant texts for further literacy learning – a fashion show of dresses, the collapse of a building on a construction site, a vehicle accident or transport breakdown etc. The use of such texts can lead to very fruitful *critical reflection* on the training being conducted rather than such training consisting solely of the mechanical application of tools and skills.

Training for embedded literacy learning: But this will call for well-trained, well-supported and innovative/creative trainers who have access to a range of relevant

materials relating to the trade or skills which form the basis of the training. And this calls for trainers who know what the embedded literacies of each skill area are and for a resource which can help the trainer obtain copies of relevant materials relating to the skills area. Which seems to argue that, rather than send non-literate vocational skills trainees off to someone else to help them to learn literacy, then best trainers of embedded literacies is someone who uses these literacies regularly – a practising craftsman or tradesman who will help the trainees with **all** the skills of the trade, including the embedded literacy practices (see for example of taxi drivers, Prinsloo and Breier 1997). As Kalman (2005:123) very recently wrote, “We think that it is indispensable for learners to be in close contact with fluent readers and writers as a way of enhancing their learning and their literacy environment” (a literate environment is not just a matter of texts but of *people* using those texts).

They too will need a programme of training and development based on critical reflection to enhance their own literacy practices while helping others to learn.

It would then seem best to combine the two elements (vocational skills training and literacy learning) rather than keep them in parallel - to embed the learning of literacy within the skills training by using the embedded literacies of the craft or trade as the teaching-learning materials, so that literacy becomes one of the skills being learned rather than something on its own; and to develop from this base into a wider literacy so that by the end of the programme the trainee will find herself/himself using a wide range of relevant materials such as newspapers and magazines etc as a normal part of their practise of the skill rather than a small range of strictly limited materials.

And this will mean not having separate literacy learning classes but simply using these texts in the training programme in exactly the same way as learning to use a chisel or a trowel or sewing machine etc. (see ‘literacy as artefacts’ in BVH New Literacies OHPs).

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