Developing adult literacy: Approaches to planning, implementing and delivering literacy initiatives

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How good are local-level literacy programme organisers at identifying, and responding to, the needs of the communities with whom they work? Do they ever unintentionally impose their own definitions of what literacy is and what a literacy programme should do, such that they fail to empower learners in the ways that matter most to them? These are some of the issues which arise from this helpful and stimulating book.

The significance of the book lies way beyond the remarkable coincidence that the three authors all share the same first name and their surnames all begin with the same letter. It also lies beyond the very useful feature that an electronic version can be downloaded free of charge from the Oxfam UK website (http://publications.oxfam.org.uk/). This book is important because it provides a rare example of an excellent introduction to the whole field of adult literacy work and to literacy programmes around the world, aimed specifically at people who are responsible for organising literacy programmes in local contexts. It is ideal reading not only for newcomers to the field but also for all who have years of experience and who want to reflect on their own practice in the light of current thinking.

The three authors have extensive experience as literacy practitioners around the world. Juliet McCaffery is an independent literacy consultant who has supported and evaluated literacy programmes in several countries, including Sierra Leone, Sudan and Egypt. Juliet Merrifield is the head of an adult education centre in the UK, having previously worked in the USA at the Highlander Research and Education Center and the Center for Literacy Studies at the University of Tennessee. Juliet Millican has been involved in literacy programme management in Africa and Asia. All three speak with authority from their positions in the mainstream of adult education and development internationally. They are familiar with local- and national-level literacy programmes and are well aware of the realities and constraints which literacy organisers have to take into account. They offer an important discussion of the theory of literacy as a social practice, which has strong academic and practitioner support in the UK and which has influenced the policies of the UK government Department for International Development as well as multilateral agencies, including UNESCO (UNESCO 2006).
The book sets out “to identify key considerations in planning and implementing literacy programmes” (p. 254). As such, it provides literacy organisers with the orientation they need to fully understand their work and the diverse factors which impact on it. It aims to enable literacy organisers “to become clear about their conceptual base and make conscious choices about planning and implementing programmes” (p. 257). This is a very worthwhile goal because practitioners need to be conscious of their own presuppositions so that they can consider how these influence, and perhaps constrain, their approach to the planning and implementation of literacy programmes.

**Content**

In the first three chapters of the book, the authors discuss their perspectives on literacy and the significance of literacy in current international development agendas. They emphasise the need for literacy organisers to be responsive to local needs and, as one aspect of this, to take into account the differing needs of men and women from the earliest point of planning a literacy programme.

The key contribution of the book lies in the next five chapters, which provide a clear framework for understanding how literacy is conceived in various ways in current practice, and how these various conceptions lead to different kinds of literacy programmes. The authors identify four separate conceptions of literacy (although they recognise that there can be some overlap between them) and discuss how each of these plays out in programme design, methods and materials. These four perspectives are literacy as skills, as tasks, as social practice and as critical reflection.

Literacy as skills sees literacy as a matter of the technical mastery of reading and writing; literacy programmes based on this view typically use primers to provide learners with a thorough grounding in decoding and encoding. Literacy as tasks stresses literacy as a means of accomplishing particular functions; literacy instruction is accordingly contextualised for specific occupations or activities. Literacy as social practice is concerned with how literacy is used in social contexts; programmes aim to enable learners to master the particular functions for literacy which are important in their setting and to make use of literacy in whatever ways matter to them. Lastly, literacy as critical reflection, familiar from the work of Freire, emphasises the transformative power of literacy; such programmes aspire to enable learners to adopt a critical stance towards their socio-political situation. This framework helps practitioners to locate their own beliefs and understandings within the diversity of approaches to literacy which are found on the field. While this is certainly not the first book to try to bring conceptual clarity to the multi-faceted world of adult literacy (see for instance Barton 1994; Searle 1999; Tabouret-Keller et al. 1997), it provides a straightforward and well-developed framework against which the ideological basis of any programme can be assessed.

The following chapters shift the focus in a practical direction. Chapters 9 to 11 discuss key elements of implementing literacy programmes, issues of language in literacy, monitoring and evaluation. At various points in the discussion, the authors illustrate how the four theoretical positions outlined above have differing implications for the implementation process. For instance, evaluation in a skills-based programme is likely to prioritise testing the learners to establish their degree of mastery of reading and writing; on the other hand, in a social practice
programme evaluation will be more concerned with establishing if the learners are making greater use of literacy in their lives.

Chapters 12 to 16 discuss learning and reading theory, curriculum development, literacy materials, teacher training and assessing learners and programmes. The final chapter includes a very useful discussion of the four theoretical positions. The authors recognise their own preference for the view of literacy as a social practice, but they adopt a balanced approach pointing out the strengths and weaknesses of all four theoretical positions. While the literacy as skills approach has the advantage of being relatively simple to implement on a large scale, it can be accused of failing to meet the particular needs of learners, as evidenced by the large number of adults who fail to complete a course of literacy instruction. The literacy as tasks approach is good at equipping learners to be competent users of literacy for particular purposes, but it may not equip them to use literacy successfully in other ways. Literacy as a social practice links literacy closely to the needs of individuals and communities but it requires tutors who are well trained and sensitive to local needs. (See SILEBR 2009-023 for a review of a book on training tutors in this approach.) The critical approach to literacy also demands well trained tutors, even if it has the potential for having a more profound effect on the lives of learners than other approaches.

Finally, the authors urge literacy workers not to espouse any one position too doggedly but to consider how the insights from each perspective might improve their own practice. They conclude that success in literacy work depends on literacy programme organisers having a clear vision of the power of literacy to make a real difference in people’s lives, being constantly responsive to the changing needs of the learners, designing a clear structure for delivery and providing good materials, irrespective of the theoretical position they adopt.

**Assessment**

I would certainly have benefited from reading this book in my own practice as a beginning literacy worker in Africa. In spite of quite extensive training, I had not fully thought through the different ways in which the task of literacy in a minority language community could be approached and I was certainly not as sensitive to local needs as I ought to have been. The book would have given me greater theoretical understanding to help me work out why the response to literacy in the local language was limited. I would also have gained great encouragement from being reminded that the task of literacy is very complex and that the challenges I was facing were shared by other colleagues in the field.

I now find the book a very useful resource in training courses for literacy organisers. It is written in a straightforward manner with a deliberate intention to be readily understandable to readers whose first language is not English. Sentences are relatively short and uncomplicated and the seventeen chapters each follow a similar structure, beginning with a brief overview of the content and ending with a section on specific implications for literacy planners and organisers and a short list of further resources. The text is illustrated with figures, tables and diagrams and with numerous text boxes giving examples drawn from current literacy programmes in developing countries. In its detailed discussion of theory and its implications, it complements *Adult Literacy: a Handbook for Development Workers* (Fordham et al. 1995) and *Local*
Literacies: Theory and Practice (Waters 1998), while its recognition of the realities of local level programmes and its up to date examples of programmes distinguish it from Bhola’s A Source Book for Literacy Work (1994).

Of course, an introductory book that covers a whole field of activity can be accused of superficiality in its treatment of each of the aspects it discusses but this would be an unfair criticism. Its very strength lies in its breadth, as well as in the wide personal experience of literacy which the authors bring to their writing and the balanced presentation of the four theoretical positions. The authors’ awareness of current thinking and recent developments in literacy work is of great value. The book can be criticised for having few references to sources within the text, for referring occasionally to ephemeral resources rather than published works and for failing to refer to the latest editions of some publications, but these do not detract significantly from its overall value.

Now, as an experienced literacy practitioner and trainer of literacy personnel, I appreciate how the book has helped me to make sense of the whole field of literacy and to be able to present it to students in an easily digestible manner. It would be hard to find a book more directly relevant to the needs of many local-level literacy organisers around the world. I would recommend this book strongly.

References


