



Below are excerpts from the current issue of *Literacy Across the Curriculum*.

REFLECTIONS ON LITERACY

Transfer of knowledge and technology has traditionally moved from the West to developing nations, on the premise that "we" know what "they" need. But when it comes to literacy, (and perhaps by extension to other issues as well), we have much to learn from the developing nations.

The most obvious is a lesson in humility. Against our constant grumblings about dwindling funds and inadequate technology, it is chastening to hear that in a village without electricity finding paper and pencils is a challenge. A more pertinent lesson can be extracted from a common worldwide preoccupation with outcomes of literacy programs.

A recent World Bank Discussion Paper (Abadzi 1994)...reviewing adult literacy programmes worldwide over the past thirty years, estimates that for every 100 learners who joined classes, on average only 12 of them actually learnt to read and write. Moreover, adult literacy programmes have, in general, failed to link literacy to wider development, (Archer & Cottingham, ODA report, 4)

A sense of the disillusion was palpable at the World Conference on Literacy held in Philadelphia in March. Despite the optimistic spin given by UNESCO speakers in their opening comments, most international presenters gave sobering accounts of their experiences. Nowhere was the problem reflected more clearly than in some of the South African sessions.

In relation to literacy, South Africa today mirrors both the developed and developing worlds. As part of its attempt to redress the ravages of apartheid, the country is committed to making its black population literate enough to manage a high tech society - hence the appeal of workplace literacy models borrowed from the US, UK, Canada and Australia.

Disjunction in the workplace

One such initiative was described in the context of a workplace literacy program that is fostering community development. It has been implemented at Umgeni Water in Kwa-Zulu Natal. The second largest water authority in South Africa, Umgeni controls 9000 sq. miles and is responsible for dams and water purification. It has recently developed a Rural Areas Water and Sanitation Plan to get potable water to rural areas by the year 2005. The problem, according to

presenter Sally Frost, is that "community water committees lack the technical and managerial skills and confidence to effectively manage the water supply after Umgeni withdraws." Umgeni has decided that a workplace literacy program could be the answer.

Describing the program begun in 1993, Ms. Frost cites a rise in functional literacy among 540 employees from 3% (1993) to 15% (1996). The internal program has helped local development by using the skills of their Adult Education Department to support the community - with needs analyses, literacy screening, facilitation, training and classes. They stress life skills - committee skills, problem-solving, decision-making and more.

Listening to the description of the model, I could have been in a North American plant. The only signal that I was not came from the accompanying slides of brightly dressed villagers balancing water jugs on their heads. Ms. Frost betrayed no sense of irony about presenting immediately after Cape Town sociologist Mastin Prinsloo, who had just described an ethnographic study of adult literacy provision in South Africa which found that most programs have failed and that there is a disjunction between what policy makers have expected and what has actually happened.

Ignoring what people know Prinsloo found that most literacy provision being offered in night schools did not match what people did in daily life, and that adult education in general was being constructed as entry into job training. In setting up qualification frameworks and reconstruction programs, policy makers have turned to borrowed models, making assumptions about cultural and cognitive deficits and ignoring the specific contexts of their own country.

For example, Prinsloo points out that for migrant workers, apart from the inaccessibility of schooling, there was often also an anti-schooling bias: leaving school early was equated with becoming a man. School was seen as a place for women and children. But unschooled people can be self-taught and many organizers without schooling during apartheid become powerful mediators. Now these sophisticated people are being reconstructed as infants in adult literacy night classes. The models ignore what people already know.

Khetsi Lehoko, and education Department official responsible for South Africa's adult provision, also took issue with the image of ignorant water-carriers conveyed by the Umgeni slides and reinforced Prinsloo's picture of many people who cannot read or write yet are politically literate. He also noted that saying you cannot read or write can be a camouflage in threatening times. He spoke of the challenges facing the country - of trying to turn small-scale to large-scale provision. Defending the system of qualifications and standards being set, he sees it as part of an integrated approach, and speaks of developing a separate cadre of adult educators and of transforming the infrastructure of the night schools.

Building on what people know

The possibility of building practice on community needs was exemplified in a promising approach presented in another session at the conference. REFLECT (for Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques), has been developed and pilot-tested by ACTION-AID, a UK-based international development organization.

Fusing the theory of Freire and the practice of Participatory Rural Appraisal, REFLECT starts from a probing historical and philosophical analysis of literacy, and the weaknesses of current practice (see TO PONDER). In a REFLECT program there are no printed "primers" the only printed matter is a manual for facilitators (See REVIEWS) which guides them in helping community literacy circles develop their own learning materials by constructing "graphics - maps, matrices, calendars, and diagrams that represent local reality, systematize the existing knowledge of participants and promote detailed analysis of local issues."

Pilot-projects in Uganda, Bangladesh and El Salvador since 1993 have been monitored and evaluated in depth. The evaluation process has been scrupulous, a model of what "outcomes-based" might look like at its best. These projects have all been rural, but the practitioners are calling for new research sites - in urban areas, in the developed world, in specific settings to determine what aspects of this practice might be transferrable.

Canadian Contexts

What can any of this tell us in Canada? Our problems shrink in comparison to those described, yet remain troubling within our own context. However we are also beginning to examine our assumptions and practices and often find them wanting. The Ontario Literacy Coalition has recently published a background paper on outcomes-based evaluation (see p.5). The odd juxtapositions in South Africa can serve as a foil to highlight some questions; the REFLECT analysis and practice can offer some alternative models of instruction and evaluation.

What are the outcomes we expect from literacy programs? What definition of literacy lies behind the expectations? Whose needs are being met? How often do we begin from what people know, need and want, and how often do we assume they know nothing.

Ending with hope

Paolo Freire, frail but still inspired, was the keynote speaker in Philadelphia. Despite the pervasive pessimism at the conference, he invoked a philosophy of hope. "Education today," he said, "has to be a critical process, a struggle against fatalism... Change is difficult, but change is possible."

We must all believe that at some level, we would not still be working in literacy.

This issue of LAC looks at some recent research on practice - in Ontario, the UK, and in developing countries.

It examines some approaches that have been found effective in specific contexts, and does several takes on the role of the visual in both "old" and "new" literacies. [LS]

Recommended reading:

David Archer & Sam Cottingham,
Action Research Report on REFLECT,
Regenerated Freirean Literacy Through Empowering Community Techniques,

Overseas Development Administration,
Serial No 17, March 1996.

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