Introduction to the book review

The book “Everyday Literacies in Africa” arose out of a series of workshops conducted by the authors in Ethiopia in 2007 and 2008. The training programme is called LETTER (Learning for Empowerment Through Training in Ethnographic Research). These workshops were similar to a series of workshops carried out in India. (For a soft copy of this workshop report, entitled “Exploring the Everyday”, visit http://www.nirantar.net/publications.htm. Accessed January 23, 2013.)

The authors wanted to have a better understanding of what literacy means in the rural and urban context of Ethiopia. To do so, they used an ethnographic research approach and worked with a group of practitioners who wanted more effective learning materials for adults. The book is a description of their ‘journey’, as they call it. The book illustrates the ideological model of literacy. It shows how using an ethnographic approach rather than questionnaires to understand existing literacy practices in a community reveals more information about what is happening in societies.

Two of the authors are well-known players in the field of literacy. Alan Rogers is familiar with issues on adult education in the global South and has produced a number of publications on adult education. Brian Street is one of the first people to have drawn attention to literacy as a social practice. Recently, he received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Reading Conference in the USA.

Before reviewing the content of the book, it is good to understand the ideological model of literacy. In the world of literacy there is an ongoing debate about the concept ‘literacy’. Some see literacy as a set of cognitive skills that need to be acquired through instruction, while others look at literacy as a social practice which depends on the social and cultural context in which they take place (McCaffery, Merrifield and Millican 2007). The former is often referred to as the ‘autonomous’ model and the latter as the ‘ideological’ model to literacy (Street 1984). Both
models have their merits and disadvantages. For example, the autonomous model has clear definitions of literacy and is able to distinguish between literate and illiterate people (Cheffy 2008). However, such measures could be an oversimplification of what is really happening in literacy in a society. Some people’s level of literacy competence may not fall within the definition of the autonomous model. The book review will show some merits and disadvantages of the ideological model of literacy.

The book review

“Everyday literacies in Africa” has three chapters. The first chapter describes what an ethnographic approach to literacy is. The second chapter gives ten case studies of ethnographic approaches to literacy collected by the participants of the workshops. The third chapter describes the findings of the case studies and looks at what they mean for adult literacy and numeracy programmes.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 first describes why the authors chose an ethnographic approach to literacy. The authors wanted to know what people ‘know’ and how this knowledge can be used in literacy and numeracy learning. They argue that while most adult literacy programmes say they start where adult learners are and take into account their knowledge and experience, in reality many literacy programmes treat the ‘illiterate’ adult learner as someone who does not know anything about literacy. However, ‘illiterate’ adults do have knowledge about numeracy and are involved in literacy tasks. An ethnographic approach to literacy and numeracy gives insight into the hidden knowledge that adult learners have about literacy and numeracy. It starts from the understanding that people are already engaged in literacy practices and they want to know how to build on these practices. The authors distinguish between a literacy event and the literacy practice. The former is a one-off occurrence involving text. The latter is a repeated behaviour which shapes literacy events.

In this chapter the authors also discuss what is involved in ethnographic research to gather information about literacy practices in communities. The methods used by those at the workshop to collect ethnographic information were observation, collecting documents and artefacts, photographing and videoing, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 describes ten case studies. The case studies were informed by the ethnographic research carried out by the workshop participants of the workshops. These case studies show how literacy and numeracy practices are a part of ‘illiterate’ adults’ lives, even though using the autonomous view on literacy, they would not qualify as literacy practices.

Chapter 3

The third chapter first presents the findings of the case studies. The authors discovered that many people are involved in a variety of literacy practices in different settings and even in different
languages and scripts. They also noticed that the people’s literacy practices are different from the ones taught in literacy and numeracy classes. For example, people use different strategies to calculate grains of maize or sticks. The calculations are often done by estimation rather than precision. The authors also noted how ‘illiterate’ adults do not feel a great need for learning literacy skills per se. If they attend adult literacy learning programmes, they do so more for the skills training than for learning literacy (p.119). In addition, it was noted that just learning literacy and numeracy skills is not sufficient to help people out of poverty. The benefit of literacy and numeracy comes from their use, not from only learning them.

The authors next address the question of how to integrate the local literacy and numeracy practices into the classroom to assure that classroom literacy and numeracy practices are used in the community. How can a literacy and numeracy programme start from where the learners are, from what they know, and from what they do? Such integration implies a different role for the teacher. In the classroom the teacher needs a different attitude towards the learner so that the learner is viewed as a resource. Also, collaborative learning, where learners learn together and from each other should be promoted in the classroom over individualized learning. Collaborative learning is much more the norm in society.

Before answering the question of how to integrate the local literacies in the classroom, the authors put forth the Nirantar model in India as an example of how an ethnographic approach was used to develop a literacy programme. An adult literacy programme was developed for the Dalit women in Uttar Pradesh. The developers of the programme brought the ‘text’ of the women to the class. The researchers had found calendars in many homes. These calendars became the theme of the lessons. During the ethnographic research it was discovered that the women kept track of the days based on the phases of the moon. During the literacy lessons, the women named each day in their local language and linked these to the visual phase of the moon. The women were taught to read the calendars that were available to them. They also learned to write the names of the months in their local language, as well as Hindi and English. The moon as theme was also useful to elicit and write idioms, stories, and songs.

Based on their findings in Ethiopia and the above programme in India, the authors propose the CRB approach: Collect, Reflect, and Build on. This approach guides a process of developing a teaching-learning programme which uses the learners’ knowledge and practices. The CRB approach can be used within an existing curriculum, or it can also be used to develop a new approach altogether.

In the ‘Collect’ step, the facilitator will collect information from the participants for each topic to be covered. This will be done through visits, observations, interviews, and meetings with people, both formally and informally. The learners can help the facilitator. Initially, the learners might feel that they have nothing to contribute. However, by being involved in collecting (giving) information, their confidence will be built up as they see their ideas, experiences, knowledge, and practices are valuable. The case studies presented in chapter 2 are an example of how collecting information from the participants can be done.

The second element in CRB is ‘Reflect’. All the information collected about literacy practices about a certain topic will give the facilitator and learners a lot of information. During this stage
the facilitator and learners reflect on these practices. This is done by using materials that the learners use already in their normal daily routine. The discussion will revolve around questions such as: What is being done? Who is involved in it? Who creates these practices and for what purpose? How can they be improved? It is anticipated that these reflections and discussions will develop and enhance a desire for change.

The last element in the CRB approach is ‘Build on’. While discussing the literacy practices, the facilitator will seek opportunities to expand them and introduce new knowledge that builds on these practices. The facilitator can use the literacy textbook, but can also develop additional activities for the learners. The idea is that by using the knowledge that learners bring to class, the learning is much more attached to their daily lives, and they will take it back to their community contexts after the lesson.

The chapter gives four examples of how to develop a learning programme using CRB around the themes of counting; measuring; income and expenditure; proverbs, songs, and poems.

Chapter 3 ends with the conclusion that it is good to find ways of integrating an ethnographic approach into adult literacy programmes. At the same time it recognises that this approach has its limitations. By focussing only on what literacy practices are taking place in a community, the learners will not be exposed to anything new to help them widen their horizons.

**Evaluation**

The book provides interesting and useful information about an ethnographic approach to literacy. The strength of the suggested approach is that one gets a much better understanding of how ‘illiterate’ adults are already involved in literacy practices and how to build on those. The book’s sample lessons are useful for understanding how to make use the insights of an ethnographic approach in a literacy learning situation. The authors are also realistic enough to understand that a complete ethnographic approach to literacy might be difficult to realise. They suggest that it should be regarded as one extra element in an existing programme.

The challenge in applying this approach will be to find facilitators capable of implementing it. Especially in minority communities, many adult literacy facilitators tend to be minimally educated themselves and might not have the confidence or ability to be such innovative and creative facilitators. However, in my view this does not mean that SIL literacy programmes should not be involved in using ethnographic research to develop literacy programmes that are relevant to adults lives. Before embarking on a literacy programme, a programme developer would be wise to include an ethnographic approach to understand and make use of current literacy practices in the community. The knowledge and insights gained could then be included in the adult literacy curriculum and/or textbook.

In sum, this book is valuable for everyone involved in literacy. One who reads it will better understand how to develop relevant literacy programmes and materials that start with what the people know and do.
References


Street, B. *Literacy in Theory and Practice*. Cambridge, CUP, 1984