

Adult Literacy

A Handbook for Development Workers

Paul Fordham, Deryn Holland, Juliet Millican



An Oxfam/VSO Publication



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(VSO)

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A note from the publishers

The need for an adult literacy handbook was identified by VSO (Voluntary Service Overseas), whose volunteers have been working in countries throughout the developing world since the late 1950s. The idea has been developed in collaboration with Oxfam (UK and Ireland), and the resulting text draws on the experience of both organisations, and the work they support in Bangladesh, China, Ghana, Honduras, India, Mali, Nepal, Nicaragua, South Africa, and Tanzania, and the experience of others working in the field, throughout the developing world.

About the authors

Paul Fordham was Director of Adult Education at the University of Southampton for 18 years, and is now Honorary Professor in the International Centre for Education in Development at the University of Warwick. His publications include *Learning Networks: Non-Formal Education on a Housing Estate* (with Poulton and Randle), (Routledge and Kegan Paul); *Participation, Learning, and Change* (Commonwealth Secretariat); and *Co-operating for Literacy* (ICAE/DSE).

Deryn Holland is Assistant Education Officer (Staff Development), Buckinghamshire County Council. She works locally and internationally as a trainer, researcher, and writer in adult education and literacy. Her publications include *The Progress Profile* (Adult Literacy Basic Skills Unit) and *Developing Literacy and Numeracy: An Intermediate Pack for Trainers* (The Open University).

Juliet Millican has worked in Adult Education for most of her own adult life, and in literacy for the past ten years, both overseas and in the UK. She is currently co-ordinator of Access Courses at Hastings College. Her publications include *Reading, Writing, and Cultivating: A Handbook for Post-Literacy Workers* (CESO), a guidebook for the management of a credit fund, and a variety of teaching materials.

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Many colleagues, too numerous to mention, have helped to shape the ideas on which this book is based. They will recognise their own contributions; if we have not acknowledged them individually, it is because their insights have passed into common currency among workers in the field of adult literacy. We must, however, acknowledge our particular debt to Alan Rogers and Brian Street for their contributions to literacy work, and our debt to all those involved in a recent research project commissioned by the Overseas Development Administration ('Using Literacy: A New Approach to Post-Literacy Materials').

Especial thanks are due also to Sandy Fury of the University of Warwick, for creating order out of the chaos of our barely compatible computer discs; to Rachel Yates, for allowing us to draw on her bibliography; and to the Adult Literacy Basic Skills Unit (ALBSU) for permission to reproduce material from *The Progress Profile*.

We are also grateful to the VSO volunteers and Oxfam workers, and overseas staff of both organisations, who shared with us their first-hand experiences of planning and implementing literacy programmes. Above all, we thank the learners in many countries who have taught us most of what we know about what it means to be literate, and how to go about acquiring the skills which (like most people who have been formally educated) we tend to take for granted.

Paul Fordham, Deryn Holland, and Juliet Millican

Foreword

I feel honoured to be invited to write a Foreword to this book, which I have read with great interest. I particularly welcome three of its key messages. The first is that we should not exaggerate either the disadvantages experienced by those who cannot read or write, or the advantages which learning to read or write brings. There are, of course, significant benefits to be gained from learning literacy skills. But, as the authors of this book point out, many non-literate persons can lead fulfilled lives; and many who learn to read and write may still find that they are cheated — and in particular that they are still poor! As literacy workers, we will achieve much more if our expectations are realistic.

The second key message of this book is its insistence that literacy is something we *do*, not just something we *learn*. The authors aim to help men and women to read and to write in their everyday lives. They are mostly and inevitably concerned with what happens in the classroom; but they never forget that what takes place there is of no value, unless it leads to real reading and real writing outside the classroom. This means that all teaching for literacy will need to start with real life (using real literacy situations, practices, and events in the community) and end with real life. Unless our teaching is based on reality, we shall have produced learners like the woman from Nepal (quoted in Chapter 4), who said that she could read the literacy primer, but nothing else. And that is no use to her at all. All this means, as this book indicates, that training for literacy is not just a matter of developing skills. It is more a question of developing the right attitudes, especially building up learners' confidence. This is often overlooked in literacy training programmes today.

Thirdly, I value this book's emphasis on the fact that literacies vary from group to group. It is not just that they vary from country to country and culture to culture. Fishing communities have different literacy practices from trading communities, for example; indeed, one group of fisherpeople can have quite different concerns from another group along the same coast. Urban and rural literacy contexts are quite different and call for different approaches. This must mean that teaching literacy skills is always a matter of innovation: making up things as we go along.

For this reason, readers are invited to use this handbook creatively, rather than let it constrain them. It is planned as a 'useful problem-solving resource', leading readers to decide for themselves what to do in any situation. It asks readers not to follow it, but to *use* it.

I feel sure that planners and trainers with or without professional qualifications in the teaching of literacy will find this book helpful. Oxfam and VSO are to be congratulated on identifying a long-felt need and working so hard with the authors to fulfil it.

Alan Rogers
Education for Development
Reading
England

Preface

The purpose of this book

This is a book for development workers with no formal training in adult education or literacy who encounter the need for literacy in the communities with which they work. It looks at the relationship between literacy and development, the role of literacy in development, and the importance of literacy to development. By exploring some of the central issues and debates, we aim to help development workers to listen with more understanding to requests for literacy from the people with whom they are working. For example:

An agricultural extension worker may find farmers who are beginning to experiment with new methods. They will need to record information on their yields or on varying prices at the market. ...

... **A health worker** may be faced with requests from mothers at a clinic who want to understand the child-growth charts or the words on immunisation certificates. ...

... **A co-operative development worker** may start by introducing book-keeping to someone who is already literate, but may find other members of the co-operative wanting to read the information recorded. ...

... **A community development worker** may want to help village-group members who are promoting a local project, like sinking a new well, to develop their leadership skills.

To respond effectively to such situations, we need not only some knowledge of teaching and learning methods, but also an understanding of some of the consequences of introducing literacy to individuals, groups, or communities.

When people request 'literacy', they will have their own idea of what they want, and their own way of assimilating it into their lives. This book aims to help both learners and development workers to understand what literacy means to them, why they have asked for it, what kind of literacy they want, and what purposes they expect it to serve. Helping learners to understand these questions is the best way for development workers to deepen their own understanding of different literacies and literacy practices; and to move on from seeing reading and writing merely as skills to be learned in a mechanical way.

It is important to recognise that there is no one literacy which people either have or do not have. For one person, reading or counting may be more important than writing. For another, writing a simple letter to an absent relative may be a sufficient achievement. Traders will want yet another kind of literacy. The question of what language to choose for literacy in multi-lingual situations is perhaps one of the most difficult to answer, and will mean considering the relationship between language and power.

Most of this book is essentially practical. It looks at the various stages in planning, teaching, and evaluating a small-scale literacy programme, and the likely effects, both on individuals and on the progress of development in an area. It offers suggestions for using available materials and for developing new ones designed for specific situations or places. It is not intended to be a comprehensive guide; nor does it set out to be a complete course book for the training of trainers. It is designed to set the reader thinking about what to do, and to give examples of how things have happened in other places. We hope that the ideas and examples it contains will be an essential foundation for readers who are trying to decide how to meet what for them may be an unfamiliar request. It should also help development workers to decide for themselves when it might be appropriate to suggest a literacy component in a local development project.

'Deciding for oneself' is a major theme of this book. Real problems can only be solved and real choices can only be made by the people who are experiencing them. Ideas from elsewhere can be a useful stimulus; but they cannot provide ready-made answers or recipes for instant success. However, by considering some of the recurring issues in the learning and teaching of literacy, and looking at some of the implications behind policy decisions, we hope that readers will understand their own particular situations better. Seeing how other people have introduced literacy into development programmes might inspire confidence in another community's ability to do the same.

We have written a resource book, not an academic textbook. It is to be used in practical situations, either by development workers who decide to begin some literacy teaching themselves, or by those who plan larger programmes and employ local teachers. We hope it will be relevant to decision-makers, planners, trainers, and teachers.

It would be wrong for a short and practical book like this to gloss over the complexities of literacy. At the same time, there is no mystery about it. On each and every occasion, there are four crucial questions for development workers to consider.

- Who needs literacy?
- What do they need it for?
- What kind of literacy do they need?
- How will the programme be planned and implemented?

We hope that this book will help development workers to understand the implications behind each of these choices.