

Report of ILD 5

Hidden Literacies led by Dr Rafat Nabi

on October 25th 2012 at Feed the Minds

Dr Rafat Nabi works for the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (SCA) in Afghanistan and was formerly the Literacy country director for Education Sector Reform Assistance (ESRA) Program (USAID Funded). She is an educational development professional with over 30 years of extensive field and research based experience. This includes teaching at pre-primary and primary levels; teacher training; working with government at all levels and with NGOs; conducting research, monitoring and evaluation of the projects as well as documentation. She is currently attached to Cambridge University as a visiting fellow, conducting research on nomadic and marginalised groups of society in Afghanistan

During her professional career, she worked nationally and internationally with governments; national and international organisations; civil society groups and donors particularly USAID on different assignments. This varied experience has given her in-depth knowledge, understanding and skills on different aspects of educational development like formal education; education in crisis and education for marginalized and deprived groups in society, community based education and inclusive education.

She developed many literacy programmes for adults and young people, provided assistance to the Government of Pakistan to develop the first national guidelines for adult and youth literacy and a literacy curriculum. She undertook a comprehensive study on the retention of literacy skills. The ILM (the integrated model of literacy was developed with the assistance of USAID). Her experience in literacy is based on field work and research.

She started doing research as she was puzzled as to why most literacy programmes for adults were unsuccessful. As she said "What the books say and what the practice says doesn't match". On meeting Professors Brian Street and Alan Rogers she became interested in the concept of social literacies.

In her presentation to BALID members, Dr Rafat gave a detailed description of people who could read “this and that” though they described themselves as ‘illiterate’. She talked about several of the people in her book *Hidden Literacies* - her domestic servant, her driver, a plumber and a vegetable seller - who all taught themselves to read and write. The vegetable seller needed to give receipts as new people moved into the area and his clientele changed. He tried attending literacy centres and was rejected and upset by educated people, so he decided to teach himself. Rafat described the stages he went through which included copying from a book, even though he didn’t know the letters and sounds, learning how to write receipts and eventually meeting a woman who helped him develop his reading and writing further.

Rafat described a plumber who also needed to provide receipts and who received help from a literate friend. After six sessions he could read 40 – 50 words related to plumbing. On his eighth session he was able to join words to make sentences, on his ninth he was writing receipts and on his eleventh he declared he was able to read and write.

An excellent discussion followed and some of the questions raised included the transition from situated literacy to general literacy, how local materials can be produced without the reproductive facilities of richer communities and the mismatch between the learners’ agendas and donors’ agendas.

Rafat responded by saying that learners need motivation to learn. She stressed they must have a clear objective and there must be clear steps in the learning process. Rafat said that after the initial learning, those she knew received assistance from a literate person. In relation to reading materials, individual handwritten stories could be kept in a book box from which people could borrow the individual pieces.

The talk generated a great deal of discussion. Those present were particularly interested in hearing about the practical application of the theory as many had taught adults themselves. Rafat stressed that motivation, and the student’s goals were the driving force behind learning and teaching. In two of the examples she gave, the need to learn to write receipts was absolutely essential for work – and through hard work and determination the vegetable seller and plumber were successful. The group commented on how often the specific motivation was ignored or overlooked in many literacy programmes.

Towards the end of the session, participants reflected on the key points they were taking away from the discussion which could enhance their own practice, which included the following:

- Literacy learning does not need to be through a literacy programme but can be mediated through life events and interactions with key people able and willing to act as catalysts, rather than 'teachers'.
- Reassurance that integrated, linked learning of literacies can be highly motivational and purposeful (e.g. health, craft-income related, citizenship-participation related).
- A warning that in developing programmes, systems and structures there is a danger that we could lose what works for individuals (e.g. the language experience approach which relates to social and economic practices). How, therefore, do we retain the individual approach but also develop the economies of scale?
- The discussion reinforced why it is so important to involve learners / participants / beneficiaries in the development of activities. Not only are they the people with first-hand experience of what they need but also by involving them they will be motivated in making change happen.
- As trainers of trainers (of trainers) we can support trainers in thinking about the kinds of steps which Rafat's 'learners' were taking (e.g. context specific knowledge in response to a direct need, later followed by transferability to wider contexts) and also the kinds of interventions which were triggering change (listening, providing context specific support, allowing the learner to direct their learning, giving feedback, allowing the 'learner' to decide what next, when, even how).

This ILD was a very stimulating discussion and we are most grateful to Rafat for coming and sharing her experience and ideas with us.

Juliet McCaffery & Katy Newell-Jones

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