

Improving the quality of adult literacy programmes in developing countries: the ‘real literacies’ approach.

Abstract: *This paper looks at some of the characteristics of traditional adult literacy programmes in developing countries. Drawing on case studies in Asia and Africa, it outlines an experimental approach using texts found in local communities and chosen by the literacy participants rather than or as well as literacy primers, and indicates the underlying concepts on which this approach is based. It assesses some of the strengths and weaknesses of this approach and concludes that in some circumstances, it is worthy of experimental use. The main problem is how to evaluate its success in achieving its goals.*

Conversation in rural Bangladesh:

Interviewer: How long have you been the leader of this women’s group?

Woman: Seven years.

Interviewer: And you cannot read or write?

Woman: No - I have never been to school.

Interviewer: When was the last time you wrote a letter?

Woman: Ten days ago.

Interviewer: What was that about?

Woman: One of our members had lost her ration card, and I had to write to the *zilla parishad* (local council) to get a new one for her.

Interviewer: How did you write that letter?

Woman: My ten-year-old son wrote it for me.

(author’s field notes, Bangladesh 1988)

This conversation, recorded in the field in Bangladesh in 1988, is remarkable. It shows that a woman, categorised by aid agencies (and by herself) as being ‘illiterate’, is in fact quite normally, and apparently regularly, engaging in literacy activities without any sense of disadvantage. It challenges traditional approaches to adult literacy which see ‘illiterates’ as persons signally disadvantaged and unable to engage in developmental activities until they have mastered the skills of reading and writing through a special programme of adult literacy classes. Nor is this conversation unique: throughout the developing world, thousands of men and women are living their daily lives, engaging in literacy practices without having the skills of reading and writing, despite all the efforts of aid agencies to provide adult literacy classes for them (Street 1984; Hodge 1997).

Problems with adult literacy programmes: And yet it is widely agreed that existing models of adult literacy programmes have failed to deliver what has been claimed for them. Although, in some cases, impressive statistical results have been obtained from special campaigns, as in Tanzania and Nicaragua, these have not always lasted, as the high figures of those classified (by various criteria) as being ‘illiterate’ or ‘semi-literate’ in these countries show (Carr-Hill et al 1991; Rogers 1993).

Two main problems may be identified as underlying the causes of this failure of traditional approaches to teaching literacy skills to adults. The first is the problem of ‘*motivating*’ adults for participation in adult literacy learning programmes. To this end, vigorous efforts are made to exalt the value of literacy and the disadvantages of being ‘illiterate’. Exaggerated (and in many cases clearly false) promises about the socio-economic benefits of ‘being literate’ are made to the participants – what may be called the ‘you’ll-never-be-cheated’ approach. Literacy is stressed as “the key to development” (a phrase which UNESCO has disseminated widely throughout the developing world). Some practitioners have referred to a ‘constant battle’ to motivate adults and to keep them motivated. To some extent, these efforts work; several programmes have reported a good deal of success in this field. Adults do attend, sometimes in considerable numbers. But most programmes report irregular attendance and very high ‘drop-out’ rates – a feature of existing programmes which has been studied in various places (there is some disagreement as to whether these are ‘drop-outs’ or whether they are people who are ‘pushed out’ by the various constraints of the existing programmes, including the norms of ‘participation’ which may be imposed on the participants; Robinson-Pant 1997 p186).

The stress that is laid on the socio-economic benefits of learning literacy skills by agencies concerned to motivate adults to participate in adult literacy classes is however often mistaken. For it leads the

participants to assume that they will benefit directly from learning literacy skills in a classroom setting. But in practice, the socio-economic benefits which arise from literacy do not spring from *learning* literacy skills, but from *using* literacy skills in real life to achieve real goals set by the participants (ODA 1994). The aim of adult literacy programmes, then, and the measure by which their success should be judged, should not be the learning of literacy but the use of literacy skills. To give an example: if out of a class of 30 literacy learners, 25 pass the test at the end of the course, but yet after six months, it is found that only five of them *are* reading and writing in their daily lives, the success rate in this instance should surely be only five, not 25, despite the test results.

It is this emphasis on the value of *learning* rather than *using* literacy skills which accounts for the second main failure of these programmes, their inability to help the participants to *transfer the literacy skills* they learn in the classroom or literacy centre *into use in their daily lives*. The case of the Nepali woman who said, "I can read the primer (literacy textbook) but I cannot read anything else" (author's field notes, Nepal 1994) can be replicated in most countries. A recent study of those income-generation activities which accompany adult literacy classes shows this failure clearly. The participants rarely use literacy in these activities. For example, one group in Kenya engaged in goat rearing said that they could not read the word 'goat' - "because it is not in the primer". This is typical of many such programmes in many countries: what is learned in the literacy class is not normally used in the income-generation work. There are a few projects which do make this transfer. A women's group in Delhi, for instance, engaged in sewing advertising banners to hang across the roads, are using their new literacy skills to earn money. But these are rare (Rogers 1994). The numbers of persons coming through adult literacy learning programmes who can and do read fluently and with understanding regularly in their daily lives or who use writing and reading to advance their daily activities, while not completely insignificant, are in fact small. A widely distributed paper by Dr Helen Abadzi (1992) of the World Bank has revealed something of the scale of this failure, although most commentators disagree with her diagnosis of the problem as lying in the psychological characteristics of adult learners.

Throughout the world, efforts are being made to find new ways of developing more effective adult literacy programmes (some are listed in a forthcoming report on post-literacy, DFID forthcoming). New 'more relevant' primers are being created. Better training programmes for literacy instructors (facilitators; animators; volunteer teachers or whatever term is used for these persons) are being devised, especially built on more participatory approaches (*Training for Transformation* 1984; *Towards Shared Learning* 1985; PRIA 1989). New programmes of 'post-literacy' to reinforce the skill learning already achieved are being created, for example in Kenya and India (Dumont 1990; Kenya 1998; NLM 1995). In Nepal, Save the Children (US) has developed a family post-literacy programme by which literacy learners in their classes are encouraged to keep a diary of family events or a family health record (freely and/or under certain headings which have been given to them) (Manadhar 1993; Leve 1993; Comings et al 1992), and other agencies are creating ways of helping participants to transfer their new skills into their daily lives. But these are not activities which the participants themselves feel they need to keep up; they have been requested to do them by the literacy providing agencies, so they are rarely maintained for long. Completely new approaches are more rare: REFLECT which links Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA 1991) to adult literacy learning and community development activities at local level is one such new approach (Archer et al 1996). The World Bank has set up a review of new methods of developing more effective approaches to adult literacy (World Bank 1998).

This paper describes one such approach, what we have called the 'real literacies approach', which seeks to make existing models of teaching literacy skills to adults more effective. The background to the development of this approach is as follows. Between 1995 and 1998, Education for Development was invited by DFID to provide a series of training programmes for practitioners from NGO and government-organised adult literacy programmes in Bangladesh, and during 1997-8, these were opened to participants from Botswana and Namibia. Pre-course and follow-up visits were made to these countries to see the participants in their work places. Further, a series of training workshops were provided through the sponsorship of the British Council in West Africa for participants from Ghana, Sierra Leone, Cameroon, Nigeria and other countries, and other training events have been held in Nepal and South Africa for field-level and middle-level adult literacy practitioners. It was during these activities that the real literacies approach has been developed, and the approach is being used in many of these countries (Education for Development 1997-8). The paper sets out the justifications for this

approach, together with some of the issues and problems which accompany it. While not wishing to promote a new orthodoxy, it argues that this is one approach which literacy-providing agencies can experiment with in their own local context.

THE REAL LITERACIES APPROACH

The 'real literacies approach' shares the same basic principle as existing literacy programmes. It seeks to help people to develop their skills of literacy, so that they can use these enhanced skills to undertake real literacy tasks in their daily lives in the main spheres which surround them – at work, in the home and/or in the community – and thus improve the quality of life of themselves and their family/community. But the starting point for this approach is very different from that of traditional adult literacy learning programmes.

Positive, not negative: The real literacies approach does not start off by stressing the disadvantages of being 'illiterate', by saying that non-literate persons cannot engage in development until they have learned literacy skills. Nor does it exaggerate the benefits of learning to read and write skilfully. Instead, it starts by saying that every person – whatever their level of literacy skills, even entirely non-literate persons – are already engaged in literacy tasks and activities during the course of their lives. Clearly the nature of such activities will vary; but the researches of several persons such as Professor Doronila and her team in the Philippines (Doronila 1996) have revealed clearly that the level of these activities relate to the cultural and economic activity of the whole community, not to the level of skills of the individual adult. In her case studies, all the members of the fishing communities and hill terrace farmers had lower engagement with literacy tasks than all the members of the urban slums she examined. It had nothing to do with the personal skills of individuals, everything to do with the context in which they lived.

The real literacies approach then does not start with the classroom but with what the participants are already doing in their daily lives. It does not start with a deficit model (what the participants lack, what they cannot do) but with a positive attitude towards the participants (what they are already doing). Non-literate persons receive and write letters; they communicate with the school their children attend, fill in essential forms, exchange money for goods and services, travel to town; they obtain ration cards, learn from election posters and signs and other notices, understand signs over buildings and symbols on various locations such as a hospital, watch people reading newspapers and often access the information in these papers; they scan advertisements and inspect packages in the shops they visit or on the medicines they get (Barton 1994; Baynham 1995; Heath 1983).

And in dealing with these daily literacy experiences, they adopt their own strategies. Some get other persons to read and write for them. They access and create letters or other forms of literacy through the agency of other persons (family, friends, neighbours, government workers etc). Some use visual clues. One woman in Delhi reported that she had no problem catching her bus home from the market she visited; rather than ask for information, she waited until she saw someone she knew getting on the bus and therefore knew this was her bus (author's field notes, 1976). They tie knots in string or make marks on walls to keep records of transactions. (It is widely assumed that 'illiterates' cannot count, but there is a great deal of field evidence that they can count and calculate: they may not be able to do school-type sums, but they calculate frequently and accurately, Rampal et al 1998).

For literacy is of course a part of a process of communication. Communication consists of a mixture of oral, written and visual elements in different proportions. All persons engaged in communication use all of these different elements. Literate persons use non-literate strategies (visual and oral). Goods are bought, not only by reading but more by their location in the shop, their size or packaging or shape or colour. Doors are opened because of signs on them, not because of the words they carry. Even so-called 'literate' people often ask orally about buses rather than read the complicated and small print of the bus timetable. We all use a range of communication strategies (Street 1998).

The case study of the woman in Delhi who said that she chooses her bus by sight of other persons can be used to explore this further. The bus company wishes to communicate to its users that this bus will be going to certain places. It uses a number and the name of one place on its signboard; and those who

ask other more knowledgeable persons or who consult the timetable or who already know from experience realise that in the process of reaching its end point, the bus would pass close to the point where they wish to be, although this is not stated openly. Few buses (usually only express coaches) indicate every stopping place; they communicate their stopping points indirectly through a single sign and name. On the other side of the equation, the woman concerned accesses that information in her own way. She is joining in the social communication of her own community. She is not excluded from that community because she cannot read and write. She, like all non-literates, is engaging in real literacy tasks, using her own skills and experience.

Learning from real literacy tasks: The 'real literacies approach' starts with the real literacy tasks which individuals undertake in their own lives rather than with generalised literacy tasks set out in a primer. It says that the best way for adults to learn literacy skills is by using the activities which they are already undertaking or which they wish to do in their own lives. It therefore introduces these real literacy activities into the learning programme in the classroom.

The word 'real' is used here, not to denigrate the classroom programme of the traditional adult literacy programme. Rather the term indicates that these are tasks and activities which go on in the 'real' world outside of the classroom. The activities devised for adults to learn in the classroom are 'special' activities. They have been carefully created to achieve learning goals, and they use specially prepared texts. The tasks and activities which the 'real literacies approach' adopts to help adults to learn their literacy skills are based on the texts which already exist in the community, the 'found texts'.

Adult experiential learning : The justification for using the literacy tasks which individuals already undertake in their own lives as the basis for learning literacy skills lies in modern understandings of adult learning (Brookfield 1986; Jarvis 1987). Adults, it is now felt, seeking to make sense of their world, to achieve their own goals, however basic those goals may be, learn experientially (Carter 1997). They learn by doing what they are called upon to do or what they set before themselves to achieve. They learn from their everyday activities in the real world around them. They do not, like children, learn first and then practise afterwards. They learn by practising for real. They learn farming by real farming, they learn fishing by fishing, they learn cooking by cooking, they learn parenting by parenting for real. In the same way, they will learn literacy skills by engaging in real literacy tasks.

The truth of this can be seen from the fact that in three recent studies of literacy in the field in countries as far apart as Brazil, Sierra Leone and the Philippines, a significant number of persons were found who had learned their literacy skills without either going to school or attending adult literacy classes (Stromquist 1997; Pemagbi 1995; Doronila 1996). They had learned literacy skills from scratch through their daily experiences, and were using their skills for the advancement of their own lives and families.

If then adults learn most from their daily experiences rather than from pre-set prescribed learning programmes, it may be argued that the most effective way for adults to learn literacy skills is from their own daily literacy experiences. The fundamental distinction between the real literacy approach and the traditional literacy approach is that, while many traditional literacy programmes deny that illiterate adults have such daily literacy experiences, the real literacy approach starts from the assumption that all persons have some daily literacy experiences from which they can learn.

This approach is not only likely to be more effective in bringing about sustainable learning in the adult participants. It will also help towards overcoming the two main problems which (as we have already seen) face traditional programmes. First, if the participants identify what they want to read and write, the literacy tasks they are already undertaking, the communications they wish to engage in, this will clearly help towards the motivation of the participants. Rather than doing what the literacy teaching agency says they should do (primer exercises), they will be doing what they want to do, reading texts and writing scripts which they have chosen.

Further, it will help with the second problem, enabling the participants to take this learning back out into the community. The problem which many adult literacy learners have is to see how the primer exercises which they learn in the classroom can be used in their daily lives. For many people, literacy has become compartmentalised - they see it as an activity which goes on in a literacy centre, as being

school-based, divorced from their reality. They cannot see how they can use the literacy textbook at home; its discourse is quite different from their discourse outside the classroom. On the other hand, real literacy tasks identified by the literacy learners themselves from their own experience and brought in from the local community to the literacy learning centre will clearly be of greater relevance than primer exercises devised centrally and applied to all the different adult literacy groups in diverse communities which is the norm in most literacy programmes. These adults will be learning for a purpose, their own purpose, to fulfil a real literacy task which they have chosen and which they wish to achieve.

Contextualisation and decontextualisation: The relevance of the literacy activities which go on in the classroom to the participants' daily lives is universally recognised as a vital component of any programme developed for adults. But in literacy, it is not a matter simply of choosing words which appear to be relevant to the literacy learners. For literacy (reading and writing) is not just decoding words and sentences. Rather, it is finding out the *meaning* of written words and using these words to create meaningful messages. We can see this plainly when we say that non-literate persons stare at a text "with incomprehension"; they cannot make out the meaning of the words and sentences. The aim of learning literacy skills is not to identify individual letters and words but to get the sense of the text.

But *meaning derives from context*: there is no meaning without context. Traditional approaches to literacy teaching tend to assume that words have an intrinsic meaning, a universal meaning which will apply in all contexts. But this is not true. Words are context-dependent, not autonomous.

Traditional literacy primers decontextualise words or sentences. These words are printed on a page and they have no reality apart from being in a textbook. For example, the word 'ball' may be printed on a textbook page. A picture may indicate that it means a play ball and not a dance (which in some contexts the word 'ball' means). But the word 'ball' even when used in a game can mean different things. A child's plaything is quite different in meaning from the word 'ball' when applied to a World Cup football game. A statement such as "Owen got a good ball from Collymore", raises all kinds of questions, such as how can a ball be 'good' (or 'bad')? Similarly, the word 'cat' used in a literacy primer is decontextualised: a picture may show that it means a domestic cat rather than a tiger or a whip, but even then, it has no meaning because it has no context.

We can illustrate this from a Hindi primer written for women in India (SRC Rajasthan). Among the words chosen were *agni* (fire) and *puri* (water), on the grounds that these were words which would be of particular interest to women. But the women who were called upon to learn through such decontextualised words asked, 'when do we ever need to read these words or to write them?' They did not see the relevance *to them* of such words in written form, however often they used them orally. When, however, these words were placed in the context of two recent newspaper reports, one of a slum fire which devastated an urban area which these women knew, killing some people with whom the group were acquainted, and the other of a shortage of water in their own locality and which they all had experienced, immediately the words *agni* and *puri* had meaning, they made sense; and the women immediately became interested in learning to read those words *in that context*. Decontextualised, they were not relevant; contextualised, they were clear motivators.

The traditional approach to adults learning literacy, drawing on school models, says that adults, like children, must learn to read decontextualised words first (indeed to learn letters first and then decontextualised words) and only later to see them in sentences when they suddenly gain meaning. Only after *learning* can they *use* words in contexts. The programme is thought to be sequential: the participants pass from 'illiteracy' to a literacy class and to becoming neo-literate, then post-literate, and then into continuing education based on new uses of literacy, the process ending eventually by the participants becoming independent readers (ACCU 1988; ACCU 1993).

Adult learning theory, on the other hand, says that adults do not normally learn in such a linear way. Adult learning takes place to meet an immediate goal and when that goal has been reached, the learning motivation ceases. It is therefore a much more 'messy' process. And because it takes place to meet immediate needs arising from real situations, adults often find it difficult to learn effectively from decontextualised textbook material. They learn through the meaning of the material, which arises from the immediate situation. Learning for adults is always situated learning. It is always purposeful, to

achieve a goal which the adults have set for themselves (Rogers 1977). This is the primary justification for bringing contextualised literacy activities and materials chosen by the adult literacy learners into the classroom. They bring in with them the texts they wish to read or the material they wish to write; they choose the purpose for which they wish to learn literacy skills.

Freire saw this, and therefore chose generative words from within a real context – the *favella* in which the participants lived (Freire 1972). But he then decontextualised these generative words (although the discussion which accompanied the literacy learning tried to keep the context alive). The words were broken down into syllables, so that new (decontextualised) words could be created and learned. It was only after they had been learned that they were put back into a context where they gained meaning.

The real literacies approach then encourages the participants to bring their own literacy tasks – and with that their own literacy texts – into the classroom. The agencies invite the participants to decide not simply when and where they wish to learn but also **what** they want to learn, what tasks they wish to do. And this means that behind every adult literacy class there lies a process of surveying the local literacy practices of the learning group and of its members. This is a pre-requisite for the learning programme.

The process is relatively straightforward, although as we shall see it calls for special qualities from the facilitator. Participants are encouraged to bring along some real literacy activities which they wish to engage in, some real literacy texts which they wish to learn to read (or write). Small groups work inside the class on these tasks, students helping students, sharing experiences.

Real literacy materials or real literacy tasks?:

In traditional literacy programmes, the term ‘materials’ means two things: the special teaching-learning texts (primers and other teaching-learning materials such as flash cards etc) which the providers prepare and issue, and secondly, specially prepared texts designed either to get information across or to help the readers to improve their literacy skills. ‘Materials’ refers to those pieces of writing created specifically to help people to learn something. They may be books, booklets or other printed matter written by experts or by participatory workshops, or they may be learner-generated, in which case the participants help to prepare the learning materials (Meyer 1996).

In the real literacies approach, however, ‘materials’ are not something specially written for learning. They are the real written or printed texts which exist in the local community. In every town and village there are lots of these materials – election posters, bus tickets, bank forms, T-shirts, religious materials, calendars, graffiti on walls, wrappings around food or cigarettes or medicines, newspapers etc. They get everywhere, these real literacy materials. Entering a Nepalese village several kilometres from the main road, the first sight seen was a young person sitting on a wall reading a film magazine. Lists drawn up in Bangladesh, Ghana and Nigeria reveal a much wider range of these texts than had been anticipated (Pemagbi et al 1996; Omolewa et al 1997).

However, when the ‘real literacies approach’ was first being developed in connection with the training programme for adult literacy workers from Bangladesh (1995-98) (Education for Development 1997-8), stress was laid on identifying and using these ‘real literacy materials’ in class. The literacy workers (at facilitator and middle level management) were encouraged to go out into the community, to help the participants to survey what texts existed in the local environment and to bring these into the classes. The facilitators were trained in how to use such texts for learning literacy skills. Government notices, graffiti on walls, extension leaflets, post office material, health forms, newspapers and magazines, shop advertisements etc were among the material used in classroom contexts for learning literacy skills.

But the traditional approach took over once more. Parts of these ‘found texts’ began to be handled in the classes in a decontextualised way. Election posters in Bangladesh were used to help the students to identify a word here and a word there taken out of their context, just like an alternative primer. Newspapers in Egypt were used in the same way. In Botswana, material was collected from a Coca Cola stand and brought in by the facilitators, with the consequent danger of participants learning to read the words ‘Coca Cola’ and nothing else (Education for Development 1998). They were simply

treated as containing 'words', not messages. The literacy learning programme went back to the traditional paradigm, but using a different 'primer' made up of words chosen from texts identified by the literacy learners.

This danger however seems to be less when we talk of 'real literacy *tasks*' rather than 'real literacy materials'. What is the task which is intended by the newspaper, the election poster, the Coca Cola advertising material? How can we join in that task? What kind of materials will we use and what processes will we engage in? (It is interesting that in the case of 'Coca Cola', the advertisers do not in fact intend anyone to 'read' the words but simply to recognise the image, its shape and colour. That is the literacy (or communicative) task. A person does not need to be 'literate' to get the message and to buy the product).

The reformulation of this approach to adult literacy in terms of 'real literacy tasks' also helps to overcome another issue relating to real literacy materials. Positing the learning process in terms of tasks has enabled the programme organisers and participants to identify materials which do not yet exist in the local community, texts which need to be 'fetched' into the social environment: magazines, for example, which do not reach into some villages, or post office letter forms etc. And it also helps to identify activities which will require the participants to 'create' texts for themselves – letters, notes, shopping lists, accounts, for example. The materials to be used for learning literacy cannot be confined to those texts which may already exist locally; texts can also be *fetched* into the community or *created* in the process of completing literacy tasks chosen by the participants.

Case studies: A telling example of this approach comes from a literacy programme in Jaipur run in the early 1980s by the State Resource Centre of Rajasthan. Members of a women's literacy group in an urban slum indicated that they were bored by the literacy primer, although it had been written specifically with women's interests in mind. When asked what they wanted to read, several of them brought along cinema notices from the local newspapers of films then currently showing in the town. They went to the cinema regularly, despite their poverty. The facilitator, getting the participants to work in groups, used these texts for the class. Because they were keen, and because they already knew all the words on those notices and their meanings (the name and street of the cinema, the title of the film *Ram Tera Desh*, the names of the film stars, the dates, the prices of the seats etc), the participants were able to learn to read these notices speedily and with a high level of achievement. Their confidence and pride quickly grew. They took the texts home with considerable excitement (more than can be said of literacy learners with primers) and showed others that they could read these notices. Other women asked to join the literacy classes, saying, "We did not know that literacy was like this". It was possible to build many different activities on this – such as numeracy work based on the prices of seats and class numbers, a group visit to the film, discussion on gender roles as portrayed in the film and even the writing by the class group of a short notice about the film to distribute around their slum. Although this programme came to a sudden halt because the slum residents were removed from that site (which they had been occupying illegally) and the programme was never resumed, nevertheless, it is an illustration of how adult participants can learn literacy skills through a task which they choose for themselves (author's field notes 1983).

It is important that this example should not be taken as a new universal model. Those who are experimenting with the real literacies approach are not advocating that everyone should use cinema notices. What they are saying is that literacy activities from the local community can be included among the various learning tasks which will help the participants to learn literacy skills. The identification and collection of these materials is often done by both the facilitator and the participants, and indeed other persons in the locality may help when it becomes known that the literacy centre is collecting such material. In the programme LABE (Literacy and Adult Basic Education) in Uganda, the women brought in health census forms and filled them up in class, one for each family represented, again one student helping another in a co-operative way. This was what concerned them at the time (Kiirya pers. communic.). In Nigeria, it was signs and notices in the market. The tasks, and the materials which go with those tasks, will always be locally determined.

The real literacies approach then is based on the premise that adults will learn literacy skills more effectively and transfer these skills into daily use in their lives if they are able to bring their own literacy

tasks into the classroom rather than try to take the teacher's literacy tasks learned in the classroom out into their daily lives. This would seem to be common sense.

The use of the real literacies approach is spreading, and is beginning to have an effect on the transfer of literacy skills from the classroom into daily use in people's lives. In Bangladesh, a Real Literacies Forum (now re-titled the New Literacies Forum) has been established to promote the use of real literacy tasks in literacy learning programmes. Training programmes for literacy animators have been developed and papers circulated. In West Africa, a regional grouping has emerged based on Sierra Leone, and a handbook produced. Two manuals to help literacy instructors in the use of real materials in literacy programmes have been prepared, both of them arising from a workshop held in Ghana for literacy practitioners from West Africa (Pemagbi et al 1996; Omolewa et al 1997), and similar aids are in preparation in Bangladesh. It remains to be seen whether this approach is more successful than earlier movements, but its success will be judged, not by how many people learn to read and write in class (i.e. how many pass a test showing that they *can* read and write certain set texts, as in traditional adult literacy programmes), but by how many actually are reading and writing in their everyday lives (i.e. what literacy activities they *do* do).

SOME ISSUES AND PROBLEMS WITH THE REAL LITERACIES APPROACH

We need however to look at some of the issues and problems which have been identified with this approach to learning literacy skills and which may hinder its wider adoption.

Different literacies: The first is that recent research has demonstrated convincingly that there are many different kinds of literacy tasks (Baynham 1995). Professor Doronila in the Philippines studied thirteen local communities and found many different kinds of literacy practices among them (Doronila 1996). Similarly, Barton and Hamilton have shown in a different context how literacy skills are used by different groups to achieve quite different purposes (Barton and Hamilton 1998).

A study of a Tamil village (Ayun Poruvai in Trichy District) conducted in 1998 found several literacy focal points, each with its own literacy:

- the school and adult literacy centre (school-based literacy)
- a women's group meeting in one of the women's houses (developmental literacy)
- the church (religious literacy)
- the clinic (health literacy)
- the shop (commercial literacy)
- village administrative office (developmental literacy, extension)

There was also a post-literacy village library containing mostly developmental texts from extension agencies, but very rarely used. (There was no police station or post office in this village, both literacy focal points in many other villages). Apart from this, there were the domestic literacies throughout the village – newspapers, letters, calendars on the walls of most houses. And there were also literacies for special events such as festivals or weddings and funerals, and particularly elections. Some of these literacies of course overlapped: the extension literacy of the Village Administrative Office was close to but wider than that of the clinic; and the school-based literacy primer attempted to use developmental literacies, although this text never came close to the literacy practices needed to participate in developmental literacies. On the other hand, the literacy practices of the self-help group was mostly participant-generated, keeping records of savings and trading in connection with mushroom growing and gem polishing etc; and the religious literacies were quite distinct and were felt to be distinct (author's field notes, 1998).

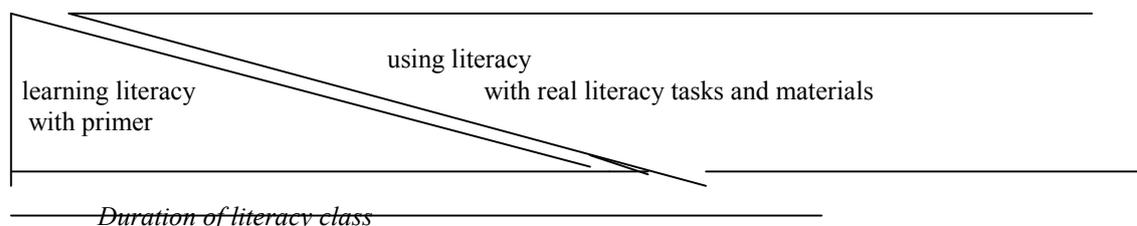
This is not unusual: in South Africa, studies have again revealed that different groups have different literacies. For example, the literacy practices of taxi drivers were shown to be specific to that occupation (using maps, road signs, engine manuals, receipts, names on buildings etc, Prinsloo and Breier 1996). The same can be said of different groups such as hospital porters (ambulance, drugs, bandages, names of wards and departments etc) or workers in a car factory or a mining company (safety notices, instructions, products and processes, machines, materials, notices of meetings etc).

And in the light of this growing awareness of many different local literacies, to put those involved in very different literacies through a common literacy programme using generalised primers would not seem to be the most effective way of helping these adults to learn literacy skills. There can be little justification for having a common literacy learning programme or a common primer: why should taxi drivers and hospital porters or car workers leave their workplaces and sit down together to study a common primer consisting of decontextualised words like ‘ball’ and ‘cat’ etc (or their linguistic equivalents)?

It is often argued that existing literacy primers are needs-based: that the needs of farmers or fisherfolk or indeed of women have been identified by experts, and that these needs have been used for creating words for learning (ACCU 1992; ACCU 1996). But the needs are generalised needs – they are the needs of *all* farmers or all women or all fisherfolk etc. They are not specific to the different groups of adults who are wishing to learn literacy skills. But (for example) individual women have individual concerns and interests. Those with young children have quite different concerns from older women or unmarried women. Again, different farmers and different fisherfolk will have their own interests and concerns: for example, one Madras fishing community was worried about fishermen from neighbouring areas using motorboats to fish in their traditional areas, a worry that was not represented in their literacy primer.

And for adults, it is these *specific* interests and concerns which form the motivation for learning, not *generalised* needs. Adult groups are not like children’s classes, grouped together because they are more or less at the same point of their development. Any adult group will be much more widely varied than any class of children. The tea pickers in Bangladesh or in Sri Lanka will not have much in common with the nearby farmers; they have developed their own literacy practices.

The problem then is how to encompass such a wide range of diversity within an adult literacy learning programme. And this raises a second issue, the **relationship between the real literacies approach to the traditional approach to learning literacy**. The training programmes with the Bangladesh literacy practitioners referred to above suggest that the most practical and effective way of developing this approach is to create an overlap, to introduce real literacy tasks into existing literacy classes slowly, gradually taking over from the existing primer. An overlapping model has been developed:



Note: a version of this diagram appeared initially in ODA 1994.

It is unlikely that a complete abandonment of the existing pattern of classes will be possible; it is not likely to be acceptable to either providers or participants. At the moment, for example, real literacies approaches are being introduced into several NGO programmes in Bangladesh alongside the existing programme, and the Government programme of the Directorate of Non-Formal Education is also experimenting with real literacy materials, again alongside the official primer. Field reports indicate an increase in motivation among the participants.

A third issue is the doubt which a number of providers have that in many local communities in rural areas of developing countries **there are not enough real literacy materials** to be used in this way. This is undoubtedly a major issue with this approach to learning literacy skills. It is true that, in some contexts (especially those of non-standardised or non-dominant languages), there may be a real lack of found texts (Robinson 1990, 1994). But surveys of real literacy materials in Ghana, Nigeria, India and Bangladesh, among other cases, have revealed that in fact much more exists than is often recognised (Pemagbi et al 1996; Omolewa et al 1997; Hodge 1997). There is at times something of a resource

myopia about literacy (as about other forms of development). The community is viewed in the same way as the so-called 'illiterates', as suffering from a deficit of literacy materials which need to be brought in from the outside. Such a comment often comes from people who are looking for a certain type of text, and who overlook other kinds of found texts in the community.

Some traditional programmes, working on the assumption that there is nothing for people to read in many villages, have laid stress on the necessity of providing post-literacy programmes, supplying follow-up or supplementary materials to local reading centres. India and Kenya are currently launching on major post-literacy programmes (Education for Development forthcoming). But post-literacy programmes have in general been even less successful than the initial literacy teaching programmes. They usually reach only a small fraction of those who complete adult literacy classes; and evaluations of village libraries regularly reveal their lack of use by those for whom they are intended (see DFID forthcoming).

But (as we have seen above) it may be more helpful to answer this objection by concentrating on real literacy *tasks* rather than real literacy *materials* (found texts). In every community, there is no scarcity of 'real literacy tasks', activities which require written material to be brought in or created to achieve a task which some people wish to promote and other members of the community wish to participate in. If there are no such literacy tasks, then there surely is no point in helping adults in that community to learn literacy skills which they will never be able to use. One does not bother to learn the skill of fishing when one is in an inland area without the opportunity to use those skills. One does not learn rice farming in an arid landscape. In these circumstances, it may be necessary to build up a literate environment until there are enough real literacy tasks for the community members to engage in before teaching the literacy skills needed to do these tasks.

In part, of course, this comment is built on a view that **many of the found texts are too difficult for literacy learning**. Again, there may be much truth in this. In one instance in Bangladesh, a group of women in a BRAC adult literacy class said they wanted to work with the Marriage Registration Form. But after a time they indicated that it was too complex and that the print was too small for them. It was possible in this case to encourage the group and the facilitator to try to re-write the form in simpler language, to debate the need for all the different kinds of information required on the form, and to make representations to the local registration office about the usefulness of this form in its present format to the persons it was intended for (Mazhar 1998).

We need however to distinguish two elements in this comment. First, there is the idea that this approach is *too difficult for the literacy animators/facilitators* to use in their work. This may of course be largely true; for many of the facilitators themselves find the tasks of reading what is needed for their daily lives and writing such texts as they need very difficult.

It is clear from the Bangladesh example cited above that many literacy facilitators require a great deal of support in the real literacies approach. They will be called upon to be creative and innovative, to respond to material they may not have seen or examined in detail before. It has been recognised that better initial training is needed, and new formats are being introduced in Bangladesh. Training manuals have been developed in West Africa and are in course of preparation in Bangladesh. But on its own, initial training will not be enough. Regular on-going support will be needed. The facilitators, like the participants, will be called upon to look at their own experiences of literacy, at their own literacy practices, and to learn from these. A process of critical reflection on experience is called for in adult learning, and the facilitators (as in all good adult education) will be learning alongside and from their literacy learners. The Real Literacies Forum is intended as such a support group for Bangladeshi field workers.

Secondly however, there is the question whether some words in texts which the participants have chosen will be '*too difficult for the learner-participants*'. The concept of 'difficult words' lies behind this comment. Several post-literacy programmes such as that run by FIVDB, one of the most prominent literacy NGOs in Bangladesh, set out to help adults to learn a certain number of new words of increasing complexity (Jennings 1984). The same idea also lies behind the practice of producing 'easy reading material' for adults at different levels, based on the vocabulary used and the length of sentences. This concept is taken from school where graded readers are common (UNICEF 1993; ERA

1991). But recent research shows that even for children, there is no such thing as a uniform level of difficulty in reading material. Children (and adults) are able to cope with reading material according to their experience, not skill level. One child will find a book easy because he/she knows and understands the background well; another child in the same class or group will be unable to decipher the same book because he/she does not have experience of its world (Moon 1993). There is no such thing as a 'level of literacy', no such thing as 'difficult' words which applies to all persons. This is a figment of the imagination of educationalists. Words depend on the context in which they are used and the persons they are used with. Adults use any words, however 'difficult' they may be, to achieve a task they wish to complete.

However, much more significant is the comment that **some (perhaps many) of the participants in adult literacy classes cannot find any real literacy tasks in their own lives with which they wish to engage**. Field studies suggest that this is so.

To examine this in more depth, we need to look at student motivations. Although this area has not been adequately researched, it would appear that there are three main motivations for participating in adult literacy programmes. First, there is the *symbolic* motivation, the desire to join the 'literate' group, to have the schooling which others have had and which brings with it a status. "If you are illiterate, people stare at you as if you are stupid", said one Bangladeshi woman, outlining her reasons for joining and staying in the literacy class. There is no intention here to use the literacy skills; rather the aim is to gain increased confidence and self-worth through being able to state that one 'can read and write'. There are many adults who participate for this purpose. Secondly, there is the *opportunity* motivation. Literacy skills will open the door to other kinds of activity. One literacy participant in a Botswana Game Reserve said that there was nothing he wanted to read or write in his daily life, but that he attended because he wanted to get a driving licence. Others want to learn literacy skills so as to be eligible for a loan rather than to use them daily. For how many persons this opportunity motivation is the primary motivation is not clear. Thirdly, there is the *instrumental* motivation – the desire to use literacy skills to keep their own accounts, to write letters, to read newspapers or magazines etc. These – and these alone – plan to use literacy skills regularly. Individuals may attend for one or a mixed group of these motivations, and this will influence their response to attempts by the facilitators to help them to use their newly acquired literacy skills in their daily lives.

The desire of literacy practitioners to help participants to transfer their literacy skills into use in their daily lives then will not always meet the intentions of the literacy participants. Many will be unable to identify situations where they feel any need to read anything or to write anything, unable to identify any texts (found or fetched) which they wish to read. This is one of the reasons why existing adult literacy provision is largely ineffective. And it is for this reason that the 'real literacies approach' can never be a universal approach to improving the quality of adult literacy programmes. However, some strategies have been developed to help with moving the participants forward in this respect. The facilitators can on occasion serve as a role model, indicating areas in their lives where literacy activities have enhanced what they were doing. On other occasions, daily activities which the participants engage in can be discussed in the class to see whether literacy might improve these activities. In one BRAC programme in Bangladesh, for example, the women are embarking on a discussion of different recipes for cooking, leading (it is hoped) to the writing of these recipes down (author's field notes 1998).

This issue, that the real literacies approach cannot meet the differing needs of all the different participants, provokes a further question which has been raised by some practitioners. It has been argued **that this approach will not lead to development, to socio-economic change**. Indeed, it is argued, the use (and therefore the validation) of existing found texts may even lead to the confirmation of existing inequalities in the local community.

Two comments may be made here. The first is that – as the Bangladesh Marriage Registration Form example shows – it is possible to engage in real literacy tasks with an element of *critical awareness and discussion*. In Jaipur, the film was looked at with a careful analysis of how gender roles were portrayed in the film. In Ghana, a universal wall notice 'Don't urinate here', which the participants saw every day, was taken for learning. None had any difficulty learning to read these words. But at the same time, the session led to a lively discussion of power within the community and to some attempts to re-compose the notice in different forms ("Who wrote it? who is it meant for? why did they

use English? why did they use a long word? could it be rewritten in more effective language? could one devise a sign for those who could not read? etc”). In Botswana, the Coca Cola example led to discussions about cultural invasion and globalisation, some being in favour, some against the presence of multi-national companies like this in the country. To use real literacy materials decontextualised will not lead to change. To engage in real literacy tasks with critical awareness may.

Indeed, it may be argued that real literacy materials lend themselves to critical analysis much more easily and effectively than the sample texts chosen by the literacy agency. Each text can be scrutinised and examined critically. Who produced it? who is it aimed at? what is its purpose? why is it in this language and format? Questions of power arise naturally from this analysis. The contents can be discussed (for example, how women are portrayed in the real materials). Examples of materials which can be rewritten in more comprehensible and inclusive language can easily be found. In one case, a literacy group using real shop signs for learning literacy skills was urged to rewrite local shop signs in the local language (Education for Development, Nigeria 1997).

This raises an interesting point – whether one can work with a group of literacy learners to examine the literacy primer with critical awareness. Who wrote it? What words and images are included and what are excluded? It will of course not be easy to engage in such discussion for many reasons, but in some contexts this has already begun.

But there is a second point here relating to the encouragement of developmental change through literacy classes. The real question is, *whose development is important?* whose views will predominate (Education for Development *Development* 1997). For example, in Brazil, a recent evaluation found that some of the women participants in a Freirean literacy programme were using their new skills for reading fashion magazines and writing Christmas cards rather than using these skills for “further learning” which was the goal of the providing agencies (Stromquist 1997 p151). The issue here is how far reading film or fashion magazines or writing greetings cards are justified uses of literacy skills, whether they constitute development *in terms of the participants*, even if it is not development in terms of the providers of literacy programmes. This will always be a moot issue for development agencies, whose voice counts? (Chambers 1997).

A further issue is **how far such an approach can be scaled up into a national literacy programme**. Insofar as a government may wish to have a uniform programme of study for literacy, it is clear that to help different local communities of fisherfolk to deal with the real tasks they are faced with, quite apart from the tasks which different groups of tea pickers or dairy farmers or shoemakers or domestic workers, or different social and cultural groups will choose for themselves cannot result in a common learning programme.

The problem is not a simple one. If real literacies are local, meeting the different aspirations and intentions of different groups, using local real materials, how can they be adapted into a national movement? Is it appropriate to the Indian Total Literacy Campaign or to the Bangladesh Non-Formal Education programme or to the Egyptian Campaign for the Eradication of Illiteracy?

But there is today, in many developing countries, a greater willingness to encourage local diversity in learning programmes. In India, for example, the Total Literacy Campaign encourages the various Districts to develop learning programmes which are relevant to their own districts. In other countries, decentralisation of learning is being encouraged. And there are some interesting initiatives: bottom-up approaches by which local government agencies or NGOs make proposals to national bodies to meet specific local needs; work-based literacies; assistance to local developmental groups such as credit and savings groups or income-generation groups etc. So that a national programme can perhaps be built on a wide diversity of local initiatives sharing common guidelines.

The major problem about such an approach, however, is the difficulty of **finding common measures of achievement** to satisfy national governments searching for statistics to convince the international community that they are making progress with what is seen as ‘the problem of illiteracy’. How can the different advances made by taxi drivers and hospital porters and abattoir workers (as in Botswana) in developing their use of literacy skills *in their own contexts* be measured? How can we address the question of participants achieving a standardised level of literacy?

This is the issue to which further research is being addressed, using ethnographical approaches to evaluation and measurement (Vulliamy 1990; Powell 1991; Hill and Parry 1994; Goyder et al 1998). This is the next task for adult literacy practitioners. Without this, the real literacies approach, however sound its basis in adult learning theory and in the new literacy studies may be, is unlikely to be adopted by the World Bank, UNESCO or other international agencies or by national governments. In their search for statistics, these bodies will remain steadfast to the traditional paradigm, however ineffective that has proven to be.

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