Continuing with Literacy

Segundo Montes, El Salvador: this woman was one of a group of refugees who organised literacy classes for themselves while in exile in Honduras.
Photo: Jenny Matthews

Developing a literate society

Literacy and change

The demand for literacy often arises as individuals and societies are beginning to change. Literacy is likely to accelerate these processes, and the experience may become uncomfortable for those in positions of power. Employees may demand better conditions. Women may demand equal treatment by men and before the law. Citizens may demand a more just political system. Inevitably, any development process carries social and political implications, as well as economic outcomes. These changes are an inevitable consequence of effective development programmes, including literacy schemes. Development workers have to be aware of them and make their own decisions about how they will react in their own particular circumstances.

In Chapter 9, we suggested that the most important test of success was whether or not the new skills had an impact outside the classroom, in the daily lives of those who were newly literate. Changes in the daily lives of the very poor, to help them achieve change for themselves, will inevitably bring about shifts in political power, as well as economic development. How development workers react to inevitable change may depend on the degree to which the original programme design was political in intent, and how the established political authorities may have viewed it.

One of the most overtly political literacy programmes was that established by Paulo Freire in Brazil in the 1960s. Many programmes today claim either to be Freirean or to use a modified Freirean approach. Freire's original work was done in the belief that literacy should enable the poor to question the situation in which they were forced to live. He believed that it was only by becoming more aware of the inequality in their lives that people would find the means to fight against it.[22]

Whether or not the various changes which accompany literacy are planned, all development workers will probably come to realise that even very local literacy programmes can and should be transforming experiences for the communities and individuals concerned. What newly literate people do with this experience is likely both to increase the *pace* of change and to change its *direction*, perhaps in ways not intended by development planners or governments. For example, a women's craft

programme with a functional literacy component may not only improve product quality, but also lead to demands for a greater voice in management and marketing. How should the development agency then deal with these demands?

Continuing education

People will not develop their literacy skills unless they use them regularly. We have argued that if the only thing which learners have to read is a primer, a primer may be the only thing they end up being able to read! And if this is all that happens, then there is unlikely to be a real impact on many people's lives. On the other hand, if they practise on real materials like newspapers, government notices, advertisements, mail-order catalogues and the like, and if they go on reading them, then they have already begun to use their new skills and to develop them. The rest of this chapter looks at some of the ways in which development agencies can help to facilitate a developing literacy.

Clearly, this is easier in an environment where most people use reading and writing as part of their everyday way of doing things and of communicating with each other. In a modern city, for example, survival may depend on being able to read notices which tell you which way to go or what to do. Working or living in such an environment without being able to read or to write creates obvious problems; and people who are newly literate in those circumstances will need little extra motivation to continue developing their new skills. They are obvious candidates for any available and suitable continuing education for adults. Such provision may not be there, or may not be affordable or easily accessible. In that case, the development agency may wish to promote (or encourage governments and/or others to promote) a subject-based programme of classes in both practical subjects like tailoring and more academic subjects like language, mathematics, and economics.

However, in many parts of the developing world, especially the rural areas, writing and reading are new skills for most of the population. Visible, everyday, 'real' materials may be limited to a few advertisements or government notices or labels on items in village shops. Newspapers may be either scarce or absent. And not all, or even most, of these items will necessarily be in the language used by newly literate members of the community. In these circumstances there will be a strong argument for a programme of post-basic literacy learning — often called 'post-literacy'.

Although the term 'post-literacy' is widely used throughout the world, we, the writers of this book, try to avoid it wherever possible. There are two reasons why we take this view. The first is partly philosophical, and the second is entirely practical. We think that the use of a deceptively simple term for a rather complex set of possible programmes can be misleading. In the next few paragraphs we will try to sort out some of these complexities.

'Post-literacy' — or a developing literacy?

The first reason for questioning the apparently straightforward use of the term 'post-literacy' is the fact (which we have stressed throughout this book) that literacy itself is both complex and variable. If there is no one 'literacy', there can be no one post-literacy either. Moreover, while learning in the same class initially may perhaps be seen as appropriate for all, what learners wish to learn later will vary enormously. As we have stressed all through this book, literacy is not a simple technology which you either know how to use or do not have. Nor is it a series of stages through which people progress, from being illiterate to being literate. Whether a person is literate or not depends on context and on culture; it is a dynamic not a static state. Someone who is literate enough to read complicated language may be illiterate when it comes to using computers. Someone who can read a sophisticated novel may have problems in understanding a government form or completing an income-tax return. These examples give rise to questions like: is 'post-literacy' a course in computing or how to fill in your tax returns? The variations are endless.

At the beginning of this book, we posed four key questions.

- Who needs literacy?
- What do they need it for?
- What kind of literacy do they need?
- What is the best way to plan and implement a programme to meet those needs?

The same questions need to be asked when the basic literacy programme has been completed and people wish to move on to some kind of continuing education.

The second and entirely practical reason for viewing the term 'post-literacy' with some scepticism is that the form of organisation required to deliver a basic literacy programme is unlikely to be suitable for post-basic literacy learning. A basic programme is usually organised by trained literacy workers, and the learning takes place in regular class meetings. Once such an organisation is established, it is tempting to keep it in being for 'post-literacy' — often perceived as rather formal classes which come to look more and more like a primary school for adults.

There are two dangers here: first, that the uses of literacy in everyday life are given less prominence than the more formal literacy of the classroom; and, secondly, that a range of learning opportunities is not developed to match the learners' diverse motivations.

A support system for continuing literacy and education

A recent study of continuing literacy programmes,[23] published by the UK government's Overseas Development Administration, suggests that the best way to promote better literacy practices is to develop an effective

support system, employing other helpers besides literacy practitioners. What would such a support system mean in practice, and what might it then do?

In our view, an effective support system for developing post-basic community literacy should be based on four principles of procedure.

* *It should act as a catalyst* within other programmes (such as health or income generation): it should not normally provide its own classes of instruction.

* It should attempt to *integrate improved literacy practices across all development sectors* (such as agriculture, water, health). In development jargon, it would be 'cross-sectoral'.

* It should not be aimed solely at those who have attended an initial literacy class. *It should aim to support anyone in the community who has difficulty with the reading, writing, or calculating tasks which they need to do.*

* It should *encourage the use of real literacy materials*, rather than specially prepared resources.

Real materials can be divided into two categories. The first category consists of extension materials: all those books, pamphlets, posters and the like which development agencies use to spread their message to individuals and to communities. The second consists of magazines, catalogues, advertisements, comic books and other printed materials already available but perhaps not yet widely used to improve literacy practices. Extension material is seldom used for the development of literacy, and few literacy agencies use such material for their classes, even when it is available. An effective support system would aim to exploit this rich resource.

Building a literacy support system

Support systems will vary from country to country and perhaps from programme to programme. But if it is based on the principles listed above, a support system is likely to have certain key features. First, it will be small and mobile: very different from the large, heavily staffed structures set up by some government literacy programmes. Second, it will act as a catalyst, offering advice and exercising influence among other major providers and across sectors. To do these things, it will need sufficient status, and enough funds to be able to commission small experimental projects.

All these factors point to a structure which includes:

* a small team of literacy workers, who encourage literacy practices in other sectoral programmes;
* central responsibility for the team, either in government or in a non-governmental development agency;

- some development funds for local, small-scale experimentation on a range of activities that promote literacy practices, but not for establishing separate post-basic literacy programmes.

The ODA report mentioned above[24] further suggests that the tasks of a literacy support system might include:

- training literacy practitioners to identify and use existing 'real' materials;
- bridging the gap between the producers of real materials and the users, and working with the producers of these materials to adapt them to the needs of those with literacy difficulties;
- supporting local groups in the development of new literacy agendas;
- training other professionals (such as agricultural and health workers) to help participants in their programmes with their literacy activities.

'I'm working on a community history project. Eight of us are compiling an archive of material, and this will be our history. We work with tape recorders in pairs. A co-ordinator from the University taught us how to ask questions, and what sort of information to look for. I like this work, because it is important to remember the past and to know our history. Old people have a lot to teach us. We are also setting up a video project to record interviews with old people.' —
Esperanza Argueta, a resettled refugee in El Salvador
Photo: Jenny Matthews

Supporting literacy in the community

A literacy support service aims to help people to use their literacy skills in their everyday lives. Finding a way to realise these aims may not be easy. Such a support system will be more difficult to organise and to implement than an initial literacy programme. There are few existing models from which to learn. The long-term needs of individuals and groups will be more varied and more complex, and even further dependent on local circumstances. Groups may have fewer long-term aims in common, as their literacy practices begin to diverge. An idea which works well in one place may not work in another. Without gathering people in a formal class, it may be more difficult to reach them

and work with them in response to their emerging needs. Planners and development workers should continue to work closely with local groups and organisations, and to discuss with them the structures and facilities on which such a service might be built.

Many literacy workers agree that there is a clear need for experimental action research to find out what kind of support services would work best in different circumstances. The examples which follow are designed to give some indication of ideas and methods which planners and development workers could adapt for their own experiments.

Village library services in India and Tanzania

In Kerala (India) in the 1940s and 1950s, an independent professional association set up and developed the Kerala Library Movement, with the aim of making reading material available to people who had nothing to read. It is generally believed that this was one of the main reasons why Kerala achieved relatively high literacy rates, among men and women, compared with other Indian states. In more recent years, a state-run library service has taken over this initiative, and it has continued to grow.

In Tanzania, however, attempts to set up village libraries and to create a library service to promote reading were much less successful. There were not enough resources to produce or maintain a sufficient stock of reading material; library staff were not adequately trained; and the management of such a complex service was not established on a sound basis. In view of the difficult economic circumstances at that time, and the poor provision of basic infrastructure, it might have been more effective to run a scheme on a smaller scale.

Recycled newspapers in Uganda

In Uganda, the British agency ACTIONAID is making available old newspapers as reading material, in order to help sustain literacy. Rather than produce new books for new readers, they collect discarded newspapers in urban areas, and offer them to people who have no reading material. Newspapers use a number of different typefaces and type sizes. They contain pictures of local and national politicians whom readers may recognise. They have headlines, which can be read relatively easily, and features to be read at greater length. There are few newspapers in minority languages, but to people who are becoming literate in a national language, newspapers are a cheap and effective resource.

ALBSU and REPLAN in the UK

In the UK, there have been two examples of organisations that worked to support the development of literacy, without becoming directly involved in providing either literacy classes or on-going training. The first, operating in England and Wales, is the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills

Unit. Its function is to produce learning materials, to provide training, to encourage small projects and initiatives which investigate local needs, and to publish a regular newsletter for literacy workers and new readers. ALBSU aims to keep interest and morale high by enabling people working in small and often isolated communities to keep in touch with each other and with new ideas. It encourages organisations which provide literacy services to experiment with new ways of working. It invites bids from these organisations for financial and supervisory support, and responds to those which seem to be viable. Many of these bids are concerned with helping people to continue with their literacy, or progress on from basic literacy into other forms of continuing education. ALBSU offers advice to the providers over a limited period of time (generally two or three years), while the new initiative is being established.

The second example is REPLAN, which provided support services for those working with unemployed adults during the late 1980s.[25] REPLAN was designed to respond to changing social, economic, and political circumstances and did not prescribe any one way of working. It was concerned not only with promoting basic literacy and numeracy, but with providing education and information about education to people who needed to find paid work. The aim was to improve the life choices of individuals. Like ALBSU, REPLAN supported a number of different kinds of project that worked towards these aims. Like ALBSU, it did not offer any direct literacy provision itself, but focused on sharing ideas, resources, and materials, and publicising local projects. However, REPLAN had little or no direct funding for local initiatives. A large part of its work consisted of research into local needs and into existing provision that could be made more widely available. REPLAN workers made links between unemployed people and providers (and potential providers) of education, to try to bring the two groups together in a more efficient way. They encouraged organisations which offered education and training to consider new ways of doing it which might meet the requirements of those who needed it most. In some cases, these organisations set up pilot projects; in others they adapted existing classes. The theory was that local organisations could learn best by looking at what had been tried out in other areas, and adapting some of these ideas to fit their own circumstances. The staff encouraged organisations to contact each other, to find out what had contributed to the success or failure of an initiative.

Both ALBSU and REPLAN aimed to keep literacy workers in touch with each other, by setting up local and national networks.

Community literacy in Nepal

In Nepal, research was carried out in connection with the planning of a community literacy programme. Individuals and groups living and working in a remote hill village were questioned about the type of on-going literacy support they felt might best meet their needs.

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Their suggestions included:

- training the owner of a local tea-shop to be able to help people to deal with the literacy tasks they had to undertake (such as reading an address or responding to a letter);

- having someone available in the local weekly market to whom people could go to check weights or calculate prices;

- offering support to individual farmers within and through a farmers' cooperative ;

- training health workers to help people to understand child-growth charts, medicine labels, prescriptions, vaccination certificates, etc. and to encourage people to use their literacy skills.

The villagers' last suggestion echoes a point made by the team of literacy experts commissioned by the Overseas Development Administration (cited above on page 151): that support for adult learners, to be most effective, 'will need to be provided more frequently *at the point of use*, rather than in special classes; and by other helpers, as well as by literacy practitioners'. Unless other development professionals come to see literacy as part of their own work too, then basic literacy on its own is unlikely to become the springboard for a truly learning and literate society.