TRAINING TEACHERS FOR NON-FORMAL EDUCATION: THE LETTER PROGRAMME (Part 2)

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THE LETTER TRAINING PROGRAMME

The LETTER Programme grew out of a concrete example of this issue - how does an organisation engaged in providing NFE for women find out about what the women in their learning groups already know? Nirantar, an NGO in India working for women's empowerment through education, with mainly rural dalit women, when drawing up a new curriculum, found themselves engaging with "women who, while unschooled, routinely drew on a complex, even sophisticated, body of local knowledge based on their collective life experiences" (Nirantar, 2007, p. 4). One example of the different epistemology of the rural women was that, when discussing the difference between animate and inanimate objects, it was found that many of the women regarded rivers as animate. But this body of local knowledge, strongly held, was unseen by the women themselves - they assumed it was normal. This raised two questions: what was the impact of this prior knowledge on the new learning programme; and how could one find out about this knowledge, since it was largely unknown to the women themselves until challenged?

1. LETTER India 2006

A small adult education agency based in the UK (Uppingham Seminars on Development) had been working with Nirantar over a number of years; and in discussion between the two bodies, the LETTER training programme was conceived. It was agreed that one way of exploring what they described as "the dissonance between the cultural knowledge of local women and [Nirantar's] adult-education curriculum" would be to use ethnographic approaches; hence the title, Learning for Empowerment Through Training in Ethnographic Research (LETTER). Could NFE teachers in this and similar programmes be trained to use ethnographic approaches to explore local knowledge systems? In 2006 in Delhi, the first LETTER workshops were held.

The primary focus of the India project was adult literacy and numeracy learning. We set out to use non-formal methods (workshops, practical exercises, case study

and lots of discussion); thus the programme was not certificated (although those participants who needed one were given a certificate of attendance). The training programme was conducted in English and thus was aimed not directly at the teachers in NFE but at a group of about 20 trainers of NFE teachers, with the aim that they would cascade the training to the teachers they trained. Financial support was sought and obtained mainly from ASPBAE (Asia-South Pacific Bureau of Adult Education) based in Mumbai. With their regional orientation, the participants in the training programme came from different countries, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan as well as several different states of India. The programme consisted of two one-week residential workshops led by Professor Brian Street and Dave Baker, with a period between used for field work and writing up the case studies produced.

The first workshop consisted mainly of introductions to ethnographic methodologies, explorations of informal and formal learning, and examples of literacy and numeracy seen as social practices rather than as classroom skills. Thus a major activity was a field visit into the neighbourhood to look at what everyday literacy and numeracy practices were immediately visible if one looked carefully. What was seen was written up during the workshop - such as the numeracy practices employed by a taxi driver in charging his fare and giving change.

The ethnography is very important. We did not argue for a full ethnography to be conducted in order to learn about the prior learning of the student-learners; that would have been beyond the scope of the participants in terms of time and resources. Rather we argued for the adoption of ethnographic-style perspectives (Green and Bloome, 1997), especially using small-scale case studies for in-depth analysis. Alongside on-going discussions with the people engaged in the activity being observed, there were extended observation and explorations of the meanings of what was seen - activities which not even the person involved may have seen since they were normal, everyday activities. The women in the local market proudly showed their local measures by which they bought and sold - measures accepted throughout the local community but bearing no relation to kilos and grams as taught in classes. In one case (in a later LETTER workshop), sitting with a woman selling vegetable oil in a local market, it was noticed she served some but not other people - and on enquiry they turned out to be people from different communities she preferred or did not prefer; her sales were based on social and cultural factors rather than economic considerations, although she herself was not really conscious of that.

The key element of ethnographic approaches for this training programme was that it did not start from an assumption of deficit, of need, but simply asked, 'what is going on already? can we build on that?' Ethnography assumes a positive, not a negative (Heath and Street, 2008). This was a major change of orientation for the participants who had become accustomed to developing curricula based on assessed needs, not on prior learning, on a deficit syndrome, looking for what was felt to be lacking rather than on the view that what already existed was valuable, if different.

A third strand during the first workshop was an emphasis on literacy and numeracy as social practices. Rather than assume there is only one literacy, a set of skills to be learned and applied in all situations, we take the view that there are many different literacies engaged in in different settings (Papen 2005). We do not assume that unschooled adults do and can do no literacy or numeracy. Indeed, it was immediately obvious that all adults, schooled and unschooled alike, are engaged in many different numeracy practices in the course of their everyday activities, and this extended too to many different forms of literacy (religious, occupational, bureaucratic etc). The everyday literacy and numeracy activities of people in the community are frequently done unconsciously and are often not regarded as 'literacy' or 'numeracy', for they are very different from the literacy taught by the national adult literacy programmes on offer. In the LETTER training programme, we seek to explore what is going on in the everyday lives of the student-learners and whether such practices could be useful for helping them to learn new things, new ways of doing things.

At the end of the first workshop, the participants were asked to go back to their work places for some six months to identify and work on a case study using ethnographic approaches, before coming back for a second one-week workshop to present their case studies and to discuss how their findings could be used for developing new curricula and new teaching-learning materials for their NFE programmes. Many of the resulting studies focussed on numeracy, although surveys of local literacies were conducted in rural Uttar Pradesh and in urban Jaipur. Indigenous games in Bangladesh, the numeracy practices used in different occupations in Andhra Pradesh, local weights and measures in two north Indian villages were among the subjects investigated. The most significant finding was that the universalised standard literacy and numeracy taught in the national NFE programmes as expressed in the textbooks available were very different from the numeracy and literacy practices in the local communities which varied greatly from location to location (see Hillier 2011). As others have discovered, the gap between the (non-formal) classroom and the everyday world of the learners was very wide, not just in literacy and numeracy but in many different fields of NFE (see Scribner and Cole 1973; de Jong et al 2006; Fenwick 2010; Arnseth and Silseth 2013) - which raises still largely unanswered questions about the global and the local in NFE.

The main activities in the second one-week residential workshop were to refine the case studies by presentation to the whole group and peer review, and to discuss the implications of the main findings for the planning of NFE learning programmes and for the training of teachers in NFE. A publication produced by Nirantar and published jointly by Nirantar and ASPBAE (Nirantar 2007) described the processes of the LETTER workshops, the case studies and some of the implications for teachers and NFE planners.

2. LETTER Ethiopia
The second programme took place in Ethiopia in 2007-2008. The concept of LETTER was taken up by ANFEAE (Adult and Non-formal Education Association of

Ethiopia) with financial support from PACT Ethiopia. Some 20 trainers of teachers in various kinds of NFE, both government and NGO, including some micro-finance and credit and savings groups, were brought together for three one-week workshops with intervening periods for case study research.

The programme was closely based on the first LETTER project but it was developed further. The first workshop debated the reasons for using ethnographic methodologies to make local surveys, the significance of informal learning for the NFE learners, and literacy and numeracy as social practices. Again, a field visit was made in small groups to demonstrate both the kinds of everyday literacy and numeracy practices engaged in by people in the market, on the streets or at various locations such as a clinic or bank, and also the basic elements of an ethnographic approach to investigating literacy and numeracy practices; field work like this formed a part of each of the other two workshops, held in different locations of the country. The small groups wrote up their findings and presented them to the other participants.

They then went back to their work places and commenced work on more substantial case studies, remaining in contact with the trainers by e-mail. The second workshop received the first version of their case studies and covered much the same ground at the request of the participants. Preliminary discussions took place on the way to use the findings for the development of teaching-learning approaches in NFE programmes.

After a further period working on the case studies, a third workshop was held at which the finalised case studies were presented and different ways of developing training programmes for NFE teachers were explored. This was helped by the presence of Malini Ghose from Nirantar who was able to bring the project up-to-date with what had been happening at Nirantar since the end of LETTER India and contributed the experience of her organisation in the development of new curricula based on local surveys of existing practices. The workshop participants identified two main contexts within which they worked. Some (mostly from NGOs and a few from universities and colleges) felt that they were free to develop new training programmes for their teachers; others (especially from government agencies or from NGOs which implemented government programmes) found themselves seeking ways of introducing elements of this new approach to training NFE teachers to research the backgrounds of their NFE learners into the rather more rigid programmes they were already implementing.

The participants in this final workshop developed a programme of ethnographic-based curriculum development for teachers in NFE which was labelled the CRB approach. It called upon NFE teachers to first **collect** local knowledge and practices; then to **reflect**, i.e. discuss these with the NFE-learners to see the meanings of this local knowledge and practices to them; and then to **build** a relevant curriculum so as to develop new knowledge and new ways of doing things - not to replace the earlier but to add to them.

A presentation of the key findings was made to a number of national bodies (including some from the government), and again a book was published (Gebre et al., 2009),

funded by PACT. This contained first an introduction to an ethnographic approach to NFE, secondly the case studies, and thirdly some suggested conclusions from the case studies. The aim of this - as with the India publication - is that it can be used for training others in that country or region in this approach to NFE. The key focus of the case studies in Ethiopia was on informal income-generation activities - small scale businesses by individuals or small groups, marketing, small scale industry, a butcher, a seller of fruit and vegetables - but one case study related to a law suit. Multiple different ways of measuring weights and measures were identified, all different from the formal measures taught by the national adult education textbook. As in India, the context was one of multiple languages and scripts, and of secular and religious literacies - which raised the issue of *which* literacy should literacy learners learn and who should decide. One striking finding here, as in India, was how much literacy was inscribed on different surfaces, especially the walls of buildings; and the cultural significance of these practices occupied a good deal of discussion time. It became clear that literacy and (especially) numeracy in real life were more complicated than the formal classroom subject made them appear.

3. LETTER Uganda (2011-12)

One resource person was brought into the LETTER Ethiopia project from Uganda, and on his return, he developed a LETTER Uganda project as part of a larger project funded by the British Council and based in Makerere University[3]. There were several different strands to the whole project, including a new curriculum for the university's main teaching programme in adult education, and some workshops on writing Easy Readers for newly trained adults in the national adult literacy programme. It was therefore possible for the LETTER participants to be included in some of these other activities. Some twenty (the numbers fluctuated) participants, trainers of literacy teachers from NGOs, government departments and universities, including two participants from Ethiopia, attended three workshops held in different parts of the country and a fourth final workshop of a few days to draw together the different strands. The same mixture of workshops sessions with field visits and practical exercises, exploring ethnographic approaches, informal learning, and literacy and numeracy as social practices formed the core of the LETTER training programme. One of the resource persons from Ethiopia took part to ensure that the experience gained from the earlier projects was capitalised. Case studies were prepared by the participants. These were more wide ranging, less highly focused than in the previous workshops - some life histories including a physically disabled man who was a village leader, some occupations such as oil palm farmers, a carpenter and sellers in a street market, users of a rural health clinic and users of a community library, and rural women telling the time of day, all showing ways in which the learners in different kinds of NFE programmes had built up tacit knowledge and skills through experiential informal learning. A publication from this training programme is in preparation.

SOME GENERAL PRINCIPLES FOR TRAINING TEACHERS IN NFE

Further LETTER programmes are being explored in Tanzania, South Africa, Kenya and Brazil. But it is important to stress that the LETTER programme is not a fixed programme, set in stone. Rather, it is more an approach to the training of non-formal education teachers which can be adapted to many different kinds of learning programme, whether academic, or skill development, social development or attitude change. As discussions on these possible programmes which lie ahead have progressed, so some of the key issues arising have been identified and are being addressed. This paper is part of that process.

Four pillars of such a NFE programme have emerged, as follows:

1. First, we take NFE as being **learning programmes which are adapted** directly to the aspirations and experience of each particular learning group rather than a standardised curriculum sent down from above to be implemented locally. If this is accepted, then we need to take the classic dictum of adult education into all NFE - "start where they are" (Cross 1981; Rogers and Horrocks 2010), with the experience they bring with them.

> Education ought to make extraordinary sense of this ... experience. It should help people to examine critically what is already known by adding new insight and different knowledge so as to help them use their creativity more effectively. That is to say, it should start from where people are but not leave them there (Thompson 2002)

In particular, NFE teachers need to take account of

– the *pre-understanding* of the subject the student-learners bring which will determine what they see and hear and also what they miss

– the *funds of knowledge and banks of skills* which they have but do not know they have and which they use to manage the contingencies of everyday life, including how they relate to our NFE learning programmes

– their *existing frames of meaning* which will influence how they define what they are doing

– and the *social imaginaries* which they have built up with their local community and which form the basis of the Discourses they use when talking about their experiences and about the NFE programme they are now engaged in.

All of these are brought into the NFE classroom, and all of these will act as either scaffolding for, or as barriers to, the new learning. The first pillar then is that *the prior learning student-learners in NFE bring with them is the basis of all new learning*.

2. Secondly, we take **informal (unplanned, unintended and mostly unconscious) learning** seriously. All of the above attributes have been learned informally and therefore lie buried deep in their sense of who they are. How then can we find out what exists? As well as asking the student-learners (which will be essential) and listening closely to how they talk about the subject in hand (even more vital), the use of observation and case study analysis will be especially helpful in revealing the unconscious.

Ethnography looks for what exists, it does not assume a deficit (Heath and Street 2008). So **collecting** material relating to the subject in hand is a core element of this training programme. It applies not just to literacy and numeracy but to all NFE. For example, in health education, rather than teaching new knowledge from scratch, a start would be made by surveying the existing local practices of the student-learners' community; nutrition programmes will commence by looking at what is already on their shelves and available in their markets; skills development programmes would start by reviewing what skills and experience they bring with them. It is true that many of the student-learners say they know nothing, that they can do nothing, but observation, discussion of their prior experience and the careful analysis of case studies will show to the teacher - and to the individual student-learners, who often surprise themselves - that they do know much and are already doing much, even if they have so far been either unconscious of it or do not recognise it as being relevant to the new learning.

One issue which was raised several times in the LETTER workshops was that some of the teachers in NFE programmes felt they were not able to undertake such 'research' (Greenfield 1984). This is an example of the strength of existing frames of reference. They thought that 'research' was something done by academics, scholars, or consultants brought in from outside and required special expertise. When we spoke instead of 'making surveys' of local knowledge through local practices, they were much happier with such a concept - many of them were accustomed to carrying out surveys in their own context.

And since a large part of our aim is not just to recover what is not always clearly visible but to help the student-learners to discover what they know but do not know they know (Bakker et al 2006), a good deal of the surveying of local practices on which to build a new curriculum for NFE can be undertaken by the student-learners themselves. In India, it was the student-learners who identified that many houses in their local community had on their walls calendars which became a key component in the development of a new learning programme. It was not until they were asked to look around them that they 'saw' these on their own walls; it was the staff of the NFE programme who appreciated the value of these for new learning. The second pillar of the programme is then *to use the (often unconscious) existing practices of the particular group of student-learners and their communities as a basis on which to build the learning of new practices*.

3. A third pillar emerged from our attempts to build new teaching-learning practices on the basis of the existing practices of the student-learners. For we noticed a tendency for the trainers to collect material from the local community and to bring it into the classroom where it quickly became decontextualised, used as a textbook outwith its original function. But this denies our second principle - that it is contextualised local practices which we wish to use for new learning, not generalised materials. It is not the text or the practice which can be used for new teaching; it is its original *meaning* in the context of the student-learners, what it means *to them*: i.e. non-formal

teaching on the basis of "real-world texts being used in the ways people use them outside of class" (Jacobson, 2012, p. 58).

Thus the next stage is for the whole group to **reflect** on this collected material, which again will reveal to the NFE teacher much about the student-learners which is not immediately apparent. For example, discussion of the calendars mentioned above revealed that there were any different kinds of calendars on the walls of even a fairly remote Indian village - religious calendars, secular, commercial, legal[4]. Discussions of the reasons why they are given away may arouse some cynicism. Some calendars are solar calendars, some lunar; some have multiple dates, again giving cause for debate. Discussion of the uses of these in the household might well reveal such uses at times to be gendered, men and women regarding them differently. Sometimes they can be drawn on for forward planning, either short-term or longer term, at other times for recording past events; many will simply be ornaments. There are multiple different 'starts' to the year, or rather different years in operation at the same time (academic; religious; taxation and financial etc). This is but an example of the kind of process which curriculum-building in NFE using ethnographic approaches will involve. It is not the separate practices or the texts which matter; it is what they mean to those who engage with them, how they are used in a particular social context. The third pillar of the LETTER programme then is *reflection by the student-learners on the local practices that they have found by ethnographic-style research, becoming conscious of their own unconscious.*

4. Finally, the fourth stage proceeds to the on-going process of **building** on the existing to create new practices, new knowledge, new skills. For example, in the case of the curriculum built on calendars, the student-learners decided for themselves to develop their own calendar - and in the process learned a great deal of new knowledge and skills, developing new awareness, new attitudes of confidence and purpose, and new ways of working together.

This approach raises the whole issue of the purpose of NFE - indeed, of all education. Is it to remedy deficits, to fill gaps, to give knowledge and skills which are missing? Deficits are based on an assumption of normality; some elements of what is felt to be the normal set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes are seen to be lacking and thus should be taught to the student-learners who do not (yet) possess them. But the fourth pillar of the LETTER approach suggests that *the aim of all education,* especially Non-Formal, is to build on the experience of the learner and *to add to what is already there* (Dewey 1940) - helping the student-learners to become conscious of what they already possess in terms of funds of knowledge and skills so they can add to them, enhancing their empowerment by increasing their choice; assisting them to become conscious of the assumptions they make in their pre-understanding, conscious of their frames of reference and their social imaginaries so that they can reflect critically on these (Tirosh, 1994).

The aim of the NFE we are seeking to promote is to widen horizons, to increase choice - not to teach the 'right way' to know or to do but to help us with them to explore possible alternatives. This is true empowerment; this is what we believe Non-formal Education - and LETTER - is all about; transformative through development and growth rather than through radical revolutionary change.

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