

**Report of**  
**Ethnography and Literacy and Numeracy, Uppingham Seminar,**  
**2-5 October 2008**

**Introduction: Context Setting**

Uppingham Seminars have been running for the last ten years, mainly organised by Professor Alan Rogers. They are an informal space for a group of practitioners and academics to engage with each other around a central theme. This time the seminar took place in its original founding place at the Falcon Hotel in a small market town in central England, Uppingham, Rutland, UK, that had given the series its name Uppingham Seminars. The theme was Ethnography and Literacy/Numeracy. This year's UppSem, as it is popularly known, was special because Alan Rogers was organising it as his last seminar before retiring from this aspect of his very active life.

This year's seminar was attended by 26 practitioners and academics with 11 from countries representing the northern and southern hemispheres (USA, Uganda, South Africa, Nepal, Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Mexico and Brazil). See list of participants attached.

The seminar took place over three days, from midday 2 October 2008 to the afternoon of 5 October 2008.

Alan Rogers gave some brief introductory remarks about Uppingham Seminars, their origin, interestingly, as a birthday arrangement for himself and how they thrived over the last 10 years; now he was organising this one as his retirement cool off. He communicated apologies from invited participants who were not able to make it to the seminar for many reasons.

The participants were informed about the LETTER project in Ethiopia in which Alan Rogers, Brian Street, Dave Baker, George Openjuru and Rafat Nabi were actively involved. They were also informed of the work being done by Rafat Nabi, Alan Rogers and Brian Street on ethnographic studies of literacy in Pakistan; and in Malawi and Uganda by Alan Rogers with Kholowa Foster of Malawi and George Openjuru of Uganda. The reports of these studies were made available in the seminar. Other materials, books and reports available for viewing and some for taking by overseas participants included:

1. A book by Shirley Brice Heath and Brian V Street (2008) *Ethnography: Approaches to Language and Literacy Research*, New York and London: Teachers' College Press and National Conference on Research in Language and Literacy
2. Nirantar (2007) *Exploring the Everyday: Ethnographic approaches to Literacy and Numeracy*, New Delhi: Nirantar and ASPBAE; [www.nirantar.org](http://www.nirantar.org)
3. Uta Papen (2005) *Adult Literacy as Social Practice, More than skills*, New Approaches to Adult Languages, Literacy and Numeracy. London and New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group.
4. Reports of LETTER project in Ethiopia workshops and final report

5. Street, B, Baker, D. ,Rogers, A 2006 Adult teachers as researchers: ethnographic approaches to numeracy and literacy as social practices in South Asia *Convergence* Vol XXXIX (1) pp. 31-44
6. Alan Rogers and Brian Street (2008 October), *Ethnography and Literacy/Numeracy in developing societies: Background paper for Uppingham Seminar October 2008*. Unpublished paper on the website.
7. Two recent papers from the *International Journal of Educational Development* vol. 28 (No. 6) 2008 , one by Leslie Bartlett (a member of the Seminar) *Literacy's verb: exploring what literacy is and what literacy does* (pp 737-753) and the other by A Wedin, *Literacy and power – the cases of Tanzania and Rwanda* (pp 754-763).

Some of the above background papers were distributed through email to the participants to read in preparation for the seminar.

The participants were informed that Open Society Institute had indicated their interest in the possibility of supporting a project that may come out of the Uppingham Seminar. This element of a project made this year's seminar different from the previous seminars, as it would contain an element of concrete planning as well as exploring the central issues involved.

## **1. THE LETTER PROGRAMME AND THE SEMINAR TIMETABLE**

The next part of the workshop was chaired by Professor Brian Street who provided a brief summary of the LETTER project and its relation to this event. The participants were given the opportunity to chart the course of the three days timetable and to agree on the agenda for the seminar around the themes of the seminar. It was agreed that the discussion should try as much as possible to focus on providing time to draw on the diverse and rich experiences and perspectives available in the room. During the three days, a range of lively discussions took place in both plenary and group discussions in a very informal way. An attempt has been made in this report to reflect the various discussions and views as much as possible.

**The key theme of the Seminar was the relationship between research and teaching in adult literacy.**

The structure of the seminar was very informal with presentations and input being volunteered by the participants. It was agreed that all processes should aim at agreeing on the last day in which direction we would like to move the LETTER and other projects forward.

A brief presentation was made about the LETTER (Learning for Empowerment Through Training in Ethnographical Research) project. This included how the LETTER began, where it began (outlined in the *Convergence* paper and in the background paper) and what future trends might look like. The participants were informed of how the LETTER idea began with Nirantar, an NGO in Delhi when it was realised that adult literacy teachers were not taking into account the everyday life and beliefs of the learners in teaching reading and writing. From Nirantar, India, it was introduced into Ethiopia in Africa. In spite of the historical

association between the Delhi and the Ethiopia workshops, the meaning and activities of LETTER in Ethiopia were not exactly the same as those in Nirantar, India. In both cases, however, practical training of literacy teachers was done to help them learn how to get to know what engagement the learners have with literacy and numeracy in their everyday lives.

The LETTER training is about providing literacy teachers with ethnographic style research techniques which can help them to know what is going on in the learner's everyday life environment. It should not be seen as training in anthropology or what would be called pure ethnographic methods but rather, as Bloome and Green have termed it, an 'ethnographic perspective'. This kind of training was first presented in India in two workshops with a group drawn from Nepal, India, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Ethiopia. The LETTER programme was replicated with some modification in Ethiopia in three workshops. In Ethiopia, the first workshop focused on sharing some understanding and methods of ethnographic-style data gathering. The second workshop was focused on reflecting on and analysis of such data, and the third was on how to use the information in teaching literacy in ways that make it relevant to the learner's everyday literacy practices, including helping to develop the local literacy and numeracy practices in the communities in which the learners are based.

Thinking about the LETTER training process was the main preoccupation in the seminar as participants thought about how to move the programme forward in the light of increasing requests for such training from Africa, Asia and Latin America. The discussion included how to secure funding for the projects, as well as the design and plans for the future of LETTER.

With the above background information about LETTER, the following issues were suggested as areas of concern which could frame the discussion during the two days seminar. These areas are:

- The need to take a critical look at the LETTER approach; what are the possible difficulties with this approach? The need to find out if we are not imposing something on the literacy learners
- The need to know how the LETTER methodology relates with other approaches, e.g. REFLECT
- The teacher-as-researcher tradition as another area which will need to be carefully examined
- The role of numeracy in the UK as well as in other contexts; the North/South dialogue on the issue of literacy and numeracy training
- The process of ethnography - can it be institutionalised and/or scaled up? How do we articulate other people's experiences in literacy programmes?
- What is the role of the universities in this process? - that is, University-Community Partnership
- Pedagogy, and curriculum in relation to pedagogy
- The politics of ethnographic work
- Language issues also need to be discussed, for example, which language(s) are appropriate for use in particular literacy programmes

- The regions also need to be considered, because the focus so far has been on Africa and India; Latin America is often ignored
- How do we evaluate and justify this kind of project to agencies that are used to more quantitative approaches and need measurement of outcomes etc?

These issues were tabled in broad terms for discussion during the three days of the seminar. What follows are summaries of the discussions.

## **2. ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACHES TO TRAINING IN ADULT LITERACY AND NUMERACY**

Much of the discussion centred on two matters: a) the training of literacy and numeracy practitioners in ethnographic-style approaches to literacy and numeracy; and b) the relationships between ethnographic-style research on local (informal) literacy and numeracy practices and the teaching of formal literacy and numeracy to adults.

In relation to the use of LETTER, the following were seen as pertinent to framing the discussions.

- what are the politics, the theory, the methodology, ethics and procedures, and the pedagogical perspectives that closely relate to the challenges of the LETTER approach?
- how do we critique, identify and deal with the challenges of the LETTER approach?
- How can the LETTER approach be taken forward?

After a brief discussion of the procedures of the meeting, it was agreed that it was better to start with a presentation in plenary on the training process with four or five inputs on the training. The initial set of presentations progressed as follows:

- the first presentation was by Malini Ghose about the LETTER process in Nirantar, Delhi
- the second presentation was by George L Openjuru and Alan Rogers (in the absence of Alema Hailu) about the LETTER process in Ethiopia
- the third presentation was by Knijnik Gelsa on ethno-mathematics in Brazil
- a fourth presentation was made by Judy Kalman about her literacy research and teaching in Mexico

### **Presentation by Malini Ghose on LETTER in South Asia**

The presentation by Malini Ghose focused on the background of Nirantar as an NGO aiming at empowering *dalit* women around the issues of land etc. She described how they came to think about ethnography and the LETTER workshop and how LETTER was expanded to the region in association with ASPBAE. The training started with the application of theory and reflection. The training provided for the reversal of roles and power, new lenses for listening, observation,

stepping back and collective listening. The Nirantar training was implemented in two phases: a workshop on ethnographic approaches (with field work), followed by a small piece of research work done at the home of the participants; and a second workshop which finalised the case studies. Nirantar finalised the report (*Exploring the Everyday: ethnographic approaches to literacy and numeracy practices*, published by Nirantar and ASPBAE, Delhi 2007).

Malini then described how the work of the programme had developed in the Nirantar programme, as they first explored the local literacy and numeracy practices of the participants in their classes (for example, the uses of calendars) and then used these practices to create a new curriculum for their classes with the women learners.

### **Presentation by George Openjuru and Alan Rogers on LETTER in Ethiopia**

The presentation by George L Openjuru in collaboration with Alan Rogers focused on the LETTER process in Ethiopia. The primary concern of the LETTER training was to help literacy workers to find out what the learners know about and do with literacy and numeracy in their everyday lives.

The first LETTER workshop in Ethiopia focused on foundational input about ethnography, practical induction into how to conduct ethnographic-style studies, and discussions on literacy as social practice. The participants to this workshop were drawn from different organisations working in the areas of adult literacy education in Ethiopia. The training, initiated by Brian Street supported by George Openjuru and Katy Anis, included a brief field experience in the trading centre of Yergalem, the town in which the workshop was held: small groups made visits to some selected business organisations and religious institutions to see how literacy is integrated with prayers, religious life and livelihood activities etc. Then each group came back and presented the information they collected during the practical experience sessions. By the end of the training workshop, the participants had decided on a small-scale project of their choice to be undertaken in their local home/work contexts.

During the second LETTER training workshop held in Bahir Dar, the participants revised and presented their case studies and Dave Baker provided an input on numeracy practices. This was followed by another short field experience during which they went out into rural rather than urban settings to examine evidence of literacy in the environment. One of the things the participants noticed was a multiplicity of scripts – the question that this observation presented was how to handle this in a learning programme? The participants wanted to know the issues or knowledge which informs the selection of which scripts to use in the different context? (E.g. if a script is a prescribed script for priests only, how can such a script be used in adult literacy learning programmes?). This workshop began the process of developing some guidelines for training others in ethnographic approaches to literacy and numeracy, and also started a discussion on how to use these findings in adult learning programmes.

This workshop was followed by another home visit during which the participants continued working on their own projects again.

Workshop 3 held in Debre Zeit moved into developing the ethnographic findings for curriculum purposes (Alan Rogers presented on this aspect). During this workshop, the participants finalised their case studies (many of the case studies were on income-generating projects). In spite of this being the third training workshop with a different focus, the participants were still concerned about what is ethnography. They had the feeling that this was just a set of tools rather than a completely different approach to knowing and understanding cultural practices.. During the workshop, the participants drafted guidelines for training in ethnographic approaches for the facilitators to carry out in their class. They suggested that trainers need to build on the adult learners' existing knowledge and practices, and that ethnography is concerned with how to find out their knowledge and practices. This workshop went on to explore how to build on the findings from these small-scale research projects. It developed a three-step model on how this can be done. In this model, the first step would be to Discover what is going on by collecting information about local literacy and numeracy practices; the second step is to Discuss/reflect on these local practices in the class in terms of gender, caste, power etc. In working with the learners through this process, the aim is that they too become reflexive about their own practices. The third step is to Develop and build on these discussions. The Debre Zeit workshop chose four themes, of which three were numeracy:

- counting: the participants had found several different modes of counting (one woman demonstrated how in her context they did counting with sticks, using place value)
- measuring (for example, in the markets; an example was given of measuring butter which was very different from the standardised measures taught in the classes)
- Income-expenditure, and calculating profit and loss (brewing, selling bananas etc); the members of the workshop found out that women were using two different systems – one starting with income and calculating what they felt they could afford to buy; the other starting with what they had paid for items and then calculating what they needed to charge to cover their costs.
- Proverbs and sayings; the participants found many proverbs on the walls of houses, and felt the learners could discover/collect these, discuss/reflect on these and learn literacy skills by writing and reading these and others they made up for themselves.

**Conclusion** – how to build on these findings. The LETTER workshop saw the process as one of bringing together two sets of numeracy and literacy practices, the local and specific on the one hand, and the classroom and standardised on the other hand.

*Note: the work of the LETTER Ethiopia programme will be published shortly under the title: 'Everyday Literacy and Numeracy Practices: ethnographic studies of literacy and numeracy in Ethiopia'*

In the discussion which followed these presentations, some of the issues raised were as follows:

The participants wanted to know what people could do better that they were not able to do before: in answer, it was suggested that the learners had increased choices before them, for example whether and when to use standard measures and literacy as well as local ones.

In relation to the multiplicity of scripts, the participants wanted to know how that related to the language(s) being used. It was noted that in both contexts, there were many languages but it was not clear if their use related to the different scripts. The important issue in relation to scripts is how they can be built into the curriculum. However, it was observed that the participants in this Ethiopian context generally ignored the more obscure scripts in favour of Amharic and the English scripts.

### **Presentation by Gelsa Knijnik on her work with disadvantaged groups in Brazil**

This presentation focused on the struggle for agrarian reform of the Brazilian Landless Movement and how the landless peasants understand schooling. The presentation, **An ethnography perspective in adult numeracy: lessons from ethnomathematics work with the Brazilian Landless Movement**, fell into four parts.

*Part 1: The Brazilian Landless Movement and their struggle for land and (mathematics) education:*

**The Landless Movement** (in Portuguese, Movimento Sem Terra, MST) is the largest social movement in Latin America with an estimated 1.5 million landless members organised in 23 out of 27 states. The Landless Movement carries out long-overdue land reform in a country where less than 3% of the population owns two-thirds of the land on which crops could be grown. Since 1985, the MST has occupied unused land where they have established settlements. Land occupations are rooted in the Brazilian Constitution which says land that remains unproductive should be used for a 'larger social function'.

Source: <http://www.mstbrazil.org>

**The MST Schooling Project:** MST has established 1800 schools in camps or settlements (grade 1 to 8), with 160 thousand students and 3900 teachers; 500 educators who work with children up to 6 years of age; 3000 educators working with 30 thousand peasants on literacy and numeracy projects of adult education; Teacher Training Courses implemented in partnership with public and private universities around the country.

Source: [www.mst.org](http://www.mst.org)

The MST Schooling Project sees the need for

‘(...) two articulated struggles: to extend the right to education and schooling in the rural area; and to construct a school that is *in* the rural area, but that also *belongs* to the rural area: a school that is politically and pedagogically connected to the history, culture, social and human causes of the subjects of the rural area (...)’ Kolling et al, 2002

**Part 2: Theoretical framework: Ethnomathematics**

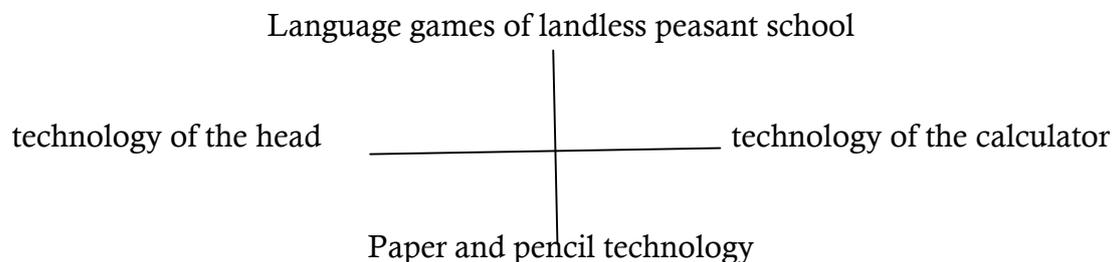
The principles of ethnomathematics: Viewing mathematics “not as a body of truths about abstract entities, but as part of human practice” (Glock, 1996: 24). Wittgenstein’s late work gives tools for thinking about rationality as forged from social practices of a form of life, which implies considering it as “invention”, as “construction” (Condé, 2004: 29). Moreover, with the support of the philosopher’s ideas, one can admit the existence of distinct mathematics. The basis of this statement can be found in the argument that these different mathematics – in Wittgenstein’s words, different networks of language games – are part of different forms of life, a term conceived by the “Second Wittgenstein” as “stress[ing] the intertwining of culture, world-view and language” (Glock, 1996:124), as “patterns in the weave of our life” (ibid. 129).

The ethnomathematics’ perspective is a theoretical tool-box which allows analysis of

- the Eurocentric discourses of academic and school mathematics
- the effects of truth produced by such discourses
- issues of difference in mathematics education, considering the centrality of culture and the power relations that institute it
- the language games that constitute the different mathematics and their family resemblances.

**Part 3: Fieldwork events**

The central point of the current research agenda is to produce data which will allow those in the Movement to describe the language games that shape what they are calling **The Landless Peasant Mathematics**, showing its *family resemblances* with other mathematics, in particular, with School Mathematics. The ethnographic principles are based on a model as follows



Sources for this model: *Reflections on Fieldwork in Marocco* (1977); *Marking time: on the anthropology of the contemporary* (2008)

The project is learning to produce and analyse data about Landless Peasant Mathematics, describing the language games that use the technology of *the head*.

1. Taking their oral mathematics as a 'theme of conversation'
2. Showing a video made by the research team to the students
3. Analysing it with the group
4. Discussing about technical procedures and ethical issues involved in the act of interviewing
5. Interviewing peasants in their communities and observing their everyday practices
6. Presenting the data to the group
7. Analysing the data produced by the group
8. Discussing possible pedagogical uses of the data
9. Reporting what was done /not done related to our work in their communities

#### **Part 4: Challenges on researching *with* a social movement in an ethnographic perspective**

Among the challenges identified are the following:

- How to go deeper in the understanding of the risks of being superficial and naïve in doing ethnographic work?
- How to establish regularities among the data produced by the students without introducing generalisations ?
- How to overcome the idea that to bring Landless Peasant Mathematics to adult education is a motivational procedure and/or a 'starting point' for the pedagogical work?
- How to develop students' competence of analysing mathematically the data produced by them in their communities?
- How to manage with the pressures produced by local, national and international comparative tests without putting aside our ethnomathematics work?
- How may we address the issue of representation of "the Other"?

#### **Presentation by Judy Kalman on literacy learning and research in Mexico.**

The next presentation was by Judy Kalman based on a research project she conducted in Mexico. The original of the research project was written in Spanish. The research was in a township in Mexico, and its aim was to find out how literacy fitted in the life of the community.

Entrance into the community was through a literacy class; she did not know anybody. She was there to assess the literacy instructor. What happened was that the literacy instructor left. This is not very unusual in Mexico; since they use volunteers, there is a continuous turnover. When the instructor left, Judy was asked to take over the teaching. In taking over the class, she developed a working relationship with the class. She was visiting the class once a week. It took a long time to get to know the class in relation to what kind of materials to take and what kind of activities to engage in. In the process, she developed two concepts, the concept of access and the concept of availability. Availability has to do with the physical presence of reading and writing materials/literacy related infrastructure (library, post office, and so on) in an environment. Access has to do

with the social conditions for mediation, interaction among readers and writers, literacy mentors, opportunities to participate in literacy events.

One important result of access is learning which entails, among other things, the development of a literate self, continuous renewal of one's relationship to written culture and hence positionings and repositionings vis a vis texts.

This project was not originally intended. She described how the research idea came into existence through the very practical experience of interacting and working with the local people, talking about what they were doing and listening to how they could talk about it. As in other cases, they decided to do a calendar with twelve displays.

In doing the calendar, they would have a discussion and work on it, with different people working on different issues, writing together, being together, talking and reading and writing together. This went on and on, resulting in texts which were produced during the process of working with the women. One of the discussions they held was based on planting *chayote*, a common food stuff like a squash that grows on a vine; it formed part of the women's written drafts that were revised in the process of elaborating their calendar. This generated a lot of discussion which motivated some of the participants who were not active to becoming active. This being together was very important in working with women and literacy learners.

### **Plenary discussion on the four presentations**

The Seminar decided to spend some time in small groups discussing these presentations, and during this group work, a number of issues were raised. These issues were later presented during a plenary session for further discussion.

A number of issues and questions were raised about the relationship between **schooling and numeracy**. Many participants agreed that mathematics is a social practice, and every piece of maths is ideological and comes from an institution, as exemplified in many different counting practices. How are these practices reflected in the curriculum? How can you teach practices? What does it mean to say 'teaching practice', for example, what does it mean to teach language practices. Practice is connected to that which we do. How far can we go with it? The literacy-numeracy divide is not about how you separate the two tasks but how the teacher teaches them; that is, the practice of teaching literacy and numeracy needs to be questioned.

**The discussion on ethnography** focused around the questions of power in doing ethnography. Who does the ethnography? Is it the learner or the trainer doing ethnography? It was observed that ethnography is a two-way study in which both the learners and the trainer have a role, because the process engages the learners in being reflexive about their local practices.

More questions were raised about ethnography. The question of the tension between ethnography (exploring what exists) and the social change pedagogy also came up. Who determines the new direction?

Other issues were tabled for future discussion. The question of assessment also came up, how do you do assess from an ethnographic perspective? How do you

as researcher or teacher avoid infusing the meanings you bring into the ethnographic process? How do you deal with large numbers of students across a wide range of contexts? Whom do you link the ethnographic approach to? How can students learn something of practical value? How do you use the ethnographic information in learning and information transfer to inform the way teaching happens in the classrooms? How do you know that what is going to be taught is really what the learners want to be learning. Is the ethnographic process value neutral, is it just collecting stuff? Is it not patronising? If the learners and the community are just going to get back what they already know, then what is the benefit? - they might want to know more, and who is going to determine that? It was noted that sometimes what people want is not consistent with what an ethnographic approach may come up with. This fed into the question of a national curriculum, and issues of certification and qualification. How does the ethnographic approach fit with that?

**In relation to teaching**, questions were raised about how you can teach practice – not just in relation to mathematics but literacy also. How can you scale up and replicate ethnographic processes? How far do we have space to recognise the power structures and the issues of language? Are teachers outside the power dynamics? How do we do ethnography in conflict situations, how far do we take the ethnographic approach? There was need to explore the learners' purposes and not only the existing practices. Sometimes learners would like to work on the school model and we should not discourage them from doing that. Where does skill come in into the social practices model which is sometimes seen as an anti-skills approach?

What happens if the kind of knowledge that is required is school-based knowledge? It was observed that assessment is not always a bad thing, so, how do you do assess for a system that cannot be based on a uniform standard? The application of ethnography may require changes in policies that are based on standard curriculum and assessment criteria, so the policy makers will need to be convinced. Does the ethnographic approach limit itself only to local funds of knowledge or should it go further? And if that be the case, how can the move from the local to the new needs be properly articulated? The ethnographic processes should also include a critical examination of all forms of local and school knowledge equally instead of romanticising the local. It should also be noted that local practices are not homogeneous; there are a number of idiosyncratic practices specific to different activities. So ethnography should analyse the variety of practices and find out some commonality to work with. Concerns were also raised that in a situation where there is much social inequality, an ethnographic approach may not be the best, because it delays actions by bringing about questioning of the inequality. In such a case, it may be advisable to just get on with the work than spend time in the ethnographic process.

During the general discussions, a number of questions that were raised in the group discussions and presented during plenary were attended to. In addressing the question of ethnography and the social change agenda, it was agreed that ethnography is not about tradition only, because it also takes into account the dominant cultures that are in the society and also social movements for change. There seem to be some difficulties in making a distinction between ethnography

and social anthropology. Ethnography cannot be about feeding back to people what they already know, for many of the funds of knowledge are unconscious. The value of ethnography is in collecting often tacit/hidden local knowledge and practices, reflecting on them and giving them value. It helps in learning the valuable local knowledge. In that case, ethnography is important in identifying and promoting the different ways of representing knowledge. The funds of local knowledge can be used to work on the reading and writing practices of the knowledge owners. In this arrangement, the immediate change will be the introduction of different reading and writing practices into the life of some members of the community so that they become part of the process with new roles in it for them. Furthermore, ethnography helps teachers who come from a different background to understand what are the knowledge systems of the community or group of people they are working with. It helps them to realise that they are dealing not with 'pupils' but with adults who have already been engaging with the written world.

Social practices make us aware that nothing is neutral, and that all practices exist in a cultural set up or social relationship. These likewise inform the competences that are applicable within the different context which they dominate.

The participants realised that in the social practices theory of literacy, we tend to discuss in dichotomous terms, and yet we also tend to shy away from dichotomising but we keep going back to it. Even talk of hybridisation is also a dichotomy because it's talking about two systems coming together. On the other hand, there is need to recognise that no community is a homogeneous entity; there is a wide diversity out there. So ethnographers should not come to a community with a dichotomies mental picture of local/vernacular against foreign and/or dominant, or any other dichotomies.

People live in a code-switching literacy environment as they live in a multi-linguistic environment. This creates multiple forms of life in which different literacy practices are deployed to serve different activities in life, without making a distinction of this one as dominant or formal, that one as vernacular or informal/local, and so on. All they are interested in is to serve their purpose in different contexts, whatever these contexts are. Some of the practices in such cases may have formal, outside origins, others are local, some are even personal creations invented to serve very personal purposes.

It was observed that we are aware that some schools provide a different context; they make efforts to make knowledge relevant to life, they make efforts to embrace and take into account what is best for learning and life. So we should not demonise all schools. Schools will need to be embraced as very important parts of the social fabric of community life. Ethnography can also help the school teachers to do wonderful work. The problem with the school systems is not the teachers but the structure of the curriculum. It was agreed that we are only talking about different systems without demonising any one of them, and after all some of these polarisations are now being broken down.

## **More presentations**

The participants decided to utilise the wide and deep experience present in the Seminar, by requesting four more presentations from Kate Pahl, Rafat Nabi, Juliet Millican and from Luke and Sophie Freeman.

### ***Presentation of Kate Pahl***

#### **Narratives of migration as represented in household project**

Kate's presentation focused on a narrative of migration as represented in household objects.

#### **Narratives of migration and artefacts of identity: an exhibition that became a set of resources for family learning**

The presentation was based on a museum exhibition developed in the north of England originally called 'Ferham Families' and an ethnographic research project that was then developed into a Learning Resources pack called 'Every Object Tells a Story'. The team included Kate Pahl, Andy Pollard and Zahir Rafiq, web designer. They decided to mount an exhibition to counter some of the anti-Islamic sentiments current in UK at the time. This was funded by the AHRC's Diasporas, Migration and Identities research grants programme. The original project involved going into homes and doing an ethnographic study of five families. The initial question concerned the nature of the relationship between objects and narratives of migration, particularly focusing on intergenerational themes. The study was very much a collaborative ethnographic process. Key themes emerged from the interviews, and these formed the basis of an exhibition of objects with stories attached to them. These themes included gold, textiles, family values, travel, toys and weddings. The team that developed the learning resources pack drew on the key themes to develop the pack. The pack was intended to be used by students to draw on learners' funds of knowledge in family literacy and English as a Second Language (ESOL) classes. The motivation for the exhibition was that it enabled the learners to represent their own identity to a wider community. This then became the starting point for the development of a set of learning resources, and a website, [www.everyobjecttellsastory.org.uk](http://www.everyobjecttellsastory.org.uk)

The discussion around this presentation raised questions about the connection of the project with literacy and it was explained that the pack is being used by students to draw on learners' funds of knowledge in family literacy. "It's a sort of embedded form of literacy". The basic motivation for the project was that it enabled the learners to represent their own identity to a wider community.

### ***Rafat Nabi's Presentation***

#### **Hidden Literacies and Numeracies**

The background of the presentation came from the realisation that something is missing from existing adult literacy programmes in Pakistan; so initially the project was to assist the national government of Pakistan to develop a national curriculum for adult literacy. Rafat was introduced to the idea of social literacy and felt that it was really embarrassing that after so many years she was not seeing social literacy especially in the work she was doing with adult literacy programmes. She then decided to find out some of the social literacy practices in her area of Pakistan and took a period of post-doctoral studies in the UK (based

at the University of East Anglia and working with Brian Street and Alan Rogers) and doing field work in Pakistan. She made in all a collection of seven detailed case studies and in these found that people who are seen as 'illiterate' and who still describe themselves as 'illiterate' are actually engaging in literacy, and some of them learn their skills in a structured way.

She took two of her case studies for the presentation.

### *Amen Baba's Six Steps of Learning*

Amen Baba was a street vegetable seller in Karachi; he had been serving our street for many years and we knew him well, because he used to come into the streets and sing songs about the vegetables and fruit he had to sell. He made up these songs himself. But we did not know he could read and write in various ways. I met Amen when he came to our house and began a conversation with him, during which the subject of literacy came up. He still called himself 'illiterate – according to your view'. He told me, during some extended interviews, that he was teaching himself to read and write in his own way; he had asked a school teacher and his own children to help him but they had refused, so he set out to teach himself. He wanted to be able to give customers a written receipt and eventually get a loan to open a shop as he felt he was getting too old to keep to the streets.

He set out his six steps and showed Rafat his papers:

Step 1: He cut out from a vegetable chart which he obtained pictures of the vegetables and fruit he was selling and copied the spelling of words in Urdu and practised them. Once he felt confident that he could write the names of fruits and vegetables without looking at the chart, he went on to his second step.

Step 2: Writing Receipt He taught himself with the help of some customers dates, the names of fruits and vegetables, numbers, and prices. He said that he made many mistakes but that he constantly improved.

Step 3: Tape Recorder He obtained and learned how to use a tape recorder. He then developed some of his songs and recorded them. He listened to them again and again. He wrote down those words which he knew and left a blank for those which he could not write. He gave the tape and notebook to one of his customers, Hamida. She listened to the tape, checked the notebook and filled in the blanks. He visited Hamida once or twice a week. Hamida (a school teacher) explained the spelling of the words, breakdown of the syllables and making new words.

Step 4: He developed his writing skills with the various languages he knew, and concentrated on the uses of various vegetables and fruits including them as remedies; he filled notebooks with drawings and colours.

His aim was to complete Step 5: reading newspapers and completing forms; and Step 6: to open an account in the bank so that in the future he could apply for a loan to buy a shop. But unfortunately he died before he completed his self-set tasks.

### *Zia the Plumber's 10- sitting learning programme*

Zia, a plumber called into Rafat's house to deal with an emergency, despite his insistence on being 'illiterate', offered her a receipt for his work in Urdu or in English. He told her that he had set himself to learn literacy skills with the help of a domestic cook. He had asked for formal help and been refused. He had ten 'sittings' with the cook. In the 1st sitting, he used five pictures of plumbing tools to learn five words; by the 2nd sitting, he was writing these five names of the plumbing tools fluently. In the 3rd sitting he learned five more words and practised with these ten words; they also played word games. In the 4th sitting, he learned to write five more words. Now he could correctly read and write the names of 15 parts. He also learned the make-up of the words and how to make new words from the parts of the words. This was very interesting for him. By the 6th and 7th sittings, he was able to write 45 to 50 words related to plumbing and was also able to make new words from these fifty words. The 8th sitting taught him to join words to make a sentence. He started to write short sentences which were useful in his work, and practised these – he said it took over his whole life. In the 9th sitting, he learned to write a receipt, and in the 10th sitting, he and his helper revised everything.

"Now I am not handicapped. I can do my job very well. With on-the-job practice, I am able to read and write". He asked an adult education class to help him to learn enough literacy to obtain a driving licence, but they told him he had to start at the beginning of the primer, so this time, he taught himself.

Rafat felt that her findings challenged the assumption that a clear line could be drawn between 'literate' and 'illiterate' and challenged the teaching of literacy to adults in many ways. (She is planning to publish a book with these case studies, and also an Introduction and Conclusion relating the cases to wider issues in literacy and numeracy. Nabi, R, Rogers, A and Street, B *Hidden literacies: ethnographic case studies of literacy and numeracy from Pakistan*)

### ***Presentation by Juliet Millican***

The presentation was based on her experience of working with literacy in Sierra Leone and Egypt on the link between ethnography and teaching and in south Sudan where the project was developing post-literacy materials in a post-conflict situation. The presentation also included her experience in community studies of literacy in Nigeria.

The Literacy programmes were based on the use of 'real materials', texts found in the local community and used in classes as they were used in the community. She outlined a process of teaching literacy that uses learner-generated material, with the learners writing about their communities and about their own lives, or folk tales in the community. This process resulted in a lot of very interesting stories. Some of the stories included the history of the civil war in South Sudan. She noted that what was of interest was how the those who wrote translated that into learning practices.

*Luke and Sophie Freeman*

### **Informed consent for logging in the Congo**

The presentation provided an account of literacy issues in the context of logging activities in Congo. The project related to the ways in which non-indigenous people in commercial companies obtained logging consents from the indigenous people in the forest areas, particularly local Pygmies. The objective of the project was to ensure that the indigenous people can make informed consents. This decision of consent is to be informed by their understanding about the value of a tree to their life. So there was need to build awareness-raising programmes on their local practices.

What needed to be done was to get the two sides to understand each other. The Pygmies needed to have a very clear understanding about decisions related to how much of the forest proceeds goes back to them. The European loggers too needed to know about the world of the Pygmies. If this process is fast-tracked, the easier it will be for the loggers and the Pygmies. So the question is, what are the literacies that can be used to help in fast-tracking this process of change in the relationship between the Pygmies and outsiders? The discussion on the presentation was around the issue of obtaining consent and the consequences of opening up the forest which has made it easier for animals to destroy the food crops of the Pygmies.

### **3. HOW CAN A CURRICULUM BE BUILT BASED ON SOCIAL PRACTICES?**

One of the issues discussed in relation to the LETTER project was developing a curriculum that is guided by what the local people want to learn. This consisted of deciding what goes into the curriculum and deciding how an assessment can be made with a system in which there can be no uniformity.

Juliet Millican presented a model she had developed from her experience in Africa,. The process started with the **home literacy practices**, and moved to the **literacy practices in the village** (mapping the village literacy practices), then **the region** (this was literacy at the **national** level) and then finally the literacy practices at the **global level** (for example, involving computer use for adult literacy learners). Some participants noted that the identification of these curriculum areas seems to be based on a political structure starting with the home and moving out to the national.

#### *Presentation by Juliet Merrifield*

NALA is the National Adult Literacy Agency in Ireland, a nonprofit membership organisation that supports adult literacy practitioners. At the time of this project the literacy system in Ireland was dominated by volunteer teaching, mostly one-to-one, with limited training or resources available for the volunteers. Having

completed a quality framework that identifies the characteristics of high quality literacy schemes, it became apparent that unless practitioners developed an assessment framework themselves, one was likely to be imposed by the government. Juliet worked with a team of Irish researchers and practitioners to develop the framework, known as Mapping the Learning Journey (MLJ). The four main dimensions of the assessment framework emerged through research with learners, tutors and volunteers. In addition to skills and knowledge, the learning journey can be tracked by the ease or fluency in completing tasks, the range of application of skills and knowledge, and the level of understanding. The framework is the basis for dialogue between learners and tutors to arrive at an agreed self-assessment of progress.

Development of the assessment framework took three years (the first year for research and initial development, the second year for testing and refinement of the initial framework, the third for validation). Although there were delays in mainstreaming the framework, it was eventually rolled out across all the literacy schemes. Ireland has the same pressures as elsewhere in Europe to measure performance in robust ways, and since MLJ was developed has moved more to accredited learning.

This approach was thought of as something which could inform the development of the LETTER process, although the discussions on this were inconclusive. The Progress Profile Approach which Deryn Holland developed in the 1980s for ALBSU was mentioned as having adopted some similar ways of measuring progress.

#### **4. THE FUTURE OF ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACHES**

The discussions on day three focused on future plans for LETTER and agreeing on what should go into the report. The method of the day consisted of group and plenary work, focussing on future plans.

##### **Ethnography and pedagogy**

Like all the other sessions, the group work raised more questions in the use of ethnography in the teaching and learning of literacy. This can be best summed up as finding the connection between ethnography and pedagogy or the ethnography of pedagogy. How can we apply the findings of ethnography in literacy and numeracy pedagogy (curriculum, learning materials, and teaching)? What is the structure of the learning when using the ethnographic approach? This may involve finding out the cultural learning practices of the learners, that is, how learning is happening in that particular community. Who determines the learning? How can learners question some of the content? How do you introduce the ethnographic process into the learning space?

The practicality of the above questions and things that may need to be done were considered against the background of poorly supported adult literacy teachers, with limited resources both at the programme and learner level, and limited teacher experience and time. The difficulties which were envisaged relate to negotiating the learner's community and the institutional requirements for

learning literacy. Could ideas such as group-based learning provide some insights into what the use of ethnography in teaching and learning literacy could be like?

Ethnography provides a way to talk about things by ethnographers who go into a space which is often very different from their own background. There is an inherent risk of the ethnographers projecting their own interest in understanding the local people. Ethnographers therefore will need to start with a self-examination of their own interest before taking into account the interest of other people. Therefore, as the ethnographer enters into other people's spaces, he/she will first need to recognise and build on people's interests and activities. There is obviously a tension to do with understanding ethnography. Is it a technique or a stance? Is it a way of constructing and understanding people? Whatever the case, this must start with an understanding of the activities. It was observed that the questions that we are raising cannot be used as a rigid frame for what we should be doing. This is because when we go to the field, we go with a mental frame/theory which will inform our understanding of what we will be seeing during the ethnographic process but which will change during that process. How can reflexivity be undertaken?

Programmes are organised within institutional constraints. These constraints manifest themselves in the form of policy, curriculum, resources, the limitation of the teacher, and the teaching spaces. The Ethiopian LETTER participants drew a sharp distinction between those (mainly in NGOs) who were free to develop experimental curricula and materials and those (mainly in government programmes and universities) who had to teach to a set curriculum and framework of assessment. But they agreed that an ethnographic style approach can be useful in both contexts.

There are other design constraints that relate to ethnography itself. These are the difficulties of using an ethnographically-based content in diverse contexts. The tension here is how the conceptual structure can provide stability across contexts when it is designed to focus on one specific context. Furthermore, ethnography could be methodologically unstable, slow and labour demanding for teachers. All these limitations would need to be addressed.

An alternative approach could be to think about possibilities of generating themes which could cut across contexts and link ethnographic approaches to learner-generated materials. The question of learner expectation of teachers was also seen as another area of tension. The learners in current pedagogy expect the teachers to teach with authority, while ethnographic approaches will tend to restrict the teacher from doing that. Who decides what constitutes the curriculum and authority?

The nature of assessment in literacy ethnography was also considered. Suggestions were made around participants becoming involved in setting their own learning goals in a kind of formative evaluation and assessment model.

Another area of difficulty was seen in the 'teacher as enquirer' – in terms of training, time, confidence and above all identity.

## **How do we take LETTER forward**

The group that gathered at Uppingham considered the following four issues in a session on the way forward:

- The report
- The future of Uppingham Seminars
- The LETTER project: where should the LETTER project go? How do we help adult educators to use ethnographic approaches in their relationships with their learners?
- A possible new team to run the LETTER project.

## **EthnoLit**

It was suggested that this Seminar might form the basis for a new network of persons engaged in ethnographic studies of literacy, similar to that which already exists for numeracy, the ethnomathematics network – perhaps to be called EthnoLit.

One of the issues that came up was funding possibilities. It was discussed that the following were possible sources of funding that will still need to be followed up: the DELPHI and the Open Society Institute. If we are to keep the network, it was also noted that we will need a coordinator.

## **LETTER team**

The following people volunteered to be part of the team that will work on the LETTER project.

- Dave Baker (coordinator LETTER)
- Uta Papen
- Cathy Kell
- Lesley Bartlett
- Brian Street
- Erika Mein
- George Openjuru

That a base camp could be used as a good example of best practices which the group could look at.

It was also suggested that one of the activities that could be undertaken immediately is evaluating the LETTER activities in Ethiopia and Delhi. Other activities that could be undertaken could be experimenting with materials development. We will need to think about what should be done around the idea of the training and extending the process into the actual teaching process.

It was further suggested that the LETTER network should be opened up. There is need to have the LETTER process in the UK too. Participants were informed

that the LETTER literacy idea was already being considered in Brighton and it could be developed further. NIACE could be interested in taking up some of these processes. We could get going with small attempts that can feed into developing the ideas.

It was also suggested that the social practices ideas and the LETTER approach needs to be broken down to easy and understandable units for the literacy facilitators to comprehend and work with. Already, there are some good examples which could be used to start going in this direction: the example of LIFE (Literacy or Learning in further education) was seen as a good one. There are also some resources available with NIACE: for example, *Responding to Adult's life* (free copies from David Barton). We could produce something like that for LETTER.

### **Uppingham Seminars future**

Participants discussed and agreed that the Uppingham Seminars could be held at various places and not necessarily in Uppingham. It was suggested that the AILA conference could be linked to this process, especially the next conference in Beijing. Some participants also suggested a method of organising the Seminars, asking participants not only to finance their participation but also to pay for the other seminar costs in terms of fees. This was seen as one possibility that could keep the Seminars going.

Since Uppingham Seminars always focus on themes, the Evaluation of the LETTER programmes so far could be the focus of the next Uppingham Seminar.

The following people volunteered to be part of the coordinating team for Uppingham Seminars in the future. There were two groups, the main and supporting groups.

The Main Group consisted of:

1. Brian Street,
2. Anna Robinson Pant ,
3. Alan Rogers, and
4. Juliet Millican,

The supporting group consisted of;

1. Cathy Kell,
2. Kate Pahl,
3. Fransman Jude,
4. Judy Kalman

Alan Rogers agreed to keep the UppSem website going. It was agreed that the report of the Seminar will be posted onto the website as soon as it was ready.

## **APPENDIX I LIST OF PARTICIPANTS**

1. Baker Dave (UK)
2. Bartlett Lesley (USA)
3. Barton David (UK)
4. Fransman Jude (UK)
5. Chopra Priti (India/UK)
6. Deyo Lisa (USA/Afghanistan)
7. Freeman Luke (UK/Congo)
8. Freeman Sophie (UK/Congo)
9. Ghose Malini (India)
10. Jackson Kara (USA)
11. Jjuuko Robert (Uganda)
12. Kalman Judy (Mexico)
13. Kell Cathy (New Zealand)
14. Knijnik Gelsa (Brazil)
15. Lyster Elda (South Africa)
16. McCaffery Juliet (UK)
17. Mein Erika (USA)
18. Merrifield Juliet (UK)
19. Millican Juliet (UK)
20. Nabi Rafat (Pakistan)
21. Openjuru George (Uganda)
22. Pahl Kate (UK)
23. Papen Uta (UK)
24. Robinson-Pant Anna (UK)
25. Rogers Alan (UK)
26. Street Brian (UK)

The following people were not able to make it to the seminar

27. Gebre Hailu Alema (Ethiopia)
28. Howard Lindsay (UK/Malawi)
29. Kholowa Foster (Malawi)
30. Kanes Clive (UK)
31. Gold Eva (USA)

*Photograph of participants*

## APPENDIX II ELN: ETHNOLITERACY NETWORK

I give below the e-mail addresses of those who at Uppingham Seminar on 4 October 2008 agreed to form the 'Ethnographical Approaches to Literacy Network' (shortened to EthnoLit!!!).

I have resisted the urgings of those who would insist that we should add 'and Numeracy' to the title, as I do not think that it does full justice to the urgent needs of numeracy to tack it on at the end of literacy; and in any case there are already networks on Ethnomathematics.

I have added the participants who in the end failed to make it to Uppingham – but in any case, the network will undoubtedly grow.

Alan Rogers

1. Freeman, Luke	<a href="mailto:luke.freeman@ucl.ac.uk">luke.freeman@ucl.ac.uk</a>	UK
2. Freeman Sophie	<a href="mailto:sborreill@free.fr">sborreill@free.fr</a>	Fr
3. Street, Brian	<a href="mailto:brian.street@btinternet.com">brian.street@btinternet.com</a>	UK
4. Rogers, Alan	<a href="mailto:alan.rogers14@btopenworld.com">alan.rogers14@btopenworld.com</a>	UK
5. Kalman, Judy	<a href="mailto:jkalman@cinvestav.mx">jkalman@cinvestav.mx</a>	Mexico
6. Papen, Uta	<a href="mailto:u.papen@lancs.ac.uk">u.papen@lancs.ac.uk</a>	UK
7. Baker, Dave	<a href="mailto:d.a.baker61@btinternet.com">d.a.baker61@btinternet.com</a>	UK
8. Barton, David	<a href="mailto:d.barton@lancs.ac.uk">d.barton@lancs.ac.uk</a>	UK
9. Robinson-Pant, Anna	<a href="mailto:a.robinson-pant@uea.ac.uk">a.robinson-pant@uea.ac.uk</a>	UK/Nepal
10. Bartlett, Lesley	<a href="mailto:LB2035@columbia.edu">LB2035@columbia.edu</a>	USA
11. Ghose, Malini	<a href="mailto:malini.ghose@gmail.com">malini.ghose@gmail.com</a>	India
12. Deyo, Lisa	<a href="mailto:lisadeyo@gmail.com">lisadeyo@gmail.com</a>	USA/Afghanistan
13. Fransman, Jude	<a href="mailto:judefransman@yahoo.co.uk">judefransman@yahoo.co.uk</a>	UK
14. Kell, Cathy	<a href="mailto:cathy.kell@gmail.com">cathy.kell@gmail.com</a>	New Zealand
15. Pahl, Kate	<a href="mailto:k.pahl@sheffield.ac.uk">k.pahl@sheffield.ac.uk</a>	UK
16. Nabi, Rafat	<a href="mailto:rafat2nabi@yahoo.com">rafat2nabi@yahoo.com</a>	Pakistan
17. Chopra Priti	<a href="mailto:choprapriti@hotmail.com">choprapriti@hotmail.com</a> <a href="mailto:cp87@gre.ac.uk">cp87@gre.ac.uk</a>	UK/India

18. Openjuru, George	<a href="mailto:openjurumails-all@yahoo.co.uk">openjurumails-all@yahoo.co.uk</a>	Uganda
19. Jjuuko, Robert	<a href="mailto:juukor@yahoo.com">juukor@yahoo.com</a>	Uganda
20. Knijnik, Gelsa	<a href="mailto:gelsak@unisinob.br">gelsak@unisinob.br</a>	Brazil
21. Mein, Erika	<a href="mailto:elmein2@utep.edu">elmein2@utep.edu</a>	USA
22. McCaffery, Juliet	<a href="mailto:juliet.mccaffery@ntlbusiness.com">juliet.mccaffery@ntlbusiness.com</a> <a href="mailto:j.d.mccaffery@sussex.ac.uk">j.d.mccaffery@sussex.ac.uk</a>	UK
23. Millican Juliet	<a href="mailto:juliet@laughtonlodge.org">juliet@laughtonlodge.org</a> <a href="mailto:J.Millican@brighton.ac.uk">J.Millican@brighton.ac.uk</a>	UK
24. Merrifield, Juliet	<a href="mailto:j.merrifield@zen.co.uk">j.merrifield@zen.co.uk</a>	UK
25. Jackson, Kara	<a href="mailto:karajonesjackson@yahoo.com">karajonesjackson@yahoo.com</a>	USA
26. Lyster, Elda	<a href="mailto:lyster@ukzn.ac.za">lyster@ukzn.ac.za</a>	South Africa
27. Kanes, Clive	<a href="mailto:clive.kanes@kcl.ac.uk">clive.kanes@kcl.ac.uk</a>	Brazil
28. Gebre Hailu Alema	<a href="mailto:alemh40@yahoo.com">alemh40@yahoo.com</a>	Ethiopia
29. Kholowa, Foster	<a href="mailto:fkholowa@chanco.unima.mw">fkholowa@chanco.unima.mw</a>	Malawi
30. Gold Eva	<a href="mailto:EGold@researchforaction.org">EGold@researchforaction.org</a>	USA

### **APPENDIX III: BACKGROUND PAPERS**

#### *ETHNOGRAPHY AND LITERACY/NUMERACY IN DEVELOPING SOCIETIES: BACKGROUND PAPER FOR UPPINGHAM SEMINARS OCTOBER 2008*

**Alan Rogers and Brian Street**

*This paper is based on a paper which has been drafted and sent for publication – but it has been extensively revised for the purposes of this seminar. It sets the background and outlines what we see as the substantive issues for our meeting. It is meant as a guide, not as a firm agenda.*

This paper relates to an experimental project in assisting adult literacy practitioners to engage in ethnographic-style research about the literacy and numeracy practices of the communities from which their literacy learners come. It outlines progress made so far and looks to the future.

## The Background

The project started in 2001 after an approach from Nirantar, a women's organisation in Delhi dedicated to the empowerment of rural *dalit* women through education, made to Professor Brian Street of Kings College London and Professor Alan Rogers of Uppingham Seminars in Development (UK). The request was for some training in ethnographic approaches to finding out the existing literacy and numeracy practices of the women involved in their programmes and the epistemologies on which those practices were based (Atkinson, 1990; Heath and Street, 2008). Initial discussions with Nirantar on this project were held during a seminar in Delhi on Urban Literacies organised by Uppingham Seminars in association with J N University, Delhi.

The background to the request was that Nirantar, engaged in developing alternative adult learning programmes with a group of *dalit* women in southern Uttar Pradesh, India, had discovered that the women held alternative ways of looking at the world of which Nirantar knew little and of which the teachers were sometimes disparaging whilst the women themselves were to a large extent unconscious of their distinctiveness. For example, the women said they believed that rivers were animate objects rather than inanimate, as Western scientific categories held. Not knowing what views were held, but aware that there were often sensitivities in how such views were perceived across different groups of people whom the learners encountered, the Nirantar staff felt that careful study needed to be made of the practices and language of the communities with which they were working, and they felt that ethnographic approaches would form a foundation for such research and a basis for more respectful relations across the participants.

The approach that Brian Street used in the project was that of the New Literacy Studies and ethnographic research as shown in a number of publications (Street, 1984; Street, 1995; Prinsloo and Breier, 1996; Street and Lefstein, 2007; Heath and Street, 2008; Street, 2004; Street, 2005; Street et al, 2006). This suggests there are multiple literacies such as religious literacies (reading the Qu'ran or the Bible), commercial or occupational literacies (the literacy practices of the tailor or the carpenter or fisherman/woman) etc. The formal classroom literacy taught in schools and/or adult literacy classes is very different; its chief characteristics is that it has rules of correctness which do not apply to the other informal literacies. The gap between what is learned in the classroom and what is practised in daily lives (in the family, the market, the workplace, the church/temple/mosque etc) is enormous and a great hindrance to learning.

Alan Rogers, as an adult educator, brought an approach to adult learning that stressed the importance to those who help adults to learn of understanding the need to 'start where they [the adult learners] are', with the literacy practices they have already learned. The necessity of building on the prior learning (formal and informal) that adults bring to their new learning programmes is well known. In addition, he brought to the project extensive international experience of working with learners and facilitators in this way (Rogers, 2002; Rogers, 2004). But while those who train adult education practitioners exhort the tutors/facilitators of the necessity of finding out about the existing practices and knowledge of their

participant learners, they have more difficulty helping them to understand *how in practice* such information is to be collected.

That one cannot just ask the learners about it is clear. For one thing, many (but not all) adult learners come to adult learning programmes believing that they know nothing about the subject matter of the programme, that they have nothing to offer in the way of knowledge or experience to the programme, often accepting the outside stereotype that they are mere 'illiterates' (cf Nabi, forthcoming). Or, secondly, even if the participants do feel that they know something about the subject matter, direct questioning of adults will often result in what is known as the 'echo effect', that is, the respondents will tell the researcher what it is felt the questioner wishes to know. Making judgments about each other is part of the relationship between researched and researchers built up during the research encounter. The researcher controls the situation, provoking resistance (often unconscious) among the respondents; and this resistance sometimes expresses itself in the form of echoing back to the researcher the language and concepts for which the researcher is seen to be searching. Recent advances in 'reflexivity' in ethnographic research have addressed this issue head on, and it requires researchers to be more conscious of the 'effects' their very presence has on their informants.

But thirdly, and perhaps more importantly, recently developed understandings of informal learning (Eraut, 2000; Coffield, 2000; Hager, 2001) which all adults pursue throughout their lives have led to a realisation that adults have built up through experience very extensive amounts of 'tacit knowledge' and hidden skills – knowledge and skills which form the basis of the practices they engage in and the discourses they use. But this is largely unconscious - the participant-respondents will often not know what epistemologies they hold, what "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al, 1992) and banks of skills they have built up through this informal experiential learning (Rogers, 2008).

So practitioners in adult educational programmes cannot simply ask the participants – although informal discussions with learners will form part of the battery of research methodologies practitioners will bring to the task of trying to find out the existing ways of knowing of their participant learners. They need to do more. It is through developing ethnographic style approaches to this research that a surer foundation can be laid for building any new learning programmes for adults that take into account the existing practices and knowledge systems of the learners (see Papen, chapter attached). Observation of the practices used within the communities from which they come and which they share, analysis of the language used by the participants, collections of artefacts used in expressing their culture as well as informal discussions with participants – these will form the basis on which judgments and interpretations can be built.

The aim of this project, then, was to train some adult education practitioners (programme planners and trainers) in ethnographic style research (Green and Bloome, 1997), taking as a focus the literacy and numeracy practices of the learners and the communities from which they came. The trainers then would train the facilitators (adult teachers) to conduct such research with their own learning groups. In this way, all those who teach literacy and numeracy to adults, by seeking to learn about and build on the existing experiences of their

learners in these two fields, would engage in their own ways in practitioner research.

### **The project, part 1: Delhi 2002-3**

This was the thinking that lay behind the programme worked out between Nirantar and Uppingham Seminars in Development, the organisation facilitating the project from the UK side ([www.uppinghamseminars.com](http://www.uppinghamseminars.com)). We called it LETTER: Learning for Empowerment Through Training in Ethnographic Research.

Nirantar worked very hard to secure some funding for the first stage of the project. In association with ASPBAE, enough funds were obtained to ensure that a small group of about twenty participants drawn from the various countries in part of the region covered by ASPBAE (Nepal, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India) came together for two workshops held in Delhi in 2002 and 2003. Nirantar provided the administration; one of the participants Alison Lide provided the record of the workshops. Brian Street led the resource team. Alan Rogers was unable to participate in person, owing to health factors which kept him in the UK, but he contributed from a distance; and Dr Dave Baker of the Institute of Education, London, who brought with him great enthusiasm, skills and insights into numeracy as social practice (see Baker et al 2003), stood in at very short notice and made a vital contribution to both workshops. Funds were still in very short supply and the UK resource persons contributed to the project by finding their own air fares to India and not expecting any payment for their contribution.

The first one-week workshop concentrated on what is meant by ethnographic-style research (Green and Bloome, 1997). It is stressed that what was needed in this context was not a full ethnography, for that would take too long and require a much greater investment than would be available and in any case we were not training the participants to be anthropologists, rather to be more culturally sensitive educators. To this end, adopting an ethnographic-style approach, an ethnographic lens, would help the practitioner to gain insights into these practices which would challenge many of the sweeping assumptions on which so many existing adult education programmes are built. It would provide nuances to the generalisations often made about adult illiteracy and innumeracy. This workshop progressed through sessions devoted to discussion in plenary and small groups, through readings given out and discussed (including Uta Papen's book *Adult Literacy as Social Practice*), and through a small-scale practice session of field work. The participants were sent out into Delhi for an afternoon to see what they could find out about the literacy and numeracy practices in their area; they presented and debated their findings. The latter part of the week was spent designing a somewhat bigger research project to be conducted individually or in very small groups between the first and second workshop.

*Photograph*

Dalit women and local measure

These larger research projects (mostly into local numeracies) were undertaken and brought to the second workshop. A good deal of time during this workshop was devoted to finalising the reports on these topics, and a start was made on working out how to use the findings of these local projects in developing ways of helping adults to learn new literacies and numeracies. Reports of these workshops are on the Uppingham Seminars and Nirantar websites.

Nirantar agreed to take the project forward. Because funding could not be obtained for a further workshop which the participants felt was needed, Nirantar developed their own ways of building new curricula on the findings of their own local studies, and Malini Ghose of Nirantar drew the two LETTER workshops together into a report which Nirantar and ASPBAE jointly published under the title *Exploring the Everyday: ethnographic approaches to literacy and numeracy* (Nirantar, Delhi, and ASPBAE, Mumbai 2007; [www.nirantar.net](http://www.nirantar.net); [www.uppinghamseminars.com](http://www.uppinghamseminars.com) ). Copies of this report have been or will be circulated at the Seminar.

### **The project part 2: Ethiopia 2007-8**

Alan Rogers, while working in Uganda during 2006, visited Ethiopia at the invitation of ANFEAE (Adult and Non-Formal Education Association of Ethiopia) and PACT, and during that visit, a request was made for a LETTER programme in that country. ANFEAE led by Alemayehu Hailu Gebre raised the funds for the project, this time building into the schedule all the three workshops originally planned. Again some twenty participants came together, this time all from within Ethiopia. Dr George Openjuru from Uganda was able to step in at short notice to work with Brian Street in the first workshop and with Alan Rogers and Dave Baker in the second workshop. Alan Rogers was able to be present at the second and third workshops; and Dr Rafat Nabi from Pakistan, a post-doctoral fellow at the University of East Anglia (UK) working with Alan Rogers and Brian Street on literacy and numeracy practices in her country, attended the second and third workshop, at first as a participant and later as a resource person; and connections with LETTER I Delhi were maintained by Malini Ghose from Nirantar coming to the third workshop.

The aim was the same as in the Delhi LETTER programme – to encourage the trainers of adult literacy facilitators to develop an expertise and experience of ethnographic-style research and then to train the facilitators so that they could engage in practitioner research. And the pattern was much as before, although the first workshop was run by Brian Street, George Openjuru and Katy Anis (a free-lance consultant working with PACT and other agencies in Ethiopia) because of the last minute withdrawal of Alan Rogers, again on grounds of health. Again there was a small-scale field exercise in both the first and second workshops, and larger scale research projects were compiled by the participants between the first and second workshops and revised between the second and third workshops. In the end, some ten research reports into local literacy and numeracy practices were compiled. The first workshop concentrated on ethnography, what it is, why it is important and how it is conducted. The second was largely devoted to the research projects.

## *Photograph*

Interviewing priest during workshop 1 Ethiopia LETTER

It was in the third workshop, with Malini Ghose outlining the progress made by her Nirantar project, that the LETTER project made significant advances in educational terms, especially in how to adapt the research findings for adult teaching and learning programmes. Malini outlined how her group had identified certain literacy and numeracy activities in the area they were working in as suitable for building new learning programmes on. One such was 'calendars'. They found that many homes and offices in the area had calendars; they collected these up. They debated these with the learners, including issues such as the difference between local ways of measuring time (a lunar system) against the formal printed measures (a solar system); how these calendars were used, for example, how far for recording past events and how far for planning future activities; gender differences in the approach to calendars; the languages and scripts in which these calendars were presented, and the balance between numbers and words; the cost of the calendars; the difference between religious and secular calendars. During these discussions, new ways of looking at time, new numeracy and literacy activities were devised, new learning took place. Formal 'schooled' practices were introduced alongside the local practices.

## *Photograph*

Calendar in home visited

The Ethiopia workshop participants, with Malini, worked out a general process of working with the findings of the ethnographic research on local literacy and numeracy practices, building new adult learning programmes on them. It was called the Collect-Reflect-Build on approach (or Discover, Discuss and Develop approach).

1. **Discover:** The chosen local practices would be collected, observed and described;
2. **Discuss:** they would then be discussed fully in class in a critical way (including issues of equality and justice, gender and power);
3. **Develop:** and on these practices and discussions, new ways of knowing and doing would be built, the more formal and standardised ways of the classroom alongside the local and more informal practices.

This would be 'starting where they are', taking into account what they already know and do and then building further.

The group then looked at their own research projects and chose four areas which they found in their case studies and saw as being suitable for such an approach:

- different ways of counting (for example, the use of sticks or beans, and different ways of using finger counting etc);
- different informal ways of measuring, including uses of containers (cf Saraswathi) (some purely individual, others common to all the traders in one local market but different from other markets) and the code switching of the traders between these and the more formal standardised ways of weighing and measuring;
- different ways of calculating income and expenditure (the difference between unwritten household accounts which start with income and determine the expenditure, and the accounting system of small businesses which starts with how much is spent which in turn determines what income is needed);
- and proverbs, sayings and songs/poems which were found in the local communities, sometimes painted on the walls of buildings, acting as a community 'glue' and especially building inter-generational relationships (grandparents teaching children traditional sayings and children teaching grandparents new songs).

All of these could be collected, debated fully and critically in the class, and on them more and more formal literacy and numeracy practices can be built. Here is really relevant learning, "starting where they are", using teaching-learning materials which come from the local communities in which the learners live. Here is learning which is not just exportable from the classroom into the community but which comes into the classroom from the community, is mediated there by educational practices, and returns to inform and enhance everyday activities. Here is learning which not only can be used but will be used in the everyday life of the learners.

#### *Photograph*

"Before entering the house, take off your gossip bonnet" – one of a number of sayings seen on the walls of houses.

Reports of each of the Ethiopia workshops are on the ANFEAE and Uppingham Seminars websites; and a publication similar to *Exploring the Everyday* will be complete by the seminar (we are trying to find a publisher).

#### **Taking the LETTER project to the next phase.**

*Widening LETTER:* Demands for training in such an approach have come in from adult literacy agencies in Uganda, Mexico (in Spanish) and Pakistan, and other enquiries have been made. Part of the purpose of the seminar is to discuss ways of taking these demands further.

*Deepening LETTER:* But there is one area in which the LETTER project still needs to advance. The programme so far is built on the basis of research undertaken by the facilitators, using ethnographic approaches. It is training in practitioner research. But it could be developed even further, with the facilitators not just conducting their own research into the literacy and numeracy practices of the learners and the communities from which they come – for that implies that the facilitators are the researchers and the learners and their communities are the subjects of investigation. Ideally, it should be the literacy learners who also conduct the research. And this is possible. Even non-literate participants can collect copies of the written texts they see around them on the walls in their villages and bring them into the class, and in class with the help of the facilitator learn to read what they have

collected. Learners can collect songs and sayings and again bring them orally into the class where more literate colleagues or the facilitator write them down and again use them as teaching-learning materials with those who collected them. The learners, with the facilitator, can discuss the various practices; they can become conscious of them probably for the first time; they can examine them critically – in short, literacy and numeracy learners can (in their own way) engage in some form of ethnographic-style research. That is a turn-up for the books – ‘illiterate’ people researching their own literacies and numeracies, and indeed the literacy and numeracy practices of others (including their teachers) and in the process learning new literacy and numeracy practices.

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## ***USING ETHNOGRAPHY TO STUDY LITERACY IN EVERYDAY LIFE AND IN CLASSROOMS***

*This is an extract from the chapter in Uta Papen's important book Adult Literacy as Social Practice, published in 2005 by Routledge. It is reproduced for the Seminar with permission of the author and the publisher. The chapter went on to include a reading from Judy Kalman's book Writing on the Plaza 1999, which is not reproduced here but perhaps Judy will bring some copies with her.*

### **What this chapter is about**

The change from a skills-based model of literacy and numeracy to an understanding of reading, writing and calculating as social practices has important implications for how we can study literacy. The social theory of literacy suggests that, in order to understand what literacy is about, it is best to look at how it is used. It suggests that we need detailed accounts of what people actually do with reading and writing, and the meanings literacy has in particular contexts. In this short chapter, I explain how we can produce such accounts. This chapter contains a brief introduction to the use of ethnography — a qualitative research methodology — to study literacy and numeracy. At the end of the chapter, I suggest a research exercise that you can carry out on your own, which will allow you to try out some of the research methods described here.

### **What is ethnography?**

Ethnography refers to close, in-depth examinations of social activities as they occur in real-life settings. The term can also be used to designate the written product of ethnographic research, in which case we talk about *ethnography*. Ethnography was first developed by social anthropologists who studied the lives of communities different from their own. Bronislaw Malinowski (1922), widely regarded as one of the founding fathers of modern ethnography, who proclaimed that, if anthropologists were serious about understanding other people's cultures, they had to learn their language, live with them over a considerable period of time and take part in their everyday life.

Malinowski's story is simple. He came from Poland, and first planned a career in science, but later came to the London School of Economics to study social anthropology. When the First World War broke out, he was about to begin anthropological research in Australia. As an Austrian citizen, he was regarded as an enemy alien, to be interned. Thanks to the generosity of the Australian authorities, he was allowed to spend his internment on the Trobriand Islands, a remote archipelago in the Pacific. Out of necessity, he began his fieldwork: isolated from contact with

other Europeans, he lived among the local population, learned their language and began to participate in their lives, while at the same time observing what was happening around him. Participant observation as a method of study was born. When the war was over, Malinowski returned to England and wrote his monographs about the Trobriander. On the basis of his experiences, he formulated the principles of participant observation and ethnographic fieldwork, which from the 1920s onwards became the standard anthropological research method.

### *Contemporary ethnography*

Since then, much has changed. Malinowski's methods have been adapted by researchers from within anthropology, sociology, education research and other social science disciplines. Ethnography (or 'fieldwork', as it is also called) is nowadays a qualitative research methodology, widely used across the social science disciplines. From its original, rather rigid and demanding framework, it has changed into a variety of approaches and it is often combined with other qualitative and quantitative methods. One of the main characteristics of contemporary ethnography is that it is much more flexible in its subject choice. Malinowski and his followers set out to study cultures as a whole, and in many ways what they attempted to do was to construct a pure (and perhaps idealised) picture of the culture in its natural state of being, untouched by historical developments and the broader social and economic conditions related to the advent of colonialism. The classical anthropologists believed that participant observation was able to provide an objective and 'true' picture of the culture and the people they were studying. From their perspective, the influence of the researcher in the field was to be eliminated as far as possible.

Needless to say, contemporary ethnography takes issue with most of these ideas. First of all, ethnography is no longer solely used for the study of entire communities and their ways of life. More selective approaches are common. Most contemporary ethnographies will look at only one aspect of a community's social world, and this could be people's reading and writing practices. Rather than studying whole cultures, ethnic groups or sub-cultures, the location of the ethnography may be a factory, a school, a neighbourhood, a group of students or an adult literacy class. While long-term fieldwork of the kind Malinowski carried out may still be the ideal for many ethnographers, nowadays the approach is also used for more short-term research projects, which can include several localities or field sites (what Marcus calls multi-site ethnography; see Marcus 1998).

I said earlier that Malinowski believed ethnography to be an 'objective' or realist method. Today, most ethnographers have abandoned such a view and situate themselves in an interpretive or critical paradigm. How they approach their research is related to their understanding of what the social world — the object of their research — is like. Researchers are now more aware of their beliefs about the nature of social reality — their different ontologies, we might say — and the epistemological question: how valid is this knowledge? How can they find out about the social world and the people who, as I would say, make this world or are this world?

Ontology and epistemology cannot be separated from one another. If you believe the social world to be something that is governed by structures and regularities, which can be explained by isolating specific factors and observing the correlations between them, as a

researcher you will use instruments such as surveys, experiments or tests. If, however, you believe that social phenomena emerge from a multitude of factors, which interact with each other to produce different effects in different contexts, you need research methods that examine social phenomena in all their respective contexts and are able to take into account multiple and overlapping factors.

Thinking about language (spoken and written) and about culture as two more specific aspects of the social world that linguists and literacy researchers are concerned with, similar questions need to be asked. What is language? What is culture? As literacy researchers, are we interested in written language as an abstract system of signs, or are we thinking about language as it is used by people for purposes of meaning-making and communication? For those who adhere to a social practices view of literacy, formal linguistic analysis is unlikely to yield any significant insights. We need research methods that can gauge the role written texts play in actual interactions, in 'real life' contexts.

As to culture, contemporary social scientists would not agree with the early anthropologists' static idea of culture as a kind of blueprint or model according to which a community organises its social world and decides what to believe in. Rather, culture today is understood as a continuous process of meaning-making (Hall 1997), emphasising the role of people as active agents in constructing the social world they live in. Culture in that sense is a process rather than a product, and any attempt to study culture needs to focus on the people and the social practices through which culture is being produced. Language, in this view, is part of culture and it is equally subject to individual and communal change. A research method that is particularly suitable to the study of language and culture as dynamic and 'real' processes is ethnography.

### **How to do ethnography**

Ethnographic research draws its data from the observation of, and participation in, everyday life events. Since it emphasises the role of people as active agents in the construction and negotiation of social reality, it privileges research methods such as interviews and participant observation over structural analysis. Most importantly, since ethnography is grounded in the idea of the social world as being complex and fluid, it believes that what can be grasped at the surface of social phenomena cannot provide us with satisfying explanations about what causes things to happen and what makes people act in one way or the other. In order to find such explanations, the researcher needs to understand the situation and its context. She needs to spend time talking to the people who are part of it and to ask them about their experiences of the situation in question. The core of ethnography's claim to validity is its grounding in the close interaction of the researcher with her research subjects and the inter-subjective understanding that is developed in the course of fieldwork (Davies 1999). It is on this basis that ethnography claims to be much better placed to understand social phenomena (in all their complexity) than, for example, survey methods.

To summarise, the term ethnography refers to a particular form of qualitative research, which is based on certain principles and uses a range of research techniques. The principles that ethnography is grounded in are these:

- Ethnography is holistic (not isolating individual factors).
- It includes engagement in the lives (or in selected aspects of the lives) of those being studied, usually over longer periods of time.
- It studies real subjects in real-life contexts.
- It draws out the insiders' (emic) perspective.
- It is based on an interpretive process that involves both the researcher's and the research subjects' perspective on the issues in question.

The main research techniques (or research methods) that ethnography applies are:

- participant observation;
- interviews (unstructured, semi-structured and, occasionally, structured in the form of questionnaires and surveys);
- document analysis;
- visual methods (photography, videos, film and the like).

### **Why ethnography is a suitable method to study literacy as social practice**

Having read the above, you may already have guessed that I am now going to suggest that ethnography is particularly suited as a research method in the study of literacy. Let me try to explain how this choice of method relates to the theory that informs our thinking about literacy.

Previously in this chapter, I mentioned different ways of thinking about and studying language. Sociolinguists, social anthropologists and many other social scientists are interested primarily in studying language in use. Literacy studies, a field of research at the interface between these disciplines, are concerned with the role of written language in society. Such studies regard literacy not just as a skill, but also as a social practice used in particular contexts for specific aims. Now, if literacy is a social practice, it needs to be studied as such. This means that the researcher who is interested in literacy needs to examine what people do with literacy, when and where this happens and to what ends they use written texts. Furthermore, if literacy is also a 'situated' practice (Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic 2000), we need to study literacy in the contexts in which it is embedded. This is to say that ethnography — with its focus on people, its interest in real-life contexts and its holistic approach — is particularly suited to the study of literacy as social practice.

The use of ethnography to study literacy centrally has to do with the New Literacy Studies' interest in understanding the role of reading and writing in everyday life, rather than just observing the way it is taught and learned in educational settings. Researchers and educationists who consider literacy to be primarily a skill may not share this interest and they are likely to use other methods. A skills perspective orientates researchers towards a focus on testing and measuring literacy levels and on educational experiments (e.g. trying out new teaching methods). By contrast, the New Literacy Studies have led researchers to move away from such questions and to shift their attention to the uses and meanings of literacy in everyday life. This change of focus is ideally matched by ethnography's interest in

broader contexts of cultural and social life and by the methodology's traditional focus on people and their meanings (what is called the emic view). As part of this move, ethnographic studies of literacy (or ethnographies of literacy, as they are called) are primarily interested in what people do with literacy, as well as what meanings it has for them in their lives. The Reading in Chapter 2 is an extract from such ethnography of literacy.

A final thought to add here is that such ethnographies have looked not only at people who can read and write, but also at those who are often claimed to be 'illiterate' or to lack basic skills. This is important because such studies have made us aware that the so-called illiterates (who are the targets of governmental and nongovernmental efforts to improve basic skills among the population) are also involved in literacy events and that they have developed their own strategies to deal with written language (see for example Kell 1996). They also have views on what literacy means in their lives and why (or why not) they need to improve their reading and writing.

You can see from the above how theory, topic and method are inter-related. To give an example, in their research in Lancaster, Barton and Hamilton (1998) started with an orienting theory, which was the idea of literacy as social practice. This triggered their interest in a particular topic: the role of reading and writing in the everyday lives of people in a town in the north-west of England. This fairly general interest further led them to explore a range of areas and settings, such as the role of reading and writing in the activities of an allotment association, the production of a newsletter or the role of reading and writing about the war in one particular person's life. Barton and Hamilton's orienting theory (of literacy as social practice) also implied a methodology. Since they needed to find out when, where, and to what ends people in their chosen community in Lancaster used and produced written texts, they had to spend a lot of time finding out about people's lives, about the different activities that took up people's time and about the things that concerned them or that they struggled with. Most importantly, they had to find out what the role of literacy was within these areas. The best way to do this was through asking people about their lives (using interviews) and by participating in selected aspects of their informants' everyday activities.

Participant observation as a method is a useful tool to identify the role of written language in particular contexts and as part of particular activities — let's say, during a meeting of the allotment association (see Barton and Hamilton 1998). However, participant observation on its own can tell you relatively little about why things are done the way they are and why people act in the way you observe. In a sense, participant observation — on its own — limits you to the visible and observable elements of literacy, or, to put it differently, to the literacy events. If you want to understand the practices that bear upon the event, you need to make use of other techniques. You need interviews to help you find out what the people involved in the literacy event think about the reading and writing that is going on, how they interpret the event and what assumptions and beliefs they bring to it. You are also likely to do some literature-based research in order to understand the context you deal with and this could include consulting policy documents, government reports, surveys and other research studies.

### **Reflexivity**

In ethnographic research, knowledge is created through social interaction (for example, in an interview). Meaning-making takes place through the encounter between researcher and researched. This means that in ethnography (and in the social sciences more generally) the connection between the researcher and the research setting is much closer than in the natural sciences. Both the researcher and the research subjects (the people being studied) are at the core of ethnographic research.

This is important because it means that, even in short-term ethnography, the relationship between the researcher and the researched will always be a close one and to a large extent relies on the researcher's personal involvement with her informants. The issue of proximity and distance is central to each ethnographic endeavour: as much as ethnography entails a process of coming closer to the research setting, it also requires the researcher to distance herself from the field experience. This is necessary in order to achieve a critical, theorising stance, which is at the heart of what academic enquiry aims to achieve.

It follows from the above that reflexivity is a central requirement of ethnography. Reflexivity means a turning on oneself, an awareness of how the product of research is affected by the personal and by the process of research (Davies 1999). For the researcher, to be reflexive means to scrutinise the conditions of how in the field researcher and researched come to understand each other and then agree on answers to questions the research has raised. This includes a discussion of the research methods chosen, but also an awareness of how subjectivity, individual experience and negotiations with informants figure in the process of interpretation. It is nowadays common practice among ethnographers to discuss these questions in the written products of their work.

The purpose of reflexivity, therefore, should not only be to disclose the process and conditions of knowing in the field, but to problematise these by which we mean, to identify and analyse all the possible problems with the data collected and how it should be interpreted. As part of such a reflective stance, the researcher describes the process of research (including its difficulties and setbacks) and acknowledges gaps and challenges in her claims to authority. Accordingly, the researcher needs to question the grounds on which she arrives at her interpretations and to be constantly ready to check her own interpretations against those of the research subjects.

While a certain modesty and critical stance towards the results of one's own research seem now to be part of the common reflexive stance in ethnography, this does not mean that as ethnographers we have to descend into relativism. Even if, as Clifford (1986) has argued, ethnographic truths are always only part of the truth, we should not abandon a form of social science that serves intellectual, moral and political purposes. There are still enough grounds on which to argue for ethnographic data as being both valid and relevant, and this is certainly important when thinking about the role that research on literacy can play with regard to the practice and policy of adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL.

### **Ethnography as a research tool for practitioners**

As mentioned earlier, one of the flagships of the New Literacy Studies is its interest in the role of literacy in everyday life. The NLS has moved researchers' interest away from educational contexts of literacy — the learning and teaching of reading and writing in

classrooms — to the uses and meanings of literacy in everyday life. This is an important move. Among other things, it challenges us to show why studies of literacy in everyday life are relevant and interesting not only for researchers (interested in theoretical issues of the nature of literacy), but for teachers, curriculum developers, planners and policy-makers. In other words, the challenge is to bring everyday life back to the teaching context and to show how learning about people's uses of literacy (through ethnographies of literacy in different communities and contexts) can inform practitioners' and policy-makers' work.

The questions are simple. What can teachers gain from understanding how their learners use literacy and numeracy in their everyday lives? What can the government, what can colleges and other providers learn from the kind of studies Barton and Hamilton (and others) have produced? These are important issues for the social view of literacy, which at times has been accused of being an academy-based pastime of researchers who have little interest in the realities and struggles of teaching, planning and financing basic education and ESOL programmes for adults. The underlying concern is how can we apply the social view of literacy to the teaching of reading and writing. I have already begun to address this issue at the end of Chapter 3.

A central question is what role can ethnographic research play in, for example, informing teachers and planners about potential students' uses of literacy, the difficulties they face, the things they want to learn, and so on. In other words, what role could ethnographies of literacy play as a curriculum resource? A related question is whether ethnographic methods of the kinds discussed here can be used not only by 'professional' researchers but by teachers and students, and what they could learn from the process. I deal with both these questions in more detail in Chapter 8 of the book.

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