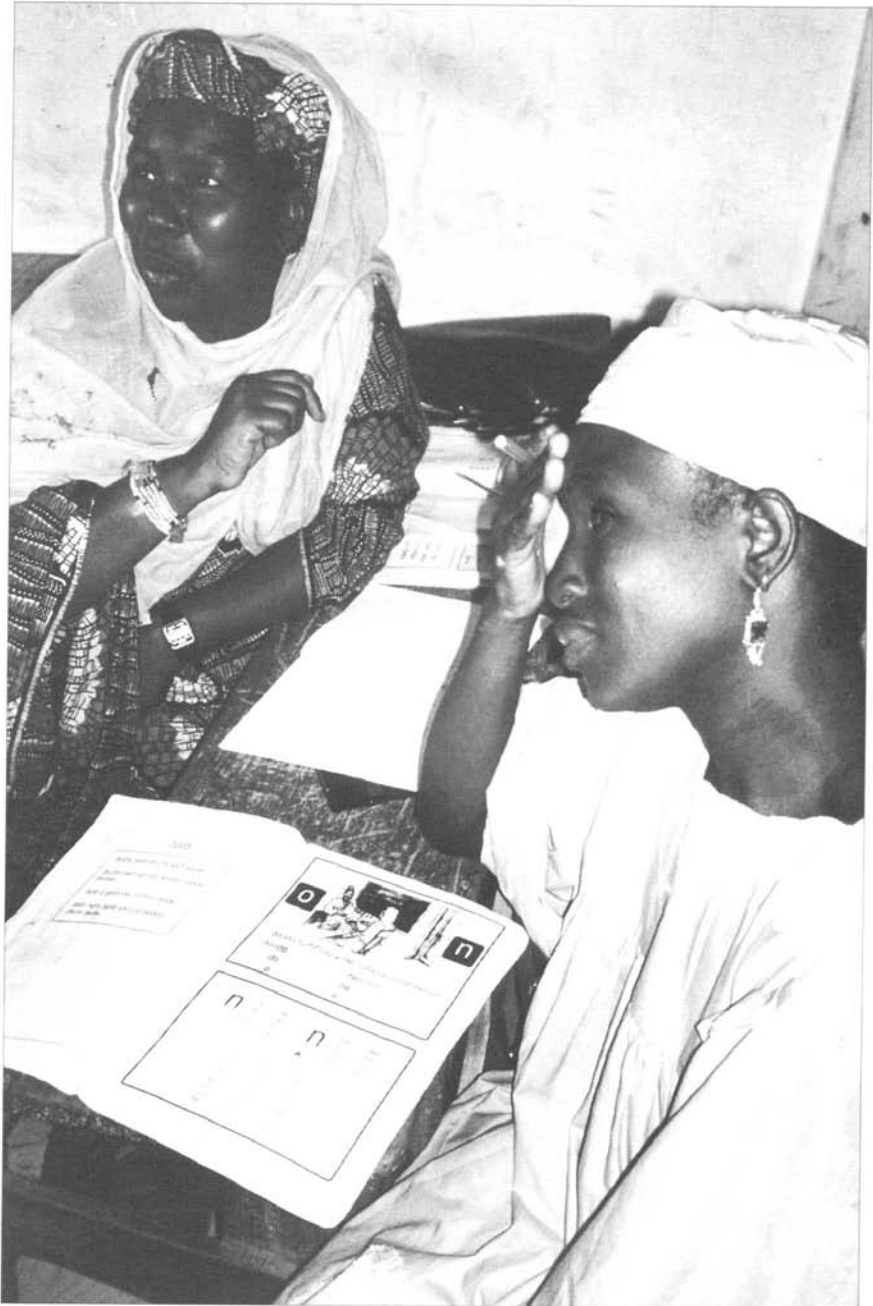
PART TWO

Planning for Literacy



Dakar, Senegal: a women's literacy group, run by PROFEMU, a local NGO. 'Why did you decide to attend literacy classes?' 'I wanted to know how to write my language. It means that you can write your secrets. It helps you to open your mind, it helps you to obtain other skills, and it helps you to recognise everything around.'
Photo: James Hawkins

CHAPTER 2

Recognising and assessing needs

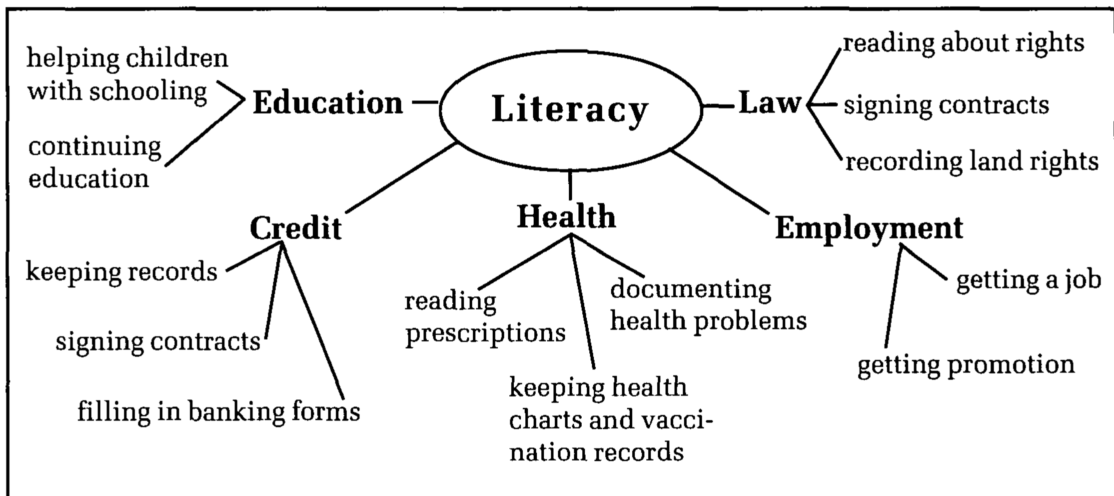
This chapter examines in more detail the four key questions for planners outlined in the Preface.

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

It follows the four general guidelines outlined at the end of the previous chapter. These imply that action should not be taken until the intended learners and the planners have discussed the proposed project in detail, and reached an agreement about what the community needs.

While some literacy projects are started in response to demand (what people say they want), the need for other projects is not always immediately obvious. As we have seen, other aspects of development, like providing clean water, may seem to be of more immediate importance and may take priority. Often, an agreed need for literacy emerges out of dialogue between development workers and local communities. Frequently, it is when people's lives change, or when change is introduced, that a productive dialogue about literacy can begin. Figure 2.1 shows how literacy might be useful in projects concerned with legal rights, employment, health, credit, and education.

Figure 2.1: Some areas of community development where literacy might be needed



Asking the first questions

Before introducing new literacy skills into a community, it is important to understand how people have coped up till now, and in what ways reading, writing, and numeracy might help them to do things better. In every society, there exist traditional practices which, although they may not involve reading and writing, serve to record, assess, or communicate information. They may consist of cutting notches on tally sticks, stringing up coloured beads, or measuring by hand or eye. Any new literacy programme will be more meaningful to learners if it is based on existing practices, and such a programme is more likely to be sustainable than one based on entirely alien concepts.

An informal local survey could be conducted with a cross-section of the community. Questions might include the following.

- Have you ever thought about learning to read or write?
- If the answer is 'yes': what made you think about it?
- If the answer is 'no': can you think of any reason why knowing how to read might help you?
- Can you think of any particular situations where being able to read things would make a big difference to you?
- How have you dealt with situations like those in the past?
- Is there anything written down that you are able to recognise and understand at the moment?

Responses to a local survey will indicate not only whether people want literacy, but the type of literacy that is appropriate, and the different needs of young and old, men and women, workers and farmers.

Ways of assessing needs

These first questions are a good way of starting to assess the kind of literacy programme to be introduced into an area; and what methods to use. A more thorough survey of local practices and attitudes, looking at how people carry out everyday tasks, will give a more complete picture of what is happening now. A good education programme is one that is based on what people already know, and is aimed at what people need to know in the future. Time spent analysing this in advance will help to create an appropriate and sustainable programme, acceptable to the intended learners.

Who should ask questions

A survey can be carried out by 'insiders' — people who live in the area and may become learners in a programme — or by 'outsiders' — students or volunteers from another village, another town, or another country who have some experience in asking questions and may become teachers or group leaders in a programme.

Insiders know the area, and are known by the people they will be talking to; they speak the local language, and they know whom to ask. Involving them will give them some power in designing the programme they want. But will they be objective in their questions? Do they have a personal bias? Will they become drawn into local politics and serve the needs of the powerful rather than the poor?

Outsiders may not know the area or the people, and may be viewed with suspicion. If questions are asked through interpreters, the emphasis may be changed or simplified. It is often hard for interpreters to convey the feelings of the people concerned. And they, like insiders, will have their own (albeit different) biases.

Other surveys may already have been carried out in the area; if they give a general picture of the social or political situation, they may be worth consulting first.

Things to take into account before starting a survey

- Do you want an objective, distanced view of the situation?
- Do you want a more subjective view from people involved?
- Do women need to talk to other women? Should men be interviewed by other men?
- Are the interviewers sensitive to the needs of the people whom they interview?
- Will interpreters translate, unedited, exactly what is said, rather than what they think you want to hear?

How to ask questions

A survey will probably consist of asking a number of previously prepared questions which seem likely to gain the information needed. Questions should be asked informally, and not necessarily always in the same order. A rigid, formal interviewing process is unlikely to produce honest and open responses. You have to be prepared to talk about the insiders' interests, as well as the topics on your own check-list. (Researchers often call this a 'semi-structured interview'.) Interviews should be carried out with a cross-section of the people you wish to work with, taking into account things like age, sex, occupation, and perhaps status and income. People can be questioned individually or in groups, but the purpose of the survey needs to be explained thoroughly in advance, and you must ask their permission. The interview should appear relaxed and informal, giving people a chance to talk at some length, and giving the interviewer time to pursue ideas that come up. But essential questions and areas for discussion need to be fixed beforehand, and should form the overall structure of the interview. And, of course, the answers must be carefully recorded for future analysis and use in the planning process.

What sorts of question?

Questions should cover a community's existing practices, people's changing needs, their expectations of literacy, types of literacy which might be appropriate, and people's long-term goals.

Before a programme can be planned, you also need to ask questions about organisational matters, such as:

- the timing of classes;
- attitudes towards teachers;
- the best composition of classes (all ages together? men and women together?);
- the location of classes;
- the materials available;
- and existing literacy skills.

Most of the organisational issues can be checked out through simple 'yes/no' questions. For example, *Do you work in the home? Do you work in the evening? Can you arrive at the centre early in the morning?* Exploring attitudes will require longer, open-ended questions that encourage people to talk at length. For example, *In what situations do you feel you need to be able to read?*

Survey exercises with groups

Questionnaires are generally used with individuals, but group discussions are also a very useful and valuable way of finding out the particular needs of people in any community. In some cases they are more effective. Listening to ideas expressed by one person in a group can often generate new ideas in others. The process of discussion helps people to think through their own ideas, explain them to others, and consider them from different angles.

Brain-storming in a group can be very productive; the process is described in Chapter 3. However, in the early stages of discussion, people may need time to think through such matters as where or how a class might take place, or the topics they would like to cover in it. It might be helpful to represent the options visually, perhaps by using sticks, stones, or shells placed on the ground, or by drawing maps on paper or in the sand. The very process of representing an abstract idea with a concrete object is itself a literacy practice, and it gives the planner a chance to see whether learners are familiar with doing this, and to learn about the conventions which they normally use.

For example, when deciding on the best place to locate a literacy class, local people could be asked to make a rough sketch map of the area, perhaps using objects to represent the various features. With sticks to represent trees, and stones to represent buildings, the map will show how far each learner would have to walk from home to the possible sites for a centre.

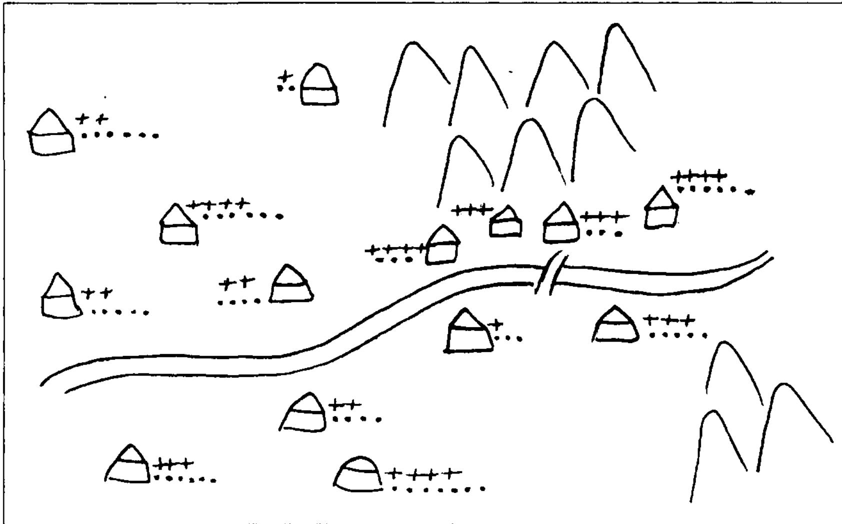


Figure 2.2: Representation of a village map drawn in the sand, showing hills, river, bridge, houses, and numbers of adults (+) and children (•) in each house. (Based on examples supplied by ACTIONAID, Uganda)

In the same way, when discussing literacy needs, stones or shells can be used to represent the different stages in cultivating, harvesting, storing, milling, and selling grain. Groups can begin to identify the particular difficulties encountered at different stages in the process, and the points at which literacy might help them. These might be calculating by weight instead of by volume; checking the price charged by the miller for the total amount of grain; or keeping records in order to decide in advance the most profitable time to sell.

When deciding priorities for literacy, stones or beads of different shapes can be used for the various literacy practices which the group might tackle, such as signing their names, opening a bank account, or recognising bus numbers. Individuals who have decided to learn in a group might like to sort out their own priorities first, before taking part in a group discussion.

Most cultures have a way of representing concepts visually. Some people record quantities by tying knots in cloth; others use numbers of beads or different-coloured beads to represent time passing, or the status of an individual. Tally sticks record quantities by notches cut in a piece of wood; totem poles represent more spiritual or abstract ideas. Some people prefer to have things represented visually: it helps them to analyse ideas into different components and grasp new concepts; others find it difficult to relate to two-dimensional images. In the same way, some readers will find it easier than others to relate to the diagrams used in this book. While these preferences may be partly determined by culture, they will also be due to individual learning styles.

Getting a group to talk about their needs without any indication of what is available or possible is generally difficult. Most people find it easier to make choices or express their feelings within clearly stated boundaries. In many cases, planners may need to define what these are, before asking a group to discuss their priorities. Again, stones, sticks, or

Namibia: a ranking exercise, using stones and soft-drink cans
Photo: Roger Yates

shells can be placed on the ground during a discussion, to represent what the planners feel they can offer.

Asking people to talk about priorities reveals the relative importance that they attach to various options. It is often a more effective way of making a decision than asking simple yes/no questions. Even when it is possible to choose only one of a number of options, a prioritising exercise can help a group to decide on the option that most people regard as the most important. For example, beads of different colours can be used to represent different days of the week, or times of day. If nine members of a group of twelve people prefer to meet on a Monday, but all of the group name Tuesday as either first or second choice, Tuesday may be the better option. The following exercises are, similarly, useful ways of identifying key features of a community's life and its literacy needs.

Seasonal calendars

Seasonal calendars record not only months or dates in a year, but the activities and problems that a community faces during a given period. They can be drawn up in advance by planners as they begin to work in an unfamiliar area. They are an important means of recording local knowledge and information, so local people should be involved in developing them.

As a literacy practice, making a calendar can form the focus of activity for early meetings with a group. The information it generates will be useful when designing an appropriate literacy programme. The process of compiling it also provides the chance to discuss with the community their familiarity with the idea of calendars, and the different conventions used for recording events.

A community calendar gives an overall picture of the workloads of various people in a community at different times of the year. Many

communities, particularly in agricultural areas, have busy periods and slack periods, depending on the season. An educational programme should take this into account. Classes should be planned for a period of the year when people have the time and the energy to attend.

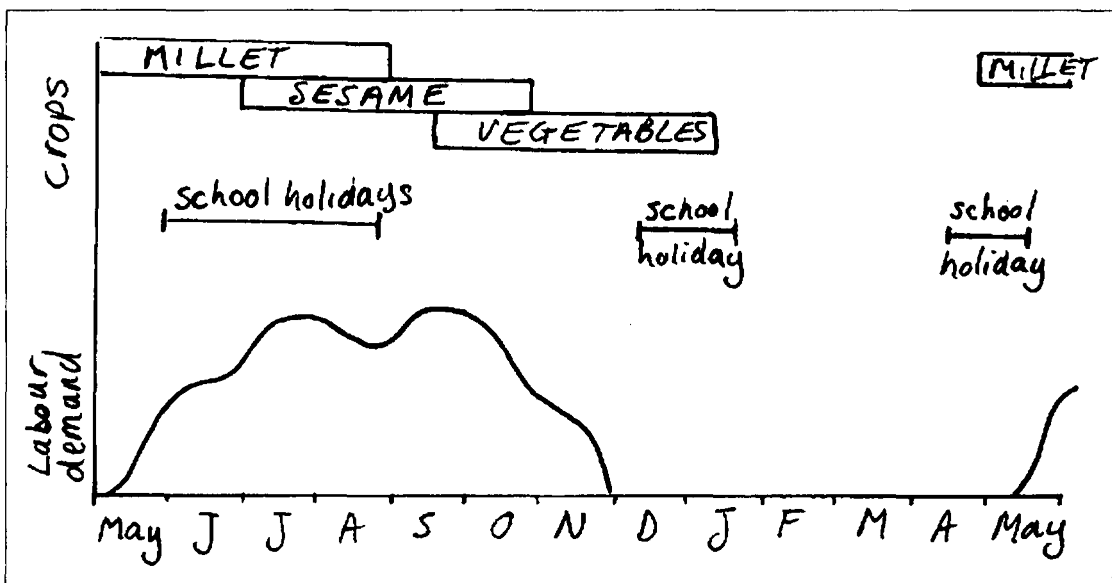
The content of the classes can be planned around the activities that are being undertaken by the community. For example, during sowing time, discussions might focus on the relative merits of new farming techniques for preparing the ground, or the choice of new varieties. Number work might be based on counting the number of rows or the total amount of seed needed, or calculating the risks when choosing new yields.

The type of information recorded on a seasonal calendar will vary according to the activities of the community. An urban group will not be affected by agricultural seasons in the same way, but are likely to have other patterns of busy and slack periods in their year, as well as different literacy needs at different times. Religious ceremonies often form significant points in people's memories, and can be used to cross-check dates and events. Once a community calendar has been drawn up, individuals can be given a copy on which to add their own dates and events.

Information recorded on seasonal calendars could include:

- ploughing, planting, weeding, and harvesting times for different crops;
- approximate times for applying fertiliser to different crops;
- periods of rainfall;
- expected temperatures;
- expected pests;
- periods when certain animal diseases are prevalent, and the need for special precautions;

Figure 2.3: An example of a seasonal calendar



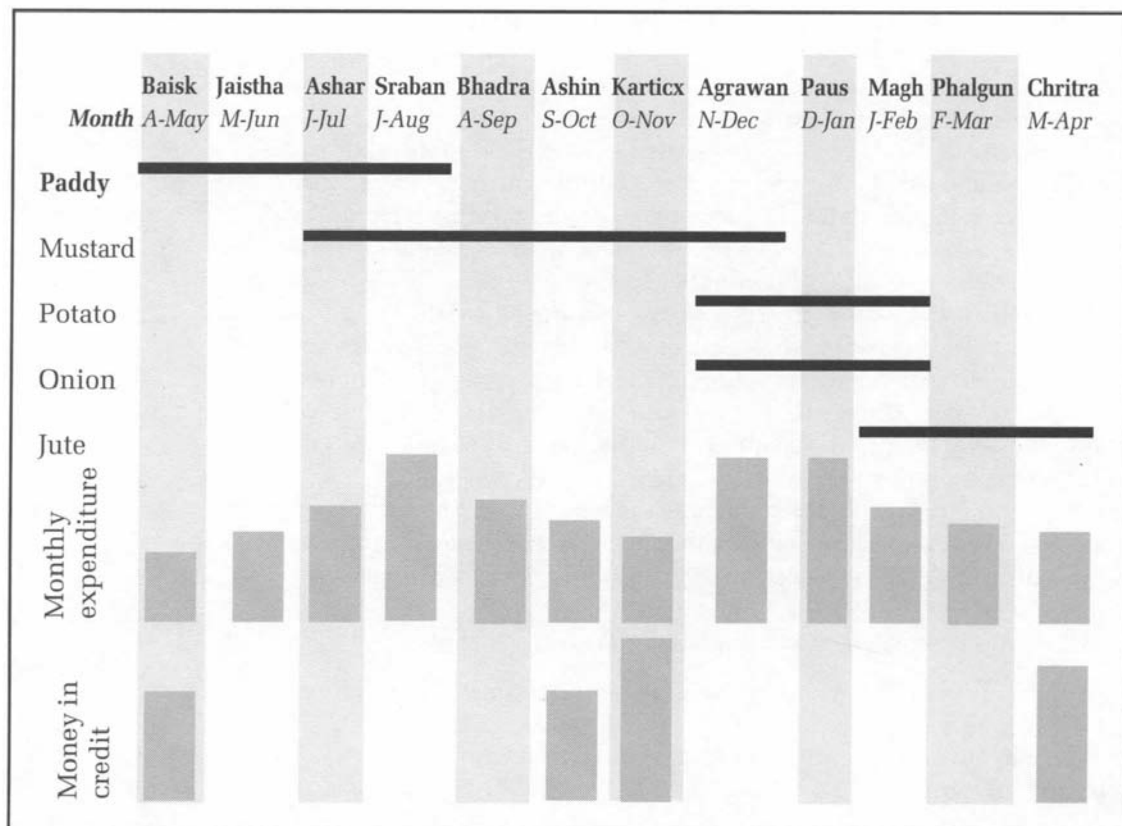


Figure 2.4: Another example of a seasonal calendar

- periods when human illness is common, and the need for preventative treatment;
- the demand for labour for different members of the family;
- school terms and holidays;
- religious ceremonies;
- public holidays.

Daily calendars can also be compiled and used to indicate the times of day when people may not be available for study. They can also be used to analyse and compare the work loads of different family members.

Time lines

In discussing changes in people's lives that have brought about the need for literacy, a time line drawn on paper or in the sand can help to put past events in sequence.

This is a good exercise to generate group discussion, as people recall the order in which various events occurred and mark them out along a straight line. By continuing the line on from the present to represent the future, people can be encouraged to indicate their expectations of literacy, the changes they anticipate, and the length of time they expect to be involved.

Local histories that begin to emerge through the construction of time lines should be noted and kept in mind. Later they can be recorded as reading material for subsequent literacy groups or for post-basic classes. Exercises involving time lines have been particularly successful with elders. A simple time line might look like Figure 2.5.

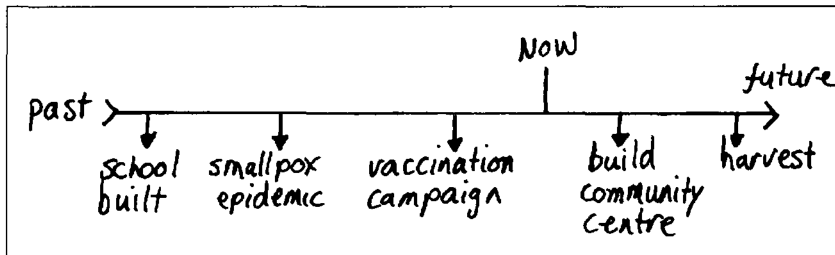


Figure 2.5: A simple time line

With this and all the activities described above, care should be taken to ensure that people understand the exercise before they begin. Beware of giving too much information or of prompting people to reply in a certain way. They need to be given time and space to indicate their own priorities and make their own choices. Without this, a survey will be biased by the researcher and not give a true picture of the situation.

Who needs literacy?

The answer to this question will depend on the results of your survey. However, in terms of general development priorities, the focus of a literacy project is likely to be similar to the target of other development activities, like 'the poorest of the poor', or unemployed youth, or farmers who may be involved in a new agricultural programme. But the needs and interests of women always require special consideration. While women comprise at least half the world's population, only in parts of Latin America and the Caribbean is there anything approaching an equal balance between men and women in terms of literacy skills.

Recognising the needs of women

In recent years, development workers have become more aware of the often very different needs of groups of men and groups of women. Studies have shown the importance of seeing women as a separate group, and of making time to consider their special ways of living, working, speaking, and communicating.

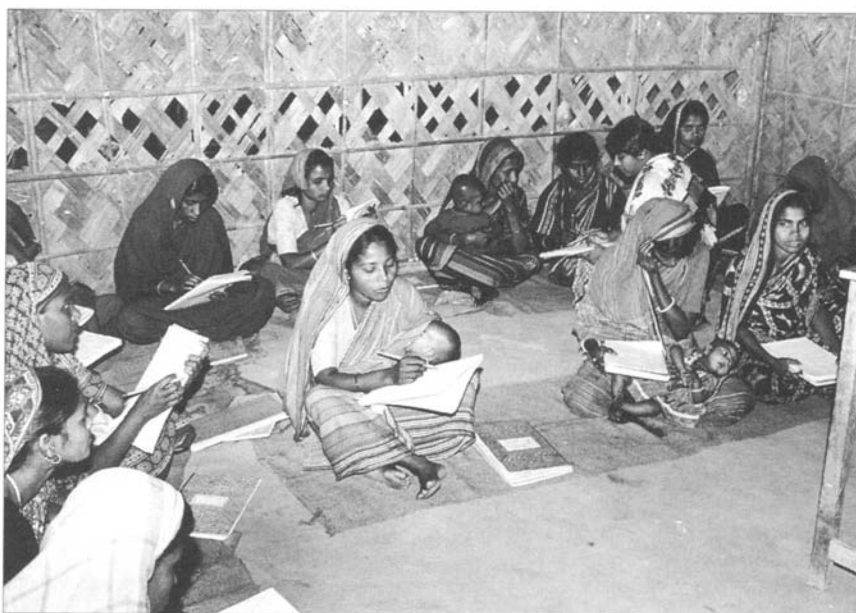
Some facts

- Women in many areas of the world do a large part of the work in the home, within the family, in the fields, and in the market-place. The amount of time available to them for learning literacy is severely limited. There is a danger that literacy programmes and their outcomes will mean even more work for women.

- There are more literate men in the world than literate women: probably 20 per cent more.
- Formal schooling for boys has traditionally been seen as more important than formal schooling for girls.
- Most adult literacy programmes, in countries of the North and the South, attract more female students than male. In spite of pressures on their time, women do appear to want literacy.

In countries where women have little power, and there are high demands on their time, it is all the more important to identify their needs clearly, and to design programmes to meet them.

Most, if not all, the fundamental questions outlined in the previous sections may need to be addressed separately to groups of women. And there are other extra factors to be taken into account when looking specifically at the needs of women.



Bangladesh: a literacy class for women pavement-dwellers. For mothers of small children, there may be no such thing as free time for study.
Photo: Liz Clayton

In the Rupandehi Province of Nepal, Women Working Together for Change (WATCH) is a locally based organisation, funded by Oxfam, which was set up to build confidence and self-reliance among women. WATCH works in the villages with groups of 15-30 women. They earn money from ventures such as seedling nurseries and mushroom cultivation. WATCH provides interest-free loans of 1,000 rupees to the poorest families and encourages them to start small money-making enterprises. When the women start to organise themselves, the need for literacy and a broader post-basic education becomes clear, and literacy classes are established.

> Kathleen Rockhill's study of Hispanic women attending literacy classes in New Mexico (USA) in the late 1980s showed a connection between gender, education, and domestic violence. Many of the women whom she interviewed said that their husbands or partners felt threatened by their going out to classes and tried to prevent them, sometimes forcibly, from doing so. This is not unusual: it occurs in different ways in many parts of the world. When one member of a family chooses to do something to improve her or his life chances, the dynamics of the family are invariably changed. [12]

Culture

Is it culturally acceptable for women to discuss their needs with men, or to be taught by men? Are there women available to conduct initial surveys and later to act as teachers or as positive role-models? Will the women prefer to be questioned individually or as a group? In many parts of the world, men object to their wives and daughters becoming involved in educational programmes, which are sometimes the cause of domestic violence. Are women able to express their needs freely? Will they be able to attend classes, if necessary in secret? What would be the consequences for them?

Related to this is the equally important question of whether women should teach men, and the question of whether or not women and men should or can learn together in any particular cultural context. These questions are discussed in Chapter 4.

Confidence

Do the women of the community have the confidence to attend literacy classes? Have they always seen literacy as a male preserve? Do they see it as something that might be available and useful to women? Do existing attitudes need to be challenged?

Changes

Are there social or domestic changes that have affected or will affect women's need for literacy, such as a tendency for men to migrate to the towns, leaving rural women in charge of households and communicating with their partners by letter? Will these new roles lead to the need for further skills, such as training in management, or second-language literacy?

Test your own assumptions!

When making a survey of how women spend their time, and trying to assess their existing need for literacy, it is important not to ignore the possibility for change within the programme. Women often mention increased self-confidence as the most important outcome of their literacy programme. Programme planners often focus on the *content* of the programmes and the information that can be passed on. Many women's

programmes have been designed to centre on issues of child-care or their domestic roles within the household. Do women want 'welfare' programmes that help them to complete their current tasks 'better'? Or do they want 'equity' programmes that will give them access to opportunities similar to those of the men of their community? Programmes which concentrate on domestic roles will do little to change the balance of power.

If women decide that they want to challenge their current roles, they will need to address the attitudes of the men in the community, and seek their co-operation. Issues of gender are not specifically a women's concern. Men will, in the same way, need to think about, understand, and question which tasks, powers, and privileges are distributed on the basis of gender, and where there is scope for change.

In trying to recognise the needs of women, it is easy to see them as a unified group who share the same needs. But, as with any group, there will be strong differences: differences between working women, single women, mothers, grandmothers, young women, and old women; and differences of class and caste and expectations. Has every woman been given the chance to express her needs? Have all the differences been taken into account?

When making a survey of certain groups, including women, it is important not to start from the assumption that they are inevitably marginalised, because this may not be the case. We need to ask:

- What strengths do women have?
- In what way are women's groups organised?
- What power do they traditionally hold?
- What assumptions have been made in advance about their roles?

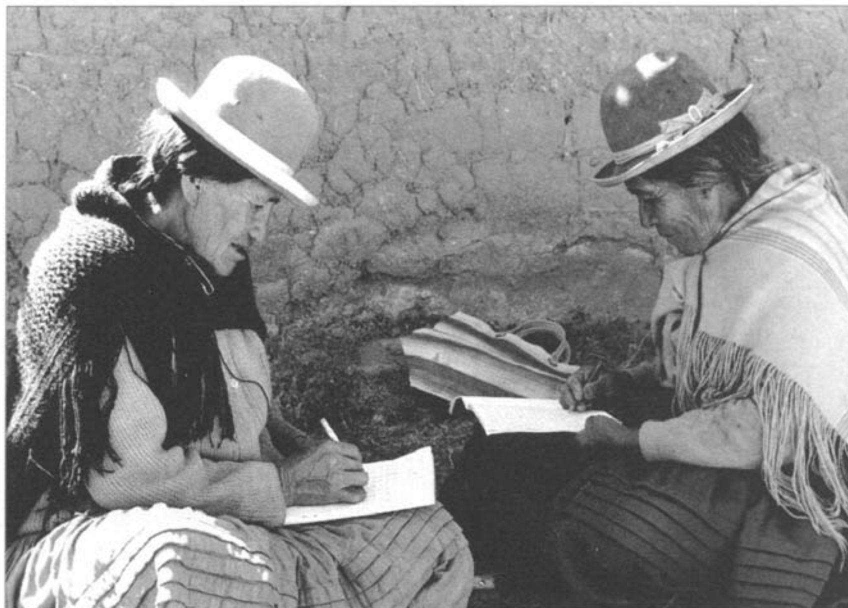
It is also important not to begin with a culturally biased view of what women need. It is too easy for outsiders to adopt attitudes which reflect Western assumptions. Deciding whether to work within existing structures and roles or to challenge them can be done only by the users of a programme themselves, and in their own time. In order truly to recognise other people's needs, it is important to be free of any preconceived idea of what these may be.

Development workers should ask themselves all the time:

- What is actually happening now?
- What can we learn from it?
- What are the alternatives?
- Which of these alternatives do the users want?
- How do these relate to literacy?

Recognising age-related needs

In every community there will be groups with specific needs which need to be specially considered. Any survey of the needs of a community must take care to identify what these groups might be: homeless people, for



Older people often prefer to learn with people in the same age-group — as here, in a literacy class for grandmothers in La Paz, Bolivia.
Photo: Jenny Matthews

instance; the unemployed; migrant workers; elderly people; or refugee groups. Once they have been identified, it may be possible to make provision to include them within new developments, or to set up something specifically for them. Programmes which aim to introduce change into a community need to take into account all groups within that community, considering both their own particular needs and the ways in which they will be affected by change in other areas.

People's needs for literacy, the types of skill they require, and the way they are best able to acquire them will not remain constant throughout their lives. As people grow and mature, their needs will change. In the past, some cultures saw learning as something that happened in the early part of life: in particular, childhood was seen as the only time for formal schooling; but this view is now questioned. People have always taken on different responsibilities at different stages of their lives, but they may have been prepared for these rôles by older members of the family or community. Now, changes in technology and in community life often mean that young adults need to learn things which older people may not know about. Rapid changes in technology and in community life are all contributing to a situation where new skills, new ideas, and new technology demand continuing re-education, learning, and unlearning throughout life. It is no longer the case that the learning which takes place in the early part of life will be sufficient to carry someone through to old age.

While some forms of learning and education may be appropriate to all members of a community, there are times when people will want to learn with members of their own age-group. The topics they want to discuss and the skills they need will be different from those that are of concern to a person older or younger than themselves. Being with people of a

similar age-group and situation in life can help to strengthen individual self-awareness, in terms of what individuals need to learn and also in terms of what they have to offer. Moreover, people of different ages often have different learning styles.

We do not advocate constant segregation by age in literacy learning. Being with people of different ages can help to improve communication and understanding between them. There may be times for integrated, all-age groups and times for separate groups. However, planners and development workers do need to take age into account. Literacy workers should be made aware of age-related needs and, as with all groups, be encouraged to identify with the life situation of the people with whom they are working.

In some African cultures a person's age-group is particularly important. At certain stages in their lives such as circumcision and the onset of puberty, young people spend time with their peers, away from most adults, learning about their new roles and responsibilities. In Senegal at such a time, a group of young people formed their own drama group. They wanted to take an active role in development issues and particularly to let people know about the problems that would be created by the government's decision to build a dam and flood arable land. They wrote a play and travelled together round local villages, performing it and discussing the issues with the villagers.

A changing view of elders

Traditionally in countries of the South, age has been seen to bring increased wisdom and knowledge. Elders in most communities have held power and commanded respect. This is beginning to change, particularly in areas which are undergoing rapid development. Young people often feel that they are more in touch with the new world than their elders are. Young people now command more power, and older people are increasingly seen as having little to offer. This Western view of elders as frail or needy is in danger of spreading throughout the developing world.

Increased poverty in many of the already poorer countries has added to the strain on extended families and has affected traditional family structures. Migration to find paid work in the cities has taken younger people away from family homes. Elders in many countries are often living alone and seen as out of touch.

Marginalising elders and assuming that they have little to offer prevents their full participation within a community. Literacy and education programmes are too often seen as something for the young. Many planners feel that literacy programmes should be aimed at those who are economically productive, and they assume that elders do not fall

A group of older people in the Windward Islands were questioned about what they wanted from a literacy programme. One of their priorities was to record some of their knowledge, which younger people no longer seemed interested in. In particular they wanted to write down events that had happened throughout their lifetime, and record some of the plant medicines and natural remedies which they and their families had always used. They felt that when the new enthusiasm for modern medicine had subsided, people would again want to use some of the traditional remedies.

into this group. But it is a mistake to see the young as the only economically productive group. Older people often have the time and the wisdom to work in a variety of ways, particularly in the administrative tasks and other support roles that are needed in literacy programmes. Their time and their wisdom can be of positive value to the rest of the community, if they are given the opportunity to use them.

In many areas, with increased demands on younger women's time, it is grandmothers and elders who are responsible for bringing up children. They play a vital economic role here, as well as having a direct influence on the welfare and attitudes of young children.

Before introducing change into a community, it is important to remember that elders will have seen and lived through many other sorts of change before. Whatever is new in current ideas about development, it is the *process* of change, and its effect on community life, that they will have experienced in the past. Their understanding and support can be invaluable.

Some facts

- The world's population is growing older. The number of older people in the developing world is growing particularly fast. It is expected to increase by more than 80 per cent between 1980 and the year 2000.
- When older people are left to care for children, their influence in encouraging children to read is as great as that claimed for mothers.
- Short-term memory generally becomes worse as people grow older; long-term memory improves.
- Older adults bring knowledge and experience of life to learning, which is an advantage when acquiring new information and skills.
- Research shows that, if people continue to use their brains, effective learning can continue well into old age.
- Age is a cultural construct. In some communities, people are considered old at 35; in others they are not seen as 'middle-aged' until they are over 40.

Planning work with different age-groups

What particular needs will each group have?

- Children have a lot of energy and may want to move around and be active in their classes. Older people may prefer to be more reflective and spend more time in discussion.
- Eye-sight usually deteriorates with age (although people of all ages may have difficulties in seeing clearly). Ensure good lighting, and hold classes in daylight hours, if possible. Where appropriate, test to see whether spectacles are needed.
- How will you plan the different daily programmes of each age-group? Will one group be excluded from coming to a class if it is set at a certain time?
- What particular interests will each group have? What topics will they want to discuss? What materials will they be interested in reading? What examples will they identify with?
- How will the aims and needs of each age-group differ? Think about children, teenagers, adults, elders. How do their responsibilities change at different stages of their lives, and how will this affect their literacy needs?
- Will the understanding of different groups of people be increased by including them in one learning group? Are there particular cultural difficulties in their learning together? If people are to be put into groups, is sex a better criterion than age?
- How will learners feel about a literacy worker from a different age-group? Older people may find it difficult to be taught by a younger person, who may in turn find it difficult to be in a position of teaching elders. Young people may be able to relate better to someone who is not much older than themselves.
- How can the skills of each particular age-group be harnessed and used positively? What in particular do they have to contribute to, as well as gain from, the whole community?
- What does each group really think about people older and younger than themselves? Is their view an accurate one? Can a literacy or learning group contribute to a better understanding between generations, as well as sharpening a generation's view of its own abilities?

Again, it is generally the local people themselves who will be in the best position to answer these questions. Care should be taken to consult with people from all age-groups when planning a programme.

CHAPTER 3

Looking at literacies and establishing aims

If you are asked to provide training in literacy skills, what kind of literacy should you offer? The safest answer is that, once you have gone though the processes of discussion outlined in the previous chapter, you should be guided by what the learners say they want and can be shown to need. When in doubt, remember that the learners know best, for attendance at literacy classes is usually a voluntary activity, and the importance of learners' motivation should never be underestimated. One difficult and often contentious issue is the question of language choice.

Language choice: long-term and short-term needs

While it is generally accepted that people acquire literacy best in their mother-tongue, it is also true there is very little written material available in a large number of principally oral languages. Learning to read and write in a local language which has very restricted use may soon become frustrating for learners. However, if the need for literacy is related to carrying out a relatively small and locally based task, acquiring literacy in a second language may not be necessary. Obviously, the needs of different groups will vary, but introducing different literacies or different languages within one community may restrict the use and value of what is learned. In discussing literacy needs with a community, it is important to take both a short-term and a long-term view of what should be done. What are the tasks which the community may want to carry out almost immediately, and what 'post-basic' or continuing education programmes might they wish to move on to in the future?

Language choice will ultimately be based on people's reasons for wanting to become literate and the goals they set themselves. In areas where they live surrounded by newspapers, advertisements, messages, and signs, there are often strong reasons for wanting to become literate in the dominant language. This could be referred to as 'the language of first sight', just as the mother-tongue is 'the language of first hearing'.

In helping people to decide the language they will choose for literacy, it is useful to understand the power-related implications behind that choice.

In the Oxfam-funded Bulamahlo learning project, in a black settlement called Shiluvane, in the Transvaal, South Africa, people are learning to read and write in Sotho, the vernacular (local) language of the area. The number of books and other reading materials in Sotho is limited, but for many of the learners the aim in becoming literate is to correspond with members of their family who are spread throughout South Africa. One woman, typical of many, reported: 'Sometimes my husband sends me money, and I didn't know how to sign for it at the Post Office. And when he wrote letters, I had to ask friends to read them for me. They know all my secrets. Sometimes I even had to pay people to sign for my money or read my letters.' It is the policy of many South African programmes for people to learn to read and write initially in their first language, and then to progress to English if they need it for work. The same woman reported: 'I worked in a white farmer's house for six years. If I answered the phone when no one was at home, I could never take a message, because I couldn't write. I couldn't even write down the phone number.' Now her ambition is to become a teacher, 'to share all this cleverness with others'.

South Africa: an open-air class run by the Bulamahlo Learning Project in Shiluvane, Transvaal. Each student has three two-hour classes each week.
Photo: Matthew Sherrington

- Language is often the most important basis for a sense of individual, cultural, and political identity.
- Where the language of education is different from that of the home, home life may be seen as inferior to social spheres where knowledge and learning mean power.
- People may be deterred from entering education because they have a limited knowledge of the language taught.

- People who speak and write the dominant language will have better access to information and therefore to power.
- When a language is written down, it assumes authority and tends to become standardised. Other forms of that language, such as dialects and creoles, may then be seen as less important. As a result, people who speak dialects and creoles may be at a disadvantage.
- While a country may have decided upon its own national language, the former colonial language may still dominate and be understood as 'the language of power', as with English in many former British colonies. In India, where Hindi is the national language, English is still widely spoken in government, politics, industry, and education. The language issue in such a large country is further complicated by the fact that in many parts of the south there is little understanding of Hindi, and English tends to be used as a *lingua franca* instead.
- Of the 4,000 languages spoken in the world, only 300 are in regular use in their written form, and fewer than 100 have a significant written literature.
- Some minority languages may consist of only a few thousand speakers.
- There is often a wide regional variation in the script and writing conventions of local languages. Literacy programmes in one area may differ significantly from those in another, and communication between areas may therefore be restricted.
- Many languages are in danger of dying out. (It has been estimated that 50 per cent of the languages of the world will disappear within a lifetime.) *Teaching* literacy in an endangered language can help to increase its value and extend its usage. *Learning* literacy in an endangered language often has limited use.
- Materials available in local languages will be restricted. People may be able to read only what they have written for themselves, or what has been specially written for them. Locally produced materials are rarely, if ever, financially viable.
- Schools often begin with teaching literacy in the mother-tongue and move on to the dominant language in later years. There is no firm evidence to suggest that second-language literacy is eventually helped or hindered by a two-step approach.

The choice of language for literacy is a crucial one and needs to decided at local level. It should take into account both the long-term and the short-term needs of learners, the available materials and financial resources, national policy, and the status of the languages in question. Its significance should not be underestimated.

[In Senegal, most literacy programmes are in the learners' first language, while all formal education is in French.]

What is now beginning to happen in Senegal might be compared to the days in Europe when literacy passed from the language of the educated elite (Latin and Greek) into national language education (in German, French, English ...), which eventually reached the majority of the population.

The formal Senegalese system of education in French is sometimes referred to as 'imported knowledge'. Adding imported knowledge to an already sound basic-skill level, to high self-esteem, and to an 'indigenous' knowledge base which is highly valorised is an invaluable step towards growth, change, and development.

But if imported knowledge is supposed to give or replace these skills, self-esteem, and knowledge base, it can have disastrous effects on the perceptions and abilities of learners. In this context, learners become passive recipients of 'messages' sent from 'outside', and this passivity (and the resulting confusion) makes true learning, independence, and subsequent action impossible.[13]

What is the programme for?

As we have seen, answers to the question *What kind of literacy?* are closely bound up with the aims of the learners. It is becoming clear that the four key questions for planners cannot be considered in isolation. In real life they are all mixed up together. We shall return to this problem later.

Establishing aims

Before beginning to plan literacy training, whether for individuals or groups, it is important that everyone is clear and in agreement on the programme's overall aims or purposes. What a programme intends to achieve will greatly affect how a programme is planned and taught. After the needs of the various groups have been assessed, the people who will be involved in learning need to agree on a set of common aims.

Learners should play a large part in setting the aims for their own programmes. If aims are set for them by outsiders, there is a big risk that they will either be irrelevant, or that they will not satisfy what the learners feel they themselves need at that time. In the first case, everyone's time is wasted; in the second, it is hard for learners to be motivated, unless they recognise that what they are learning is useful.

However, we should not underestimate the contribution of planners or literacy workers: they also have a role to play. The learners' experience is necessarily limited, and someone from outside may be able to offer ideas which the group would not have thought of themselves. A VSO volunteer working in Islamabad, for example, found a group of adults basing aims for

their course on a primary-school curriculum. They had no direct experience of adult approaches to classroom learning. While they recognised that they were learning, as adults, every day of their lives, they associated literacy with being in the classroom, being taught, and 'going back to school'. Acquiring literacy skills was for them a very passive experience, and, not surprisingly, the drop-out rate was high.

In establishing aims, a brain-storming exercise may be a good starting point. Brain-storming is an activity that generates a lot of energy, and is often a useful way to gather ideas. It means encouraging everyone in the group to contribute any ideas that occur to them, without thinking critically about them. Some ideas will be useful; others may be inappropriate, but these will often spark off new, more relevant ideas in other people's minds. For this reason it is better for the literacy worker to accept all suggestions without comment or judgement, recording everything that is offered.

Initially it is a light-hearted exercise. The serious work begins when the group has run out of ideas. All the suggestions are then discussed, and those that are not generally felt to be relevant are rejected. The rest are grouped together, or placed in order of importance or complexity. Gradually, the suggestions are turned into aims for a learning programme, and an outline of how they should be tackled. If a chalk-board is used to record the results of a brain-storming exercise, the result may look something like Figure 3.1: aims are written down, some are later crossed out, and some are grouped. But you should bear in mind that new learners may not be able to interpret a relatively complex arrangement of words like this. They will need to find other ways of recording and remembering the suggestions made; see *Survey exercises with groups* in Chapter 2.

Remember that it is the *process* of agreeing aims which is important. A trainer may well have an overview, and suggest ideas which the group itself may not have thought of. Part of the trainer's role is to extend the learners' knowledge and ideas. But it is easy for trainers, planning on their own, to make misguided assumptions about a group and choose aims which are inappropriate to the learners.

Although it is often easier to begin teaching with a primer or work book, materials prepared in advance are generally based on the aims of an outsider. People in different situations will have their own ideas and their own aims. While they may decide to use a primer that has been produced on a large scale, it will be more successful if it is used selectively to serve the aims decided by the learners.

Remember that people's aims will change and grow as they learn more, but certain overall aims need to be established in advance. If you don't know where you are going, it is very difficult to get there!

Skills and themes

Overall aims for learning will probably include a number of skills and themes: things that people want to learn to do, and things that people want to learn about. These themes and skills will arise out of the early

discussions undertaken to assess the community's needs, and may be agreed upon during the first meeting of a group.

Target skills may include:

- writing and signing one's name
- writing down addresses
- reading the Bible, the Koran, or other scriptures
- writing a personal letter
- understanding a business contract
- keeping records
- recognising road signs
- helping children with school-work
- reading a newspaper.

Key themes may include:

- the use of banks
- improved nutrition
- how a co-operative works
- crop diseases
- legal rights
- electricity and safety
- the history of political change.

Deciding on themes and skills will help to determine what is to be learned and in what order. When working with a group, every member of the group should be given an opportunity to express personal aims before deciding which ones are shared, and establishing common priorities. Themes and skills will probably be taught alongside each other, and will involve the writing and number work that is necessary for confidence in each of these areas.

In establishing aims, remember:

- If the learning is to be useful, the aims should be decided on in consultation with the learners themselves, and not by outsiders alone.

- Aims should be analysed and clarified. For example, in looking at the history of political change, what sorts of change do people want to know about? What is it that they want to understand? The aims which people set themselves have to be within their grasp, so that they are able to reach them and feel they are making progress.

- Although aims need to be established in advance, they may well change and will need to be reviewed regularly.

Establishing aims for a learning programme will help individuals to decide whether they want to be involved. It will help the person planning the course to decide who should teach what. One person need not be responsible for teaching everything. There will be many themes which members of the group know far more about than the literacy worker does. When an outline programme has been drawn up, planners can begin to consider how it might best be organised.

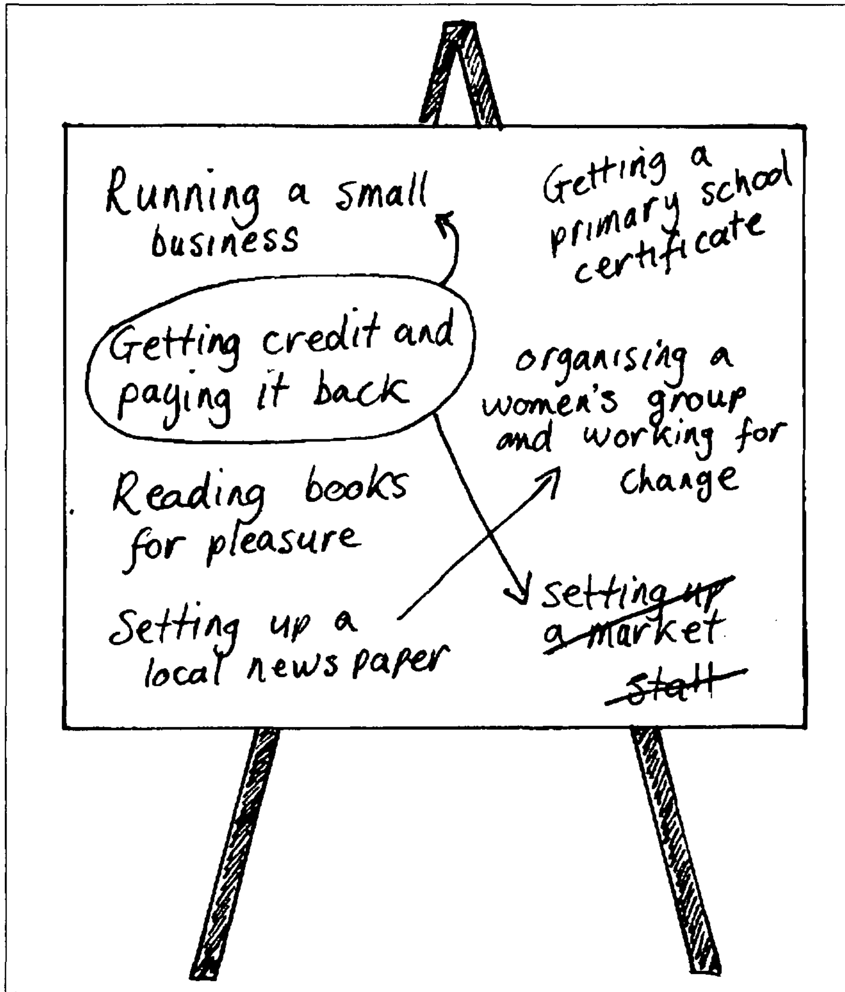


Figure 3.1: The results of a typical brain-storming exercise

CHAPTER 4

Getting organised: some practical issues

In this chapter we will consider practical issues: how often the group should meet; what time of year and day the classes should be held; where groups should meet; how big the classes should be; whether women and men should learn together; drawing up a programme; involving other people; and planning for assessment and evaluation. Part Three will consider classroom practice in much more detail.

When and how often should the group meet?

When planning a programme of learning, with an individual, a group, or a series of groups, it is important to decide on a time and a place to meet. However informal the class, meetings which are left to chance are too easily cancelled or overlooked. Regular meetings and regular practice are important in learning new skills. Classes should be planned in advance, bearing in mind the time of day and the time of year.

People attending literacy classes will need to fit them into the other activities in their lives. For farmers there are certain times of year when any extra activities are impossible. During planting and harvesting times, they may be working in the fields from early morning to late at night; while at other times of the year, for men at least, a large part of the day is free. Nomadic herders who travel with their livestock may be away for long periods at a time, but still spend two to three months in one place.

In a literacy programme in Senegal, classes were held twice a week for three hours. Learners worked for one and a half hours on numeracy, then for one and a half hours on literacy, following lessons set out in a primer. The language used was Pulaar, the first language of the area. It is a phonetic language, where each letter stands for a single sound, and there is a direct relationship between the sound of a word and the way it is written down. Some people were reading simple texts and writing letters after three months.

In India, female construction workers on a building site were unable to organise regular classes. They attended weekend workshops with a tutor about once every two months, and between workshops they used their lunch-times to work together on their books. The language used was Rajasthani, written in Hindi script. They were all living in a city where literacy was very much part of their environment. Some people progressed faster than others, but most of them could gain something from reading a newspaper after six months and four weekend workshops.

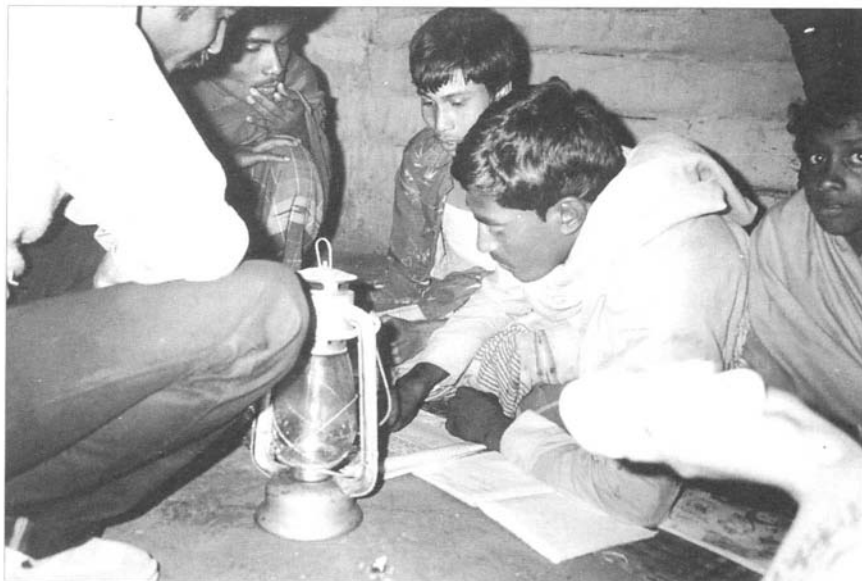
Although classes need to be fixed in advance, they need not involve the same amount of time week by week. The group may decide to meet once, twice, or three times a week, or even daily for a short period. It is impossible to predict how much time is needed to acquire literacy skills. It depends on the skills that people want, the skills they start with, the writing system they will use, and other factors. But a one-month or two-month period with classes once, twice, or three times a week is long enough to make a significant start.

Fixing a time of day to meet means considering not only people's other tasks, and when they will be free, but also their energy levels. Early morning or mid-morning is often a good time for learning, when people are still fresh and the day is not too hot. However, this is also the time when people generally work in the fields or prepare the mid-day meal.

Mid-afternoon, after eating, may be a time when there are fewer outside demands, but energy levels are low and students may find themselves falling asleep in class.

During the cool of the evening, when the sun has gone down, may be a popular time for organising classes, but this means that artificial light must be provided. There is the cost of lamps and fuel to be considered, and interference from insects. Elders, or those with poor eyesight, generally find it more difficult to work by artificial light, which can cause eye strain.

In a literacy programme in Nepal, classes are held on four evenings a week for a period of six months. Each class generally lasts for two hours. Regular attendance means that many learners progress quickly and, by the end of six months, can write their names and recognise individual letters of the alphabet and most words, if written in large letters. However, VSO volunteers report that few learners are able to transfer these skills to real-life situations; they cannot read joined-up letters, newspaper headlines, or signboards. When asked about this, one woman replied: 'I am only able to read the literacy book. I do not have attention for those other things.' If they are not able to put their new skills to use, people who learn quickly and intensively may lose their skills just as fast.



Bangladesh: learning by the light of a paraffin lamp. People are usually more relaxed in the cool of the evening; but there is the cost of artificial light to be considered.
Photo: Ro Cole

There is no one ideal time for learning, but it may help to remember:

- Classes should be between one and two hours long. Less than one hour is often too short. It is hard to concentrate for more than two hours.
- There should be frequent changes of activity (see Chapter 7, 'Planning a session'). This is particularly good for keeping people awake and interested during times of low energy.
- Students should be involved and active. People used to manual work may find sitting down uncomfortable, whatever time of day it is. It is always easier for people to learn if they are active and involved.
- The timing of the classes should be decided with all the learners. They will know what time of day they are free and able to learn. But this may well depend on people's jobs, and also it may be different for men and women, for parents and for adults without child-care responsibilities.

Where should the group meet?

Agreeing on a place to meet means finding somewhere which can be reached by everyone; is sheltered from sun, wind, and rain; has space for everyone in the group to sit comfortably; and will leave people undisturbed by curious children or animals.

Many adult literacy groups meet in school buildings, after the children have finished using them. The advantages of a school are that it is generally seen as a place for studying; tables and chairs are often there already; and there is often a board and chalk. The disadvantages of a school are that adults may feel they are being treated as children and 'sent

In Johannesburg, the 'Centres of Concern' run adult literacy classes in the evenings. They are taught by volunteers and generally held in local primary schools. No fee is charged, whether or not the students are in paid employment.

As the schools are often in the centre of residential areas, they can be easily reached by everyone. Classrooms are already equipped with blackboard and chalk, desks and chairs. The volunteer teachers attend training courses on a regular basis, and are taught how to work with adult students.

However, some students were apprehensive about attending for the first time. They were afraid of being intimidated by the teacher and treated as if they were six or seven years old.

Other students attended and found that the classes were taught quite differently from anything they had experienced as school children. But in some cases their friends and family made fun of them and teased them about 'going back to school again'. This made some students all the more determined to succeed. Others felt humiliated by the teasing and left.

back to school'; tables and chairs may be the wrong size; and the unfamiliar environment may make students feel uncomfortable and unsure of themselves.

Sitting in rows behind desks is not the best way to learn. People who are more used to sitting on the ground and to holding meetings outside may not need tables, or even a building in which to study. When working with individuals or small groups, it may be easier to meet in someone's house.

Adult learners often feel ill at ease in the formal context of a school classroom — as here, perhaps, in a literacy class in Namibia.
Photo: Kelvin Jenkins

The size and structure of the group

There is no recommended minimum size of group. Some people learn best on their own with one teacher; others prefer to be in a group. The maximum number that will allow time for everyone to contribute and learn effectively with one teacher has been found to be around 15. Adult students generally prefer to sit in a circle, where everyone can see each other and be seen. This avoids creating the atmosphere of a school, where pupils sit in rows and the teacher stands at the front. It encourages everyone in the group to participate actively in the lessons. It takes away some of the feeling that the teacher is superior to or more powerful than the group members. When choosing a place for learning, there should be enough space for people to sit together in this way.

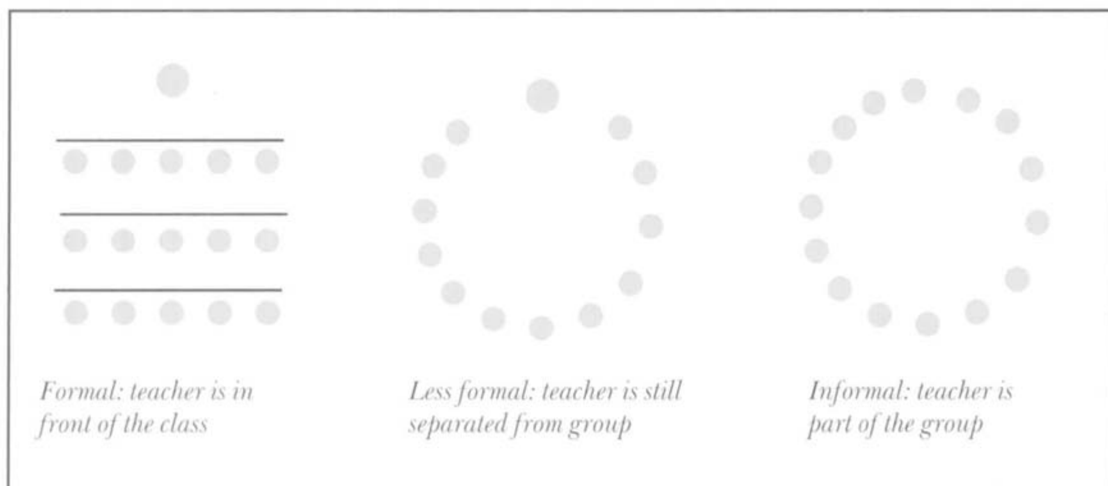


Figure 4.1: Some alternative seating arrangements

Should men and women learn together?

This decision will depend on the local culture, and only the people who will be involved can decide. Some women prefer to be taught separately from men. Some cultures insist on divided classes. There will be other situations in which men and women prefer to be taught together, particularly when working for aims which benefit the whole community.

There is also the question of whether women should teach men. In the case of a literacy programme in Mali, there were more women volunteering to act as literacy workers than men. Most of them were very competent, but, in a Muslim culture, mixed classes or men-only classes would not be accustomed to seeing a woman in the role of teacher. The women teachers solved this problem by pairing up initially with male literacy workers, and presenting themselves in teams of two. During the first few visits, the male worker would take the lead, only gradually standing back and allowing the female worker to play a bigger role. In this way she was able slowly to gain the respect of the class. When she felt

confident, the male worker would develop a 'diplomatic illness' that meant he was unable to come for the next few weeks. Provided that the classes continued to go well, he did not reappear, and moved on to work with another group. The Malian women felt that this approach, although it involved deception, was preferable to confronting the men and insisting that they should accept female teachers from the beginning. Instead they began by respecting the cultural conventions of the learners, and then working to earn their trust.

Drawing up a programme

Drawing up a programme for a course means matching the aims set by the group with the times set aside to work together. It will probably mean linking the themes with the skills they need, and introducing the writing and number work involved in these skills. This will give the learners and the group leader a rough idea of what they will be doing when.

It is difficult to predict in advance how long something will take. The group's priorities may change when the programme gets under way, and other areas of interest may emerge. Any programme will need to be modified as time goes by. But an overall programme for learning will help students to see how far they are progressing towards reaching their aims.

Involving other people

Planning and running a literacy programme, however small, will involve a number of people: in setting the aims and outlining the content for the course; in organising a place to meet; and in choosing a group leader. If the literacy programme is to be linked into other development activities, it is important to involve the people who work in them.

Development workers will be able to provide information on the importance of literacy to other development activities. Working closely with them will help a literacy worker to understand in more depth some of the things which learners need to do with literacy. The learners themselves will be able to give detailed information on some of these things. A planner who does not listen to the learners, or to other colleagues working with them, is in danger of focusing only on his or her own programme. *It is important that literacy is constantly seen in the context of people's lives.*

There are crucial questions to consider early in the planning stage.

- Who will act as teacher or leader of the literacy group?
- Will one person do all the teaching?
- Are there other development workers who could be involved in planning a programme?
- Are there others who could do part of the teaching, especially within their specialist areas like small-business management or agriculture?
- Are there members of the learning group who could do part of the teaching?

- Will the literacy workers be paid for their time, and how will the payments be funded?

On many topics, members of the group will have more experience or more knowledge to contribute than the literacy worker. Such members can be a useful resource, adding to discussions or even presenting a part of the session. They can be asked in advance to take over certain activities with the whole group, or to work as leaders of small groups.

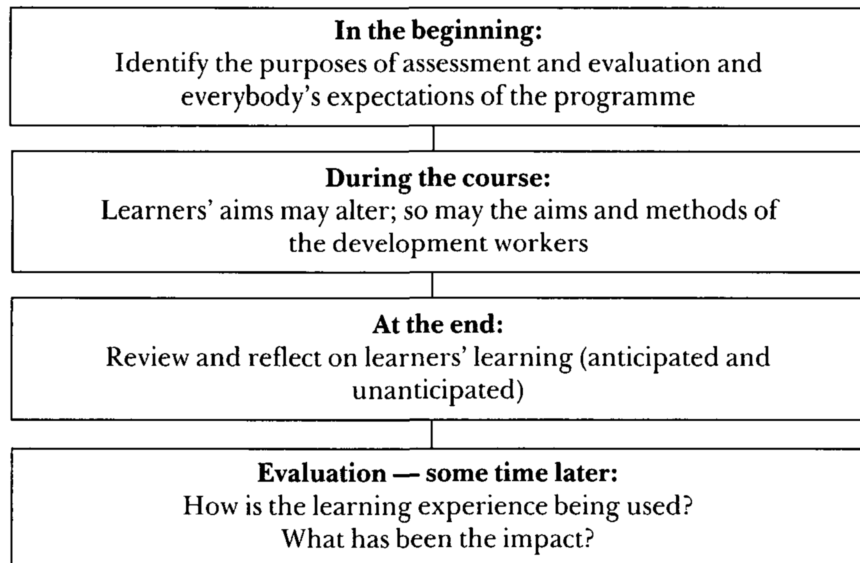
Involving learners as teachers helps to establish the power *within* the group rather than outside it, and recognises and values the skills which learners already have. Care should be taken to involve everyone who wants to contribute.

In Chapter 8 we discuss the question of whether to involve outsiders to present specialist topics. Although we can give some general guidelines on issues to be taken into account, it should be remembered that all decisions must be made in the context of particular programmes. These decisions will depend on the people who are able to be involved, the work they will be asked to do, and the money that is available to pay them.

Planning for assessment and evaluation

It is important at the outset to think about assessment and evaluation. If you neglect to do this at the planning stage, you may find at the end of the course that you have not asked the questions which you might be required to answer, or kept the records which you might be required to produce. And you will have lost many opportunities for using assessment and evaluation as a valuable means of learning during the course.

Figure 4.2: Timetable for assessment and evaluation



Assessment and evaluation should take place, in one form or another, at all stages of a literacy programme. Figure 4.2 illustrates this. There are two main kinds of assessment, for which the technical terms are *formative* and *summative*. Assessment is called 'formative' when the outcomes are used to shape future practice and organisation. At the end of a course there is usually an evaluation; often this is required by the funding agencies. Such evaluation is called 'summative', because it provides a summary of what has happened and the outcomes of the programme. *Impact evaluation* is the term used for identifying the effects of a course on the lives of the learners. We will look at these in more detail in Chapter 9.

What do you want from assessment?

One way to start is to think about assessment and evaluation from the perspectives of those involved. Here we will consider the interests and requirements of learners, literacy workers, and the funding agency (though others, such as employers and the wider community, might also have an interest). Each of these parties should be asked the question: *'What do you want from assessment?'* This is a good way of introducing the topic of assessment and of encouraging involvement in the process.

Learners want to know how they are getting on: are they making good progress? **Literacy workers** are anxious to know that their teaching is on the right track: whether or not their methods are helping the learners. The **funding bodies** want to know that their money is being wisely spent: that the learners are achieving what they were supposed to achieve; and the **partner agency** needs to know that its organisational approach is working well. While many of these interests overlap, each party is likely to have some specific interests. For example, the funding agency will want the facts and figures about attendances and costs. Individual learners are unlikely to be interested in such statistics. It may be necessary to conduct different assessments/reviews to meet different needs; but, with a little creativity, it should be possible to use class records and other information more efficiently.

Three key points are worth bearing in mind when planning for assessments and evaluations.

1 *The outcomes of assessment and evaluation must be useful.* All too often, the results of assessment and reviews are not used constructively. There is no point in assessment if no one is going to take any notice of the outcomes. The results of assessment should be used to support learning and teaching, to improve the programme.

2 *The ways in which the programme is assessed and evaluated should be in sympathy with the values of the programme and the styles of teaching and learning that it will use.* Learner-centred, participatory approaches to learning and teaching should be matched with learner-centred, participatory approaches to assessment. In this way, assessment becomes an integral and supportive part of the learning. Being able to do this requires an attitude of mind, rather than a battery of tools. Chapter 9 suggests some

imaginative ways of identifying, observing, and recognising change. Here we should simply note that there are other ways of measuring progress than by the conventional methods of *normed assessment* and *criterion-based assessment,* which are related either to other people's performance or to pre-determined criteria. *Ipsative assessment* is concerned with gauging the progress made by an individual in relation to his or her own personal starting-point. It compares what the person can do now with what he or she could do previously. It allows for individuals to progress at their own rate to develop the skills they need. Progress can be identified in terms of personal successes and achievements, rather than against set examinations or general expectations. It is a very useful mode of assessment for programmes that are not primarily concerned with formal accreditation.

3 *The processes of assessment and evaluation should not be a routine, mechanical chore.* Keeping records and assessing will become tedious, if the outcomes are not used and the information is not seen to be valued. Assessment and evaluation are about asking questions. Literacy workers should never stop asking questions about the methods and processes being used for assessment! Assessment and evaluation, when they are part of the learning process, are dynamic activities that will help to keep the learning moving easily and smoothly.

The process of assessment

Assessment is never neutral. It involves making many political and educational choices. The questions in Table 4.1 may help literacy workers, learners, and funding organisations to begin to develop a framework for assessment that fits in with their particular programme and will contribute to its success.

Keeping records

Having a set of useful records will help the assessing and reviewing process. With careful thought and planning, there is no need to become a slave to keeping records. We need to ask ourselves questions similar to those in Table 4.1. Why keep records? What will they be used for? What should we keep records of? How should they be kept? By whom? etc. This will help the worker and the learners to design ways of keeping records that will suit them.

It is useful to keep records of attendances. Irregular attendance will directly affect a person's learning. Attendance records may offer valuable information when an individual's progress is being discussed.

Keeping records of lesson plans, and noting down what actually happened during a session, or how particular materials were used, will help the worker to plan later sessions and keep track of how things are going.

As part of keeping records, learners can keep a diary, or a note of what they read, write, and calculate in their everyday lives (or of tasks which

Who is assessment for:
- the learner
- the development worker
- the programme providers
- the sponsor/funder/employer?

What is the purpose:
- to identify progress
- to check the appropriateness of teaching methods
- to boost confidence
- to find out what is not going well
- to record achievement
- to establish cost/benefits
- to find out what needs changing
- to check if the programme is on the right track
- to be able to make comparisons
- to gain a certificate or accreditation?

What to assess:
- skills learned
- concepts grasped
- understanding of ideas
- application of learning
- personal and social development

How to assess:
- formal/informal styles
- observation
- discussion
- tests/examinations (oral/paper and pencil/practical)
- assignments?

Who is to assess:
- development workers
- the learner (self)
- the learners (peers)
- the learner's family
- the learner's employer
- others?

How to record progress:
- grades/percentages/tick lists/grading scales
- written/recorded statements
- portfolio of work and comments?

How to interpret progress:
- norm-based assessment
- criterion-based assessment
- ipsative assessment?

How to report:
- standard forms
- profiles
- free expression

How to use the information:
- to plan future work (formative assessment)
- as a summary of achievement (summative assessment)
- to identify problems (diagnostic assessment)?

Table 4.1: Developing a framework for assessment

they find they need to perform). These are called Reading, Writing, and Number Diets. These need not be kept continuously, but it is useful to ask for them at regular intervals, such as every three months for a few days or one week. They will provide a benchmark of learners' progress and a clue to the sort of reading, writing, and calculating that learners do, and need to do, to operate effectively outside the classroom.

It might help to remember the following points when deciding on a system for keeping records:

- Decide what suits you and the learners best.
- Keep it simple, so that it is not too time-consuming to be practical.

- Don't write more than is needed. It can be a short note to yourself or to the learners. As long as there is sufficient information to help you recall the points, it will do.
- Records can be tape-recorded or consist of a photocopy of learners' work.
- The records are reminders for you and the learners. They do not need to be immaculate.
- Encourage discussion.
- Involve the learners as much as possible. Act as a scribe if needed, but encourage them to keep their own records.
- Make it part of learning.
- Keep a note of unusual events or 'critical incidents', such as an individual breakthrough or a good idea that occurred to you.

By spending a little time on planning for assessment and evaluation at this early stage, you will enable yourself and the learners to keep track of what is happening, in practical ways that will help you throughout the programme.