

Postscript

Be your own literacy expert

In the Preface to this book, we said that our purpose was to help development workers to listen with understanding to requests for literacy; and to provide ideas and examples for non-specialists planning a literacy programme. We will end with some words of encouragement for both these groups.

There will be high times and low times in your literacy work, and we have tried to offer some advice and some warnings. But in working through the problems that arise, the most valuable information is generally to be found on the ground. Let's look again at some of those warnings.

Literacy is more complicated than the simple mechanics of decoding letters and words

While this is true, there is no special mystery about literacy practices. How various people use literacy, what people need it for, and what sort of literacy they need will be reflected in what they currently do, and the general activities of their everyday lives. By looking at these closely, by observing how people currently carry out tasks involving calculations or keeping records or communicating over time or at a distance, the answers to these questions will become apparent. Talking to people about what they want from literacy, finding out what literacy practices exist in other places, and watching how people do things will all help in deciding what literacy is, or might be, in the particular context in which you are working.

Teaching adults is different from the way most people were taught in primary school

Sitting in rows and repeating things after a teacher may be an adequate way to memorise information, but it is seldom a good way for adults to learn to do things for themselves. If this is understood from the beginning, teaching adults is in many ways simpler than teaching

children. Provided that the group and the literacy worker agree to work together as equals, sharing information, solving problems, discussing ideas, and respecting each other's knowledge and experience, then literacy workers do not need long or complex training. If you like people, relate to them well, read and write in their language, and are ready to be creative in the ways you work together, you can learn to help others learn.

There is no recipe for instant success for planners designing a literacy programme

This is true, because every context is different, and no programme will succeed if it does not take the needs of the local people into account. However, in every working situation there is information to be gathered about other development agencies working in the field, about the availability of written and printed material, about the times when people are free to attend classes and the way in which they like to learn. While this book cannot tell you how to do it, we can tell you what to look for and where to look. Once you start asking questions, further questions will invariably follow.

It's hard to work in isolation, without support from other people dealing with similar problems

But there will be people working in literacy programmes in neighbouring areas, or in extension or credit groups or non-formal education groups in the same area. Find out who those people are; get in touch with them; visit each other's groups; offer help and support to each other. Observing someone else working with a group, or watching yourself on video working with a group are two of the best ways to learn about learning. Offer to sit in with a colleague; give him or her a supportive assessment of the session; ask them to do the same for you. Point out what you feel was strong or weak about the way they dealt with the group; share information and ideas. Think about starting a newsletter or a 'round robin' letter (a handwritten letter which is circulated, to which each reader adds a few lines of information or describes a learning activity they have tried). Create your own literacy network. Learn from your own mistakes as well as other people's. Publish your failures as well as your successes!

It's hard to know what will work with a group or with a single learner: everything is a risk

But life is a risk, and at least some risks can be calculated! Ask your groups to tell you what they have learnt from the various sessions, and how things might be organised differently. Encourage an open discussion between group members. Don't assume — or allow them to assume — that you know it all. Don't be afraid of failure: only by analysing failure can we calculate success. Confidence is built up by experiencing both failure and success.

If literacy is really to be developed in a community, then all organisations will need to promote it

This may be true; but, if you start small, it may be possible to influence some of the organisations around you. Get in touch with other development agencies; share with them the information you have gathered on literacy practices and literacy needs. Find out what printed material they are producing, or what messages they are promoting. Offer to use their material or discuss their messages with your groups. Encourage your groups to be critical of anything they use; don't deliver it to them as a finished product. Share the group's comments with the other agency. Encourage the agency staff to think about how they might re-present their material or their messages in the light of these comments. Invite them in to your class. Ask for their advice; offer yours; work together.

Not everyone wants to come to literacy classes or to develop their literacy skills

For many people, the skills they already have and the strategies they currently use will be adequate for their literacy needs. But this is surely a positive and not a negative thing. Literacy alone will not change people's lives, and it is not the role of development workers to create needs in a community where there currently are none. If the environment in which people are living does not present sufficient reason for introducing literacy, then the time may not be right for a literacy programme. Those needs will arise when and if the environment changes and literacy is more widely promoted as a means of communication within the community. It is only then that the development worker will need to respond to requests for literacy.

Good luck!

Glossary of terms used in this book

Assessment

Measurement of a learner's progress. It may take the form of formal tests or less formal observations of progress, by either learner or tutor or both. 'Normed' or *norm-referenced assessment* measures progress in relation to other learners' performance. *Criterion-based assessment* measures progress according to externally based criteria (such as the concept of 'reading age', as in 'a reading age of 9'). *Ipsative assessment* measures an individual's progress from the beginning to the end of a particular educational process.

Cross-sectoral

Refers to development work which covers a number of sectors like agriculture, health, education, or community development. The encouragement of literacy is not a matter for the education sector alone.

Evaluation

The whole process of monitoring, recording, and making judgements about whether or not aims and objectives have been achieved. Evaluation which occurs during the life of a programme is said to be 'formative', because the programme can be changed as a result. Evaluation at the end of a programme is said to be 'summative', in that it summarises successes and failures in terms of the agreed aims and objectives.

Literacy and functional literacy

Variable concepts, not capable of precise definition. It may help to think of 'literacy' in two different ways: in terms of its role in social development (which includes purposes and context) and in terms of certain measurable skills connected with it. In practice, the two ways of looking at the concept are not separable.

UNESCO defines a literate person as one 'who can with understanding both read and write a short simple statement on his everyday life', and a functionally literate person as one able to 'engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his group and community and also for enabling him to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his own and the community's development' (UNESCO: Resolution of the General Conference, 1978).

Ideographic language

A language in which characters represent the meaning rather than the

sound of words, such as Chinese ideograms, or numbers in Roman script.

Monitoring

The systematic review and recording of what is happening during the life of a programme, as part of its evaluation.

Needs

A favourite term with professionals in the field of adult education. A concept of needs emerges out of a dialogue between development workers and communities about the wants which have been expressed.

Phonetic language

A language in which letters represent the sounds of the words and the syllables of which words are made up. Swahili and Spanish are examples of directly phonetic languages; some languages, like English, are partly phonetic.

Sustainable

One of the most recent words to enter the development vocabulary, and already in danger of over-use. A development is 'sustainable' if it persists after the external intervention is phased out. In terms of literacy, the term should probably be confined to a consideration of whether or not a particular and improved level of literacy can be sustained by factors such as greater community use of local materials (like newspapers) or the development of libraries.

Notes

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- 7 A. Gillette and J. Ryan in Paul Fordham (ed.): *Co-operating for Literacy*, Toronto and Bonn: ICAE/DSE, 1983.
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- 11 S. Haggis: *Education for All: Purpose and Context*, Paris: UNESCO, 1992.
- 12 Kathleen Rockhill: 'Gender, language, and the politics of literacy', *British Journal of the Sociology of Education* 8/2, 1987.
- 13 'From demystification to empowerment: non-formal adult education in Pulaar in Senegal', by Sonja Fagerberg-Diallo, *Development Anthropology Network*, 11/1, Spring 1993.
- 14 Based on a model devised by T. Moodie in *Learning to Read, Understanding the Process*, Pinetown: Edgewood College of Education, 1986.
- 15 Reproduced with permission from The Teacher Development Series, ed. Adrian Underhill (Heinemann, 1994)
- 16 Glenys Kinnock, *The Times*, 4 February 1995.
- 17 Deryn Holland (1990): *The Progress Profile*, London: Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit (ALBSU).
- 18 Alan Rogers (1994), *Using Literacy: A New Approach to Post-Literacy Materials*, ODA Research Report No. 10, London: Overseas Development Administration.
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- 21 'Choosing and Publishing Books for Post-Literacy: The Experience of Pulaar in Senegal', by Sonja Fagerberg-Diallo, ARED/GIPLLN, Dakar, Senegal).
- 22 Paulo Freire (1976) *Cultural Action for Freedom*, London: Readers and Writers Co-operative.
- 23 See note 18.
- 24 See note 18.
- 25 Paul Fordham: 'Comment 1: REPLAN 1984-1991', *Studies in the Education of Adults* 24/2, October 1992.

This book has also drawn on ideas contained in the following publications:

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- Millican, Juliet** (1992) 'Women's expectations of literacy in Britain and Bangladesh', *VENA Journal* Vol. 4, No. 1
- Millican, Juliet** (1992) 'Integrating literacy and development: brainstorming the issues' in INCED (1992)
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- Rogers, Alan** (1994) *Women, Literacy, Income-Generation*, Reading: Education for Development
- Street, Brian** (1992) 'Literacy practices and the construction of gender' in INCED (1992)

INCED publications may be obtained from the Department of Continuing Education, University of Warwick, Coventry, CV4 7AL, UK.

Education for Development publications may be obtained from 'Woodmans', 7 Westwood Row, Tilehurst, Reading RG3 6LT, UK.

Further reading

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- Street, Brian** (1993) *Cross-Cultural Approaches to Literacy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

- These publications may be obtained free of charge by applicants from developing countries. Write to the Institute for International Co-operation of the German Adult Education Association, IIZ/DVV, Obere Wilhelmstrasse 32, D-53225, Bonn. IIZ/DVV also publishes the half-yearly journal *Adult Education and Development*, which gives wide coverage to adult literacy.

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