PART FOUR

Materials for Literacy
Katmandu, Nepal: materials for literacy!

Photo: Omar Sattaur
‘Special’ materials

Choosing literacy materials

When people are learning to read and write, they clearly need something to read and something to write about. The lack of appropriate and available materials is often felt to be a problem in literacy classes.

Many literacy programmes are based on a primer: a highly structured workbook which introduces learners to a new lesson and a new topic, often a new letter, on every page. Many primers contain ‘write-on’ pages, on which the learner is asked to copy letters or words. Others form the first of a series of carefully graded readers and give comparatively little attention to writing at all. In most cases, the resources that literacy workers feel they lack are these artificially created materials for reading and/or writing. We considered the advantages and disadvantages of using primers in Chapter 5. A large number of literacy programmes continue to use these or other specially prepared materials, but they are rarely the only printed matter available, and they may not be the most useful.

No approach to teaching literacy is neutral. While some materials are essential, learning literacy skills and learning literacy practices go hand in hand. People who are taught to read a primer learn to read a primer, and may not learn to read other more useful material. The skills involved in reading a primer are not automatically transferable. People who are taught to decipher and to use ordinary, everyday materials, or those materials which are valuable to their everyday lives, are more likely to develop real literacy practices, as well as skills. Before assuming that a literacy programme needs specially written materials, it might be useful to take an overview of the range of printed or written matter that is available in the area where classes are taking place.

This chapter will give a brief description of specially produced literacy materials and consider the advantages and the problems concerned with using them.
Ready-made structured courses

Adult literacy activities are sometimes based on the primary-school approach of progressing from a simple primer through a series of graded and carefully structured stages. An elaborate scheme gradually introduces new words and increasingly complex sentences. The scheme may be based on the number of letters in a word, the number of words on a page, or the frequency with which one word appears. This is an approach favoured by UNESCO in particular. PROAP (Principal Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific) has developed a table, setting out standard word counts and writing skills for each different level and ability. For example:

**Reading Skills: Post-Literacy Level 1**
Words: Small known words
Sentence length: 8 words
Paragraph length: 80 words
Writing Skills
Format: Personal letter
Simple story
Personal biography

The PROAP primers and workbooks are produced regionally, and written by literacy workers during workshops which involve representatives from a number of countries. The workers meet together, discuss the particular problems in their areas, decide on themes for readers, and write the texts themselves. These are briefly field-tested (given to groups of learners to read and comment on) and then taken back to each member country to be translated into the languages used in the literacy classes.

Most schemes contain more reading materials than writing materials. The writing materials that do exist are often in the form of ‘write-on’ workbooks, which give examples of letters (sometimes with arrows indicating pen direction, or dots to be joined up) and words and sentences, with lines ruled on which to copy them.

Some workbooks give problems to be solved, such as gap-fill exercises, maths problems, sequencing activities using numbers and letters, and ‘spot the difference’ exercises. Books like this encourage people to do something with what they read, and aim to develop a more active and critical approach to written texts. But it is important not to make assumptions about what people will and will not understand. The rationale and the value of some of these types of exercise may need to be explained, and some may be based on cultural practices and conventions which are unfamiliar or irrelevant to the people using them.

Among literacy workers there is a continuing debate about the value of simplified readers. These are generally familiar or classical stories which have been re-written, using a simple vocabulary and sentences, paragraphs, and pages of predetermined lengths. However, there is no real evidence to prove that word-length is significant when learning to read. While it is true that over-complicated texts and long sentences present problems, learners do use quite an elaborate written vocabulary if it is relevant to them. People will tackle material they are interested in and texts they can identify with, regardless of the length of the words. The lay-out and the organisation of text is generally a more significant factor. Newspaper headlines, for example, are easier to read than the printed text underneath. It may be preferable to help learners to develop strategies for understanding the things they want to read, rather than choosing books for them and artificially simplifying the texts.

An alternative approach could be to cut and rearrange material chosen by learners and put it into a more manageable form. Some guidelines for the organisation of materials are suggested below.
Locally produced materials

Literacy workers may wish to use the structured materials produced by organisations like UNESCO. However, they should also ask themselves if they might serve local needs better by developing local materials. Ready-made texts may not serve the needs of the learners. The subjects they discuss and the particular literacy practices they teach are decided in advance and by outsiders. Moreover, materials created on a large scale outside the programme are often written or designed by someone whose cultural background is different from that of the learners. Even where materials are created locally, however, the writer or artist is in danger of making assumptions about what the learners need and what conventions they will understand.

Another disadvantage of specially produced materials is that they are often cheaply produced, of poor quality, and reproduced so many times on copiers and stencils that in the end they are scarcely legible.

Learners and literacy workers may become over-dependent on books and primers, which can be mislaid or fail to arrive. These somewhat artificial materials are often produced by small organisations with limited funds, who then have difficulty in supplying them to the users. Much time and money may be invested in trying to produce relevant materials, but if they fail to appear regularly, learners may become reluctant to continue learning.

Practical guidelines for producing literacy materials

If, after considering all the pitfalls we have described, you decide to produce your own materials, here are some guidelines which may help to avoid some of the problems.

Books and booklets
- Print the covers, if possible, and use bright background colours.
- Use clear, bold type on the front cover.
- Centre the title on the cover.
- Print text in solid black on a clean background, to give as much contrast as possible.
- Use a durable cover, as stiff as possible.
- For the text, use paper dense enough to prevent the ink showing through from the reverse side.
- If stapling, use strong, tightly closed brass staples, and use tape on the inside of the spine.
- If binding, choose glue that will not go brittle in high temperatures.
- Trim the edges of the cover after binding; overlapping covers are not a good idea, as the corners will become damaged or torn.

Text letter-forms
- Use a type that is clear and open. With a Roman alphabet, select a
suitable typeface, taking care to avoid one that confuses letter forms or symbols; for example, the letter 1 and the number 1 look very similar in some type-faces.

- Aim for clarity and consistency, with characters large enough for everyone to see them clearly.
- Start off with larger type sizes, and gradually progress to smaller letter sizes.
- As a minimum, the lower-case x should be at least 2 mm high, and the upper-case X at least 3 mm high; you risk straining people’s eyes if you choose a smaller size.

**Letters for copying**
- Use letters that are clear and simple.
- Present only a few words at a time.
- Leave comfortable spaces between the letters and between the lines. (Remember that handwriting uses a lot of space.)
- Start with letters at least 2 cm high.

**Margins**
- Margins are always necessary: they make a text easier to handle and to read.
- Keep them consistent throughout a piece of writing.
- Make them large enough for the hand to hold the page without covering the text.
- But don’t make them too big: too much space will suggest material that is intended for children.

**Text and images**
- Where pictures and words appear together, they should support each other. Make sure that the relationship between the text and the image is clear.
- Pictures need the same margins as text.
- It is generally better to put text above or underneath an image, rather than alongside it.

**Page numbers**
- It is helpful to number pages, even if a page contains only pictures — especially if the pictures are specially placed in relation to the text.
- Put the numbers in the same place on each page, and in a place where they can easily be seen.

**Learner-generated materials**

Learner-generated materials are written by learners for other learners to read, discuss, or learn from. The Language Experience Approach (described in Chapter 5) develops a lot of written text which can be used more extensively, either by the writer of the material, or by other
learners, or within other programmes. Although most learner-generated material is used locally, there have been projects which circulate stories written by learners nationally and internationally, like the 'Round Robin' book which was sent to a number of literacy programmes around the world; each group of learners spent time reading the contributions of others in other programmes, before adding their own.

Community newspapers

One of the most common forms of locally produced, learner-generated materials is the community newspaper. Such materials are generally produced using low-cost, locally available printing methods, such as silk screen or stencil, and are written and illustrated by learners and literacy workers. They generally contain stories and articles about locally relevant issues, and are circulated through literacy programmes or sold in villages and through market places and bookstalls.

Although newspapers of this sort become more widely used when people have learned the basics of literacy (and are therefore able to make their own contribution), a skilled or inventive literacy worker may find ways of using them for initial literacy. Some can be produced as wall posters to be displayed within a classroom.

Producing a rural newspaper has many advantages:

• Readers are involved in the writing and production of it, and in a real sense 'own' it.
• The writing and production of a community newspaper are a learning process which can increase learners' confidence.
• The publication is topical and current and produced at regular intervals (generally monthly or bi-monthly).
• It is concerned with things which readers may already know about, and people and places which they can identify with.
• It sets up a dialogue between people in neighbouring areas.
• It encourages the habit of reading newspapers as a source of information.

Rural newspaper projects can also present problems:

• They are rarely sustainable, and usually need external funding.
• Problems with reproduction and dissemination may make it hard to read or hard to get hold of.
• In a multilingual context, the choice of language is a difficult one, and the paper may need to print articles in different languages, or the same articles in translation. The use of translated text is never ideal.
The Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua is home to six different ethnic groups, each with its own language and distinctive way of life. In the late 1980s, the Sandinista government in Managua recognised the coastal peoples’ right to develop their own cultural identities, and to administer their local affairs according to their traditions.

A community newspaper called *Sunrise* was developed with the help of Oxfam. Published monthly in English and Spanish (the two most widely used languages), *Sunrise* offered its readers a rich mixture of contents: baseball scores and obituaries, recipes and interviews, interspersed with articles about health and local history.

The newspaper was written and produced by a team of young school-leavers, using typesetting equipment supplied by Oxfam. Local people held raffles and reggae parties to raise the money to print the paper in Managua. The government paid the wages of the editorial team, but *Sunrise* never shrank from criticising the authorities. A favourite target was INE, the Nicaraguan Institute of Energy (known as ‘INE-fficient’ by local people); power cuts and inflated prices once prompted *Sunrise* to suggest that ‘INE should donate some of their profits to the maternity ward at the hospital: we’ve had so many romantic dark nights lately that it will soon need to be expanded.’

Copies of the newspaper always sold out within days. A member of the editorial team observed: ‘At school we only studied the history of the Pacific Coast. Now we are discovering our own history. ... For the first time, Atlantic Coast people have seen themselves in photographs, and seen their own opinions recorded and taken seriously.’

*Bluefields, on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua: the office of ‘Sunrise’, a bilingual community newspaper, produced by a team of young people.*

*Photo: Mike Goldwater*
Materials for Literacy

**Comic books**

Comics are increasingly popular as a resource for literacy. In some areas of the world they are specially prepared for new readers. People who live in urban areas, where they are in contact with advertising materials and television, usually have few problems in interpreting the use of pictures and word bubbles in telling stories. Some comic books use photographs, which may be more easily recognised than line drawings.

However, in rural areas, where cartoon images or comic-book conventions are less familiar, the lay-out of a comic book may seem over-complicated. Some people will not have the visual literacy skills to interpret the images, or understand the direction or sequence in which to read. Comic books take a long time to produce and are seldom made for a very localised market. They need to be tested out with new readers and introduced gradually.

All locally produced materials need to be field-tested with learners at every stage. Never make assumptions about what people will be able to recognise or understand, or what they will want to do. Materials containing images or ideas which people can recognise and relate to are almost always easier to read.

In South Africa a group called ‘Storyteller’ produces comic books for young black readers. They are written in workshops, where young people from townships are introduced to a general theme and asked to act out a story around it. The dialogue is recorded, using as far as possible the language in which it is acted out; that is, the spoken language of the people who will read it. Anecdotes or jokes told during the workshop are also included, as are references to popular music or fashionable ideas. The stories are converted into comic books, using local artists who base their images on scenes from real life. Word bubbles contain the spoken language of the street, while the short written text that accompanies each image uses more formal English. Some of the strength and the value of Storyteller’s work is in the time taken to reproduce not only language that people will identify with, but scenes and topics they will recognise. There is also a policy of trying to include ideas and opinions from all sections of the population, and therefore not stressing any one political or social line.

**Academic resources**

**Primary-school materials**

The problems involved in using primary-school materials with adult students can be anticipated. Although as initial materials they often deal with the basics of literacy or numeracy, they will have been written and
produced with children in mind. The examples and exercises used will reflect the interests of children, rather than the tasks which adults have to undertake, and in some cases the primary-school books available are imported from outside the local culture.

Some adults will be proud to be going to school and expect to work through the material that their children are using; others may find it offensive. Particularly in situations where learners have already been through the school system, having to use school books again may feel like an insult. Primary-school books are never very satisfactory, both in the tone they adopt towards learners and in the tasks they introduce.

However, they may be useful to literacy workers as a source book of examples, to be adapted for use with adult learners. What they do offer is a way of breaking down initial literacy skills into different tasks, and they present alternative ways of looking at the process of reading and writing.

The following exercise is from a child’s maths book.

*Alice and Peter are going on a picnic. They have four packets of crisps, eight sandwiches, two oranges, two round cakes, four apples, and one bottle of orange. They are each taking a friend with them on the picnic. How many children will there be altogether? Can you work out how much food each child will have? Can you write a sum for each different thing you have to work out?*

This example, as well as being written for children, is clearly biased towards one particular culture. It is also based on a fictitious situation. Many cultures would be unfamiliar with the types of food described and also with this approach to dividing food among people. However, it can be adapted, as in the following exercise.
• How do you decide how much food you will need for a wedding feast?
• How do you work out how much it will cost?
• If you planned a wedding feast, how many people would you invite?
• What food would you need to buy?
• Try adding up the numbers of people.
• How many chapatis (or bread loaves, or rice, or maize) does each person generally eat?
• How many/how much would you need altogether?
• How many people can you feed from one sack of rice?
• Would two sacks of rice be enough for everyone?
• What are the advantages of being able to write all this down and calculate it?

A primary-school geography book often contains maps; a history book contains facts and information. While the maps may not reflect the locality in detail, nor the historical information relate directly to the learners, they may both give useful background information and suggest ways of presenting or phrasing exercises. It is important not to duplicate the childish examples or to oversimplify the situation, but a literacy worker with limited material can adapt and invent, using school books as a starting point.

Here are some questions to bear in mind.

• Is the exercise useful to these learners in this place?
• Does the exercise reflect the tasks they have to undertake in real life?
• Do any images reproduced relate to the situation in real life?
• Will these learners be able to identify with them?
• Is the information clear and comprehensible?
• Does it address the learners respectfully and as equals?
• Will anyone be embarrassed by this material?
• Is there an opportunity for learners to comment on and to challenge work that is presented for them to do?

Play, experimentation, and trying things out for oneself are very positive ways for adults as well as children to learn. If tasks are presented in an adult context, or in a way that is culturally acceptable, there is a lot to be gained from using simple examples. Be aware of the mood of the class, and adapt things accordingly!

Secondary-school materials

While secondary-school materials are designed for older children and are less simplistic in their approach, they generally reflect the subject-based approach of the school system. By this stage, formal education in a large number of countries has moved away from the creative, participative approach and is more concerned with presenting facts and teaching a body of knowledge.

For this reason, secondary-school materials, like those from primary schools, tend to offer little more than source material for literacy workers.
‘Special’ materials

They should be used with the same degree of care. Unless the learners in a literacy group specifically need to pass secondary-school exams, there is generally little value in reproducing for them the facts and information taught in schools.

Access materials

In some areas of the world, formal education has begun to explore alternative routes into the higher education system for adult students who did not have the opportunity when younger. Countries such as South Africa, which are struggling to counteract an unfair education system, are beginning to look for a shorter route to degrees and diplomas than the seven, eight, or ten years required when working through the school system. In a very few places materials have been developed especially for adult students which begin to teach the approaches and expectations of academic study.

While this material may be excellent, it is important to keep it in perspective. The formal education system, and especially higher education, takes a very specific approach to knowledge. The way in which it questions, argues, and presents information will not necessarily be appropriate for learners who are not planning to continue their studies in this way.
‘Ordinary’ materials

In the previous chapter, we considered the use of ‘special’ materials for literacy programmes. We now turn to ways of exploiting ‘ordinary’ materials. The word ‘ordinary’ is used here to indicate the written or printed matter that already exists in the area where learners are living or working. It is the reading and the writing they will actually need to do and the tasks they are learning literacy for. While the complaint is sometimes made that this material does not exist, it is rarely the case that there is nothing at all to write or to read.

Real-life texts

Cinema notices, mail-order catalogues, advertising material, government forms, religious texts, newspapers, wrapping paper, street signs, shop names, and graffiti all fall into this category. In remote rural areas where such materials really do not exist, and there is almost nothing written in the target language of the literacy programme, literacy workers should seriously question the value of what they are asking the learners to do. Often it is a question of language choice. Is the language of the literacy class the same as that of the written notices in the area? Or are these in a different language?

Where literacy practices need to be artificially sustained, and there is no regular need to practise and use literacy skills, it is unlikely that a programme will succeed in introducing them. Research has shown that communities and individuals take on and develop those things which they feel they want or need in their lives. Literacy workers are rarely in the position of being able to create that need.

However, where ordinary materials do exist, some projects have used them creatively and adapted materials from everyday life for their own use.

Cinema posters and government forms

A literacy programme in Jaipur, India, asked learners to choose what they wanted to learn to read, and to bring their own material in with them. Instead of being given a primer, they were each offered an empty ring-binder, in which they could file the material they decided to use. If they were to operate as a group, they needed to reach agreement about
what this was, and to work on the same things at the same time.

The most popular materials that emerged from discussion were cinema notices, so the group began with these. As learning material, they had a number of advantages. Small leaflets advertising films were easily available. They used a range of type-faces, headings, and sub-headings, in different sizes; they used images as well as text, and a number of well-known names. The literacy worker was able to help the group to anticipate the words they expected to find on the poster; to recognise letters; to write the names of films; to look for specific information, such as numbers giving prices or dates; to learn to write words about the film; and to do more extensive follow-up activities. People could practise these skills by reading the larger cinema posters that decorate the billboards in the streets, and actually find out about the films they wanted to see. Gradually, as people had enough of reading cinema notices, they began to bring in other material they wanted to tackle, and moved on at their own pace.

One of the things the group wanted to do was to learn how to fill in government forms, to register births and deaths, or apply for a driving licence or a passport. The literacy worker was able to use such forms as learning materials. The group learned to write the personal details that the forms required, such as name, address, and date of birth, and discussed the presentation of the forms. Very often such forms use complicated language and are laid out in a way that is not easy for new readers to understand. Getting the group to redraft the forms in simple language before completing them provided a useful exercise in writing. It also ensured that the learners really understood the purpose of the form and what they were agreeing to. It clarified for them the relationship between a form and a contract, in which an agreement is made between two people.
The use of simpler, everyday language on official forms is a practice that is beginning to be adopted in some places. At times, literacy groups themselves have campaigned for this, by rewriting the forms and offering them as an alternative to the organisations that produced them.

Other groups have copied the format of official contracts and written a group contract for themselves. This is particularly useful in areas where literacy workers are unpaid volunteers. It makes clear for the group members what the literacy worker is prepared to offer. They in turn make clear their commitment to attend regularly, to maintain the literacy centre, and to buy their own books and pens.

Street maps and shopping lists

In Johannesburg, South Africa, a group of domestic workers wanted to learn literacy skills in English in order to improve their chances of employment. They drew up a list of tasks they would need to carry out, firstly in finding a job and then in working as domestics. These involved reading and writing addresses and then finding their way around the residential areas. One of their principal tasks would be shopping: following shopping lists, recognising shop names, reading the names on packages, and noticing the prices of different products.

This then became their learning plan and their material. They began by learning the names of streets and how to write them. They used an enlarged map of the area and tried to match addresses written on a piece of paper with the name of the street written on the map. Gradually they learned how to record information about themselves on application forms. Those in employment brought in shopping lists and packages and wrappings from products used by their employers, which in most cases were products they were not familiar with themselves. The group matched up the writing on the lists with the name on the product package, compared handwriting with type, learned to write the words they felt were useful, and read the important information from the packets. Learners invented shopping lists for each other, and went on supermarket trips to identify the packages on the shelves. Because they worked together on identifying and deciphering some of the information that surrounded them, they began to notice it everywhere they went. They were using their literacy not only in the class, but all the time.

Mail-order catalogues

In a remote village in Natal, South Africa, where literacy workers cannot obtain school books or newspapers, classes have begun to use mail-order catalogues as a source of printed texts. Factory workers who return home at weekends often bring catalogues with them to show their families what they are saving for. Mail-order companies have developed an informal network of buses or bush taxis to deliver their catalogues as widely as possible. Some learners can buy things from the catalogue, a large number cannot, but all seem to be interested in working through it.
Although catalogues contain very little extensive reading matter, using them does involve a number of complex skills. These include identifying a picture, looking up the number or letter that refers to it, and reading what are often abbreviated specifications. Actually ordering from the catalogue entails reading instructions and the ‘small print’ guarantees, and filling in forms. The learners were able to use them at a number of different levels. They could begin by identifying various pictures and writing the names of items. It helped the learners to understand early on that reading does not always entail reading or understanding everything on a page.

An organisation called ERA, or ‘Easy Reading for Adults’, produces special materials for new readers in South Africa. The staff realised that mail-order companies were far more skilled than they were in delivering their material to learners. They decided to combine with them, and asked a number of companies to include specially written stories for new readers. While this was a good use of a distribution network that already existed, in many cases what the learners actually wanted to read was the catalogues themselves. The practice of reading fiction did not previously exist in this area, and stories are regarded as something to be shared orally with a group.

Using newspapers

The University of Natal in Pietermaritzberg has begun producing a newspaper for new learners which goes out once a week with one of the larger newspapers of the area. This is distributed in the township areas, where people may buy the newspapers for the sports news. The free insert for new learners tends to get passed on and used by a member of the family who is a less confident reader. It is a form of ‘distance learning’: learners can practise and improve their reading and writing skills without attending a class. The insert contains activities like crossword puzzles or gap-fill exercises, and often invites readers to write in and respond.

The insert is also used as learning material by literacy workers with groups. Some of the exercises are completed in groups, and the main articles are used to find information about the topics they discuss. However, the insert does not specifically encourage learners to move on to read the newspaper. Generally it has proved very popular; but, when asked about it, readers tended to see it as something separate from but delivered with the newspaper. It is regarded as special literacy material.

In other areas where special materials do not exist, literacy workers have used ordinary newspapers. By cutting, photocopying, reproducing, enlarging, and isolating small headlines or articles, they can focus learners’ attention on a small area of text. It is good for learners’ confidence to take them back to the original article within the newspaper, once they have read the enlarged version. Comparing the two helps learners to see that the literacy they are learning is part of a set of real practical skills, with which they can gain access to the written information around them.
Seed catalogues and fertiliser packages: a project that failed

In a village in Kenya, an agricultural extension project tried to introduce farmers to literacy through reading seed catalogues and the instructions on fertiliser packages. However, most of the learners were subsistence farmers, growing maize, cassava, and rice for their own consumption. Some of the migrants in the area had larger land holdings, were better educated, and were growing cash-crops. It was they who were buying agricultural chemicals, though not always fully understanding the instructions on the packages, and not using them correctly. However, as they had mostly been to school, they were not attending literacy classes.

In this case, neither the literacy programme nor the extension programme was very successful. The subsistence farmers had no interest in reading seed catalogues and little opportunity to use literacy skills. The school-based literacy which the migrant farmers had acquired as children did not really help them in using or understanding the more specialised language of written instructions. Many of them had not used their literacy skills since school, and had lost the habit. The high incidence of chemical poisoning recorded at the local hospital was largely among this group: evidently few farmers could read the warnings on the packets.

Suggestions for using ‘ordinary’ materials

- As far as possible, the types of materials used should be chosen by the learners themselves, and based on what is around and available.

- Learners should be encouraged to use a range of materials and to look at them in a number of different ways.

- Using different types of material helps to introduce learners to the different ways of reading and writing used in various situations.

- The same material can be used for various exercises. Most material can be used for longer than people think. If there is no new material to use, try using the same thing in a new way.

- Most material can be used intensively or extensively. Learners can focus on a letter, a word, or a line, or use the whole thing as a stimulus for further extended writing. Badly presented material can always be criticised and re-written by the group themselves.

- Try to use material which is related to the social context: things which people will find in their everyday lives. Aim to build bridges between using this material as a learning exercise and using it in a real situation.

Development materials

Agencies concerned with various aspects of development often produce their own printed materials. They generally carry messages of some sort
and are based on the aim of reading to learn, rather than learning to read. They might include extension literature such as booklets on hygiene, animal husbandry, vegetable growing, bee-keeping, or family economy. They may include posters or leaflets prepared as part of a health campaign, giving information on vaccination or pregnancy or breast-feeding. In many cases these materials are produced without considering the literacy level of the population, or the ease with which they will be read. Figure 11.1 shows a pair of contrasting examples.

Figure 11.1:
Health-promotion pamphlets from Nicaragua. Detailed pictures with handwritten speech bubbles, like the one above, were found to be too complicated and hard to read. Simpler images (like the one below) with typewritten words were more effective.
Development materials are significant for literacy programmes in a number of ways. Literacy workers may be able to offer guidelines to organisations before they produce these materials, and encourage them to field-test them with their groups and to produce them in a format which is easy to use. The conventions of technical drawing which literate people take for granted may not be immediately apparent to learners; see Figure 11.2 for an example. Groups could be encouraged to re-design the materials themselves and to evaluate the messages conveyed by them in the light of local knowledge. As printed material which is often available in remote areas, these leaflets and posters are a source of visual images, words, and information which can be read, discussed, challenged, and used in reading and writing activities.

Technical leaflets for a fisheries project

A fisheries project in Madras produced a series of technical leaflets, giving information and new ideas on ways of handling and marketing fish. The leaflets were produced to help project staff to train local people in new ways of working. They contained words and images, and were organised into stories produced as a series of points. Each point had a line illustration and a few sentences describing what was happening in the picture. The
leaflets were distributed free in the area, but in many cases were under-used by the project staff. When questioned about the images, local people with limited literacy were able to understand them, but were critical of the clothes that people were wearing in the pictures. (A sari was felt to be too stylish for a working woman.) Although the leaflets were not used in literacy classes, people who saw them were already discussing the images. As the local people could identify with the characters in the pictures and were concerned with the content of the text, the leaflets could be useful in letter-identification, letter-search, word-search, and gap-fill activities, as well as serving as a stimulus to writing.

Booklets about growing vegetables

An integrated rural development project in Senegal produced a series of booklets on development-related issues which formed a staged part of a literacy campaign. When learners had completed their primers and been introduced to letters individually, they were introduced to words and then sentences about vegetable growing. The booklets were produced as stencilled copies on paper with paper covers, and lessons were carefully structured around them. A lot of thought had gone into preparing these books to follow on from the primer, but not everyone in the group was in a position to grow vegetables; others were experienced vegetable growers, but the books assumed that they knew nothing.

The stencilled text was not easy to read, and the paper covers soon became torn. Groups were moving through the book at a speed decided by the literacy worker, and repeating the words used to describe the images. They were relevant to some groups, but not to others. By providing the literacy workers with a set approach, the booklets did not encourage them to be creative in the way they worked.

Posters about breast-feeding

A health campaign in Guatemala produced posters warning of the danger of bottle-feeding babies. It contained four separate pictures, but no words. The images showed a woman looking unhappily at a bottle, a woman happily breast-feeding, a woman about to feed her child with a spoon, and the child finally spitting out the food. Although the expressions on the faces help to make the meaning of the poster clear, there is some uncertainty about what is being said. This poster was put on the wall in a literacy class and the group were invited to talk about it. They described what they thought was happening and discussed their feelings about breast-feeding. They suggested words they wanted to write and slogans for the different images. They decided on their own overall message.

Suggestions for using ‘development’ materials

The examples quoted above contain a number of useful lessons for using development materials.
If the material is available, it is probably a good resource for literacy.

No material should be used without questioning and discussing the images.

Specially written extension material often takes no account of local knowledge, and is written in a patronising tone.

Material written for a specific purpose and with a specific message may take no account of language level and sentence structure.

Literacy workers and literacy learners are often in a good position to advise producers of extension material.

The way that material is used in developing literacy skills is generally more important than what the material is.

Information, messages, and the reproduction of images can be criticised, rewritten, or redrawn by learners. It is not necessary to accept them at their face value.

Most so-called ‘post-literacy materials’ are technical in nature. Much of the philosophy behind producing these materials seems to be dominated by two questions: (1) What to do? and (2) How to do it? (with a little bit of Why to do it? thrown in for good measure).

For example, the technician already knows that he wants people to decide to use mosquito nets soaked in an insecticide to cut down on malaria. (This is the What to do?) He therefore writes a pamphlet that shows Why? (it will cut down on malaria) and How to? (what to buy, what dosage to use, how long to soak the nets, etc.).

In the ‘developed’ world, this more resembles advertising than the thought-provoking process which properly belongs to being literate and having access to information through the written word. The problem and solution have already been identified by the experts. All that is left to do is convince the consumer to ‘buy the product’.

While this type of writing has its place, and can play an important role in informing people of their options ... we should surely be more concerned with finding thought-provoking writers, ideas, and manuscripts which pose the problems without necessarily giving a single, simple solution.