

Learner-generated materials, collective classroom knowledge: Research with adult literacy facilitators in Guatemala

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A Pilot Literacy Project

The booklet of participant writing presented at the discussion was the product of a pilot adult literacy project that I worked on in Guatemala. I became interested in student publishing or learner generated materials when I worked at Cornerhouse bookshop in London where we sold a wide range of books produced by community publishers such as Centerprise, Gatehouse, Friends Centre and QueenSpark which included texts written by literacy students. This interest was consolidated in a study group on Language, Literacy and Politics with Sue Gardener who was the first editor of the literacy student newspaper Write First Time (Barton & Ivanič, 1991; Hamilton et al.; Mace, 1992, 1995; Woodin, 2005, 2007). Encouraging students to write, and publishing their writing in simple formats became a major part of my practice as an adult educator whether in literacy or ESOL. I found this approach to teaching literacy useful in my recent work in Guatemala.

Indigenous people make up about half the population in Guatemala. Spanish is the only official language although there are 23 other languages. Apart from Xinka and Garifuna, these are all Mayan languages. I worked in the Western Highlands where K'iche and Mam are spoken but because I was based in a town, most people spoke Spanish and the municipal literacy programme I was working with was a Spanish language programme. Many of the participants in the classes were Mayas as were all but one of the facilitators, although most of the facilitators were no longer fluent in the Mayan language.

CONALFA (Comité Nacional de Alfabetización), the national adult literacy programme, was set up in the mid-1980s. This was during the civil war in Guatemala but at the time when a civilian government had been elected and peace negotiations were under way. Initially CONALFA started with a programme based on Paulo Freire's work of conscientização (critical consciousness) and led to literacy groups organising and making political demands. The authorities reacted by closing down the programme and sacking all the facilitators on the pretext that people were not learning to read.

Since then CONALFA's work has become *escolarizado*, or more school-oriented. The organisation is mainly run by primary school teachers and the programme has established three levels of literacy with primary equivalence. Pressure to achieve international goals in elimination of illiteracy, such as the Education for All literacy goal, (WEF, 2000) led to more interest in statistics, getting people through a course and signed off as literate.

There has been plenty of criticism of the way that adult literacy education is run in Latin America.

Judith Kalman, who collaborated with Brian Street in editing a book on literacy and numeracy in LA, writes about the mechanical approach to teaching reading and writing.

I am concerned about the existence of a certain version of literacy which is limited to its most mechanical aspects and the meanings from which it originated are forgotten.

Literacy education must be understood as something much more than the simple introduction to letters.

For years we have been trying to find the way to get letters into the heads of young people and adults without worrying about finding out how reading and writing are introduced into their world* (Kalman, 2002, p.12, 15, 21).

I have been observing this attempt to get letters into the heads of adults in literacy classes in Guatemala since 2011. Although different literacy packages are used, they are usually adapted by the teacher to reflect their own experience of learning to read in primary school. One letter is presented in each class. Participants repeat the letter, copy it into their notebooks, recite the syllable family and then spend time filling the pages of their notebooks with letters, syllables and occasionally words containing the letter. Asked if they can read what they have written, the real beginners have forgotten what they were copying.

Verdugo & Raymundo have written about literacy provision for indigenous communities in Guatemala. They argue that:

People need an impetus to start learning by themselves, without making them feel dependent.

Methodological rigidity should be substituted by methods which allow the possibility of adapting to the specific demands of the people attending literacy classes and to continually innovate the ways of teaching* (Verdugo & Raymundo, 2009 p.189, 191).

They are critical of CONALFA's work and claim that the organisation is not meeting the needs and demands of indigenous communities. However, CONALFA is not monolithic and there are people within the organisation who also critique the mechanical approach to literacy. The pilot literacy programme emerged from a collaboration with the Municipal Literacy Co-ordinator who wanted to introduce innovative methods into the literacy programme in her municipality. The pilot programme attempts to provide an alternative to the traditional mechanical approach and to support participants to learn independently.

* all asterisked citations are my own translation

The pilot was introduced in 2016. It works on a simple premise. We start with oral expression through group dialogue; participants then decide what they want to write and are supported to do this. What they write becomes a reading text.

The pilot had 5 units:

1. My Group
2. My Family
3. My Community including selected topic: local history, health, environment
4. Topic Chosen by Each Literacy Group: Culture, Family, Health, Local History, Recipes, Traditional Remedies, Women's Rights
5. Revision

In Unit 1 we start with names. Everyone learns to write their own name and then we work on identifying the most common letters in all the names in the group. Letters emerge from the context. Then we have an activity where each participant draws a picture of something important in their lives and learns to write that word. They move on to writing a simple sentence about that word.

Another very popular activity in this unit is what was called 'album' by the participants. Everyone had their photo taken and this was printed on a sheet with lines underneath for writing. Then participants either wrote something about themselves or worked in pairs to write about each other. Adult Literacy Facilitators (ALFs) collected the writing and then produced reading texts from them. Each participant would receive a copy and stick it into their notebooks.

In the unit on the family, there were discussions about different kinds of families and what family means to the participants. They learned to write the names of family members and the women were particularly pleased to learn to write the names of their children. They spent one session examining ID cards, identified different ways of writing dates and were also encouraged to bring in documents from home.

At this stage, each group created their own alphabet, starting with the most familiar letters and agreeing words that would represent each letter. These were also duplicated for each participant. At the end of the unit, participants wrote, with support, a short text about family.

Although these were beginners' literacy groups, the reality is that many of the participants are not beginners. But as they did not complete primary school and do not have any certificates, they often join a beginners' class to gain some form of certification. They were encouraged to develop their reading and writing beyond what was needed for completion of the course. The texts that appear in the booklet reflect these different levels of literacy.

In the unit on community, groups drew maps of their neighbourhood and labelled the most important places. They also went out and took photos of street texts and these were printed and used as flashcards. Each group then selected a topic for a project. Two groups chose local

history, one worked on the environment, one looked at health issues and one group decided to research why people in their community were not attending the literacy classes.

The fourth unit was open-ended. Each group chose their own topic. One group worked on health as one of their members formed part of the community's health commission. In one group one of the participants was a cook and taught the others to make dishes they didn't know and then they wrote the recipes. Another group shared herbal remedies and wrote these up. Culture, local history and women's rights were other topics selected. Then we worked with the ALFs to design some activities that could be done by all the groups working on their specific topics.

Adult Literacy Facilitators (ALFs)

The minimum requirement to become an ALF is completion of nine years of schooling: six years of primary and three years of what is called *Básico*.

ALFs have to recruit their own literacy groups in their communities in their own time and are then paid according to the number of participants in their groups. If people drop out, their payment is proportionately cut. Teaching ten hours a week with a class of six they would be paid about 10% of what a primary teacher earns. The training they receive is very limited, and this was also the case on the pilot programme, but the demands made on them in terms of paperwork are quite onerous: a monthly scheme of work and report, records of attendance and assessment etc. Not surprisingly the turnover is high.

Originally, we planned to have ALFs working on the pilot programme who had at least one year's experience of working for CONALFA, but 2016 was a particularly difficult year for recruitment as there had been a change of government and payments made to the poorest families through the Ministry of Social Development had been stopped. Those who had been receiving the benefits therefore had to find other sources of income and had less time for study. Most of the ALFs from the previous year who had been interested in joining the pilot were unable to set up viable groups.

There were seven groups in the pilot and only two of the ALFs, Alexandra and Mariana, had worked with CONALFA before. All the ALFs had above the minimum educational requirement. After three years of *básico* or junior secondary school, students make a choice to continue directly to *bachillerato*, secondary completion, which is two years, or choose a vocational option which also leads to *bachillerato* but takes three years. This second is a very popular choice. The seven ALFs who worked for the pilot came from different vocational backgrounds: a bookkeeper, a secretary, a nurse, one pre-school teacher and three primary teachers.

We had also hoped that we would be able to start training the ALFs a month before the start of classes, but because of the delay in setting up groups this was also not possible. Between

March and July, a total of ten workshops were held, including two pre-course ones. Given that the approach was quite different to what the ALFs were used to, this was very little.

Training and Support for ALFs

The workshops took an experiential approach, modelling a variety of participatory learning activities. All teaching was practice-based, drawing on ALFs' existing knowledge and developing ideas through dialogue. New concepts such as the learning cycle were introduced through participatory activities. Extracts from Latin American writers on adult literacy were introduced as discussion texts.

At the start of each workshop time was set aside to share experiences of working with the new activities. This gave the ALFs the opportunity to see how they had interpreted the activities in different ways. They were able to compare the benefits of the different approaches but also realised that there is not one correct way of doing things. This was an important aspect of the work and was valued by the ALFs.

Materials workshops were held in the municipal office where ALFs had access to a computer and laptop, colour printer and laminator. While making posters was an existing practice, the production of reading sheets was new and most ALFs needed quite a lot of support in this. Some had more advanced IT skills and helped others. These sessions contributed to team building, although occasionally there were tensions about access to computers and the printer.

Class visits were the most complicated. I visited groups approximately fortnightly so that over the period of the pilot, I visited each group between six and eight times. Initially there was no fixed agenda for the visits. On the first visit I observed the class, made notes and then used these to raise issues to discuss with the ALF. Not everyone responded well to this. I was taking up more of their time. Some were not used to verbal feedback on their classes. When the Municipal co-ordinator visited she had to fill in a form which they read and signed. She didn't discuss the class with them. Dayana whose mother-in-law was in the class told me later that the mother-in-law had asked why that *gringa* was sitting there, with an annoyed expression, writing throughout the class, and two ALFs later commented that they were uncomfortable with my writing because they worried about what I was writing about them.

At other times, I led an activity with the participants. This was an opportunity for the ALFs to observe someone else working with their group and give me feedback. This was also differently valued. Alexandra said it gave her the chance to relax while I did the work. Gabriela who worked with Dayana, with both groups in a large classroom, commented that these activities allowed the participants to get to know me better so that I was no longer the angry *gringa*. I enjoyed getting to know the groups, we developed affectionate bonds and at

the end Gabriela and Dayana told me that while they had dreaded my visits at the beginning, they came to look forward to them towards the end.

Andrea was 19, the youngest of the ALFs. Although she had trained as a secretary she had later worked as a community health worker, visiting families at home to do developmental checks on babies. She told me how this experience had led her to love her community. She had been shocked at some of the poverty she had seen and the fact that some of the women she worked with had not been able to understand the growth charts for their babies. That was one of the reasons she was interested in working in literacy

Andrea usually did her schemes of work at the end of the month, recording what she had done, rather than planning in advance. I didn't get involved in checking paperwork, feeling that this was not my role. But I was there once when the municipal co-ordinator came to visit and was upset that Andrea had no written plans. After that when I came to visit I would try to come early and we would plan the class together, so there was an ongoing process of negotiation in how the class visits developed. Getting the balance right between being supportive but trying to make sure ALFs were working within the framework of the pilot was not always easy.

In one of the workshops, we developed a mind map of good practice in the teaching of literacy and from this we put together a check list which could be used as a self-evaluation tool. ALFs were asked to evaluate each of their classes using the check list, and although this was not something they were used to, we started to use it together at the end of the class visits. I kept a record of what we had agreed for each of these evaluations. This gave the feedback a certain structure and could be completed quickly if there was not much time. But perhaps this format limited what we discussed and how.

In terms of my research the class visits were probably the most important method for analysing how ALFs develop their practice.

Systematization of Experiences [\(SE\)](#)

This is a Latin American methodology which emerged in the 1970s and is closely linked to popular education and the work of Paulo Freire. I will present it through the work of [four](#) writers on the topic.

1. Oscar Jara

Oscar Jara is perhaps the most-cited practitioner of and writer on systematization of experiences. He states that:

Systematization is a rigorous learning exercise which develops a critical understanding of lived experience.

And he identifies the purpose of SE as:

- to exchange experiences

- for the people involved to understand their own work better
- to develop theoretical knowledge from practice
- to improve practice*

(Jara, 1997).

Jara argues that systematization is neither evaluation nor research although it is linked to the two. He uses a variety of creative methods in systematization of experiences: visual metaphors, drama, community writing, similar to some of the participatory methods of Robert Chambers (Chambers, 2002).

2. Esteban Tapella

Systematization of Experiences has moved in different directions over the decades. Action Aid have taken on systematization in their work in LA and also in other countries where they work. Tapella, who has worked with Action Aid in Latin America, emphasises the collective aspects.

The story of a project or experience cannot be told by one actor alone, but only by all actors involved. Through the interpretation and the telling of the project's story, we are putting the power of the story's reconstruction on the ones that were involved and that is one of the key contributions and the richness of systematization (Tapella 2009 p.26).

In a later article with Rodriguez Bilella, he defines it as a form of evaluation:

a multi-stakeholder evaluation tool developed in Latin America that emphasizes in-depth comprehension of processes and shared learning among the participants of development experiences as they unfold (Tapella & Rodríguez-Bilella, 2014 p.116).

But it is an evaluation by and for the participants in a programme rather than a targets-oriented report for funders.

3. Alfonso Torres

Torres is part of a collective at the National Pedagogic University of Colombia who work with community organisations on memory and identity. He presents systematization of experiences as a research methodology and stresses the following points:

- Collective production of knowledge, recognizing the actors as subjects.
- Awareness of the complexity of the practices, being systematized.
- Documentation of the process using multiple techniques to build a narrative.
- Critical interpretation of the logic that shapes the experience.
- Publishing the systematization should expand the knowledge available about a specific social reality.*

(Torres, 2010)

4. Graciela Messina

Graciela Messina came to Systematization of Experiences quite late, having first worked as a social researcher using more traditional survey methods but being frustrated by the fact that the research didn't offer anything to the people being researched. She sees the participatory aspects of SE as making a real difference.

Systematization seeks to push at the boundaries of knowledge and action, promoting participation as part of a way of being in the world where equality and respect for diversity are integrated* (Messina, 2015, p.19).

Messina has carried out research in more formal education settings, particularly with primary teachers, drawing on their experiences in teaching, arguing that all teaching is grounded in theory. She particularly values writing in the process of critically analysing experience.

Systematization starts from the practice of educators; we refer to making our practice speak, to presenting it to ourselves and others, looking for categories to understand it. However, our approach to practice is theoretical, that is, we approach it from previous knowledge (whether common sense or scientific). Practice in this sense is always loaded with theory. Therefore, we produce knowledge from practice which is already theoretical and contains theory; the task is to make this knowledge explicit* (Messina, 2015, p.27).

Systematization of Experiences in our project

So how did we use SE in the work of the pilot project? Most important of all was this aim of constructing knowledge collectively. This was both at the level of the ALF team but also within each of their classes. As I have already mentioned, workshops were participatory and special emphasis was given to the exchange of experiences of working with the programme activities. Although I have to admit that this was always done at the start of the workshop and as punctuality was a bit of a problem, only those who came on time really got the chance to engage in this. As there was so little time for training I often felt under pressure to move on...

The various materials and records that we produced were used in the first systematization workshop which was held just at the end of July. This workshop was run very much following the five steps developed by Oscar Jara:

1. Starting point
2. Initial questions
3. Reconstruction of lived experience
4. In depth reflection
5. Arrival points.

The starting point is the decision about which aspect of a programme is to be systematized. As this was a short and small project we would be looking at the complete process. The initial questions were decided by the ALFs with the MLC:

- what have we learned as a team?
- How can we improve, based on our experiences?
- How can we share what we have learned?

For the reconstruction of lived experience, we had an exhibition of our records and materials: all the posters, reading sheets etc. that had been produced. ALFs had been asked to write a case study of one of their participants and these had been shared and discussed in a workshop. Now ALFs were asked to bring the notebook of the participant along with the case study they had written. At the end of units one and two ALFs had also written a reflective text about the work and these were displayed. I brought my folder with all the training session plans and an anonymised summary of all the class visit evaluations.

We spent time browsing and commenting on the exhibition and there were flip chart sheets for critical questions and comments. Then we discussed these questions.

We used the metaphor of a river for the project with each of us likened to a tributary bringing our experience to the overall project. We all then wrote about these experiences on coloured paper.

I would like to share with you what Yezme wrote, as I found her contribution questioned and analysed the experience very graphically and reflected what others also experienced but perhaps could not express so vividly. Yezme was a trained primary teacher who is now studying law at university. She is politically motivated and very concerned about development issues.

The process started with many question-marks and much confusion. Nobody was sure what they were doing and all felt stressed. Then she showed the importance of sharing and comparing how they were all doing it and how this led to learning. On her third sheet, she acknowledges the importance of everyone's experience and knowledge and I'm assuming this means both in terms of the ALFs learning together and the participants in the groups building collective knowledge, and she stresses the process of expression leading to writing and then to reading. Finally, she states what she has learned in the interplay of practice with her group and reflection on it.

In the next stage, we worked together to analyse different aspects of the pilot project. We had different points on the river that represented these different aspects. There isn't time to present everything that was written on each of these points but I can share the conclusions that were reached.

- Adapt and improve the methodology using the suggestions of the ALFs based on their experience of the pilot programme
- Edit the teacher's guide so that they can be better understood and with more examples
- Produce a booklet of texts written by participants
- Include activities for special days in the teacher's guide
- Structure the final assessment based on the contents of the four units
- ALFs to organise observation visits to each others' groups.

Reflections

Each of the ALFs brings different knowledge and experience to the project which is both personal and vocational and this impacts how they understand the programme, how they work with it, how they interact with their participants, with the other ALFs, with me and with the municipal co-ordinator.

Yezme, with her development perspective, saw the pilot as an opportunity for educating the women in her group about social issues. For their projects, they chose the environment and then women's rights. Both of these topics were suggested by Yezme.

Andrea's creative, slightly chaotic approach and her commitment to her community meant her classes were very relaxed and the atmosphere among the women very supportive. One of the women was a migrant from a rural area and spoke very little Spanish. She was a complete beginner and struggled. One of her daughters often interpreted for her. It didn't happen at once but after a while the other women started to support her and always made sure she was included in discussions. I particularly remember one occasion when she was attempting to read a short text that she had written and suddenly there was silence as everyone listened and you could feel them all wanting her to get it right and then spontaneously clapping when she did.

I argue that the atmosphere in a class is at least partly shaped by the way the teacher or facilitator works and in this case, Andrea's egalitarian attitude towards her participants was, I think, instrumental in building this solidarity.

But aside of personal differences, there is also the question of the *doxa*, to use Bourdieu's term, of how we learn to read and write. The belief that learning to read means learning the letters is a powerful common-sense, undiscussed, undisputed, self-evident truth. The pilot questioned this truth.

During the years that I have worked with CONALFA I have often noted that the ALFs who were trained as primary teachers were rarely interested in trying out anything new. They seemed to imply that as they were already trained as teachers there was not much they could learn on the subject. When I have shared this observation, I have been told that not all

primary teachers are the same and of course this is true. But on the pilot, the two people who had most difficulty working with the new method were both primary teachers.

The first time I visited Mariana she had written the alphabet on the board and tried to get all the participants to recite it chorally and then individually. Those who were beginners obviously couldn't do this. I asked her why she wasn't following the activities set out in the pilot and she told me that she couldn't understand how we could start at the end and go back to the beginning. Because learning the letters had to be the beginning.

She did go on to using the pilot activities but even as she did so, she always referred to the learning of letters when summarising what had been done in a class. As in: today we have learned some more consonants. Or, we have revised some letters today. While the pilot was working with the premise that reading and writing are processes and practices, she understood it only as recognition of letters.

Mariana was unlucky in that inspectors who came from Guatemala City visited her class and were critical of her work. Mariana who was not particularly confident was devastated by the experience. During the break at one of the workshops, she told the others about it and they were all very angry and upset on her behalf. It was a moment that strengthened the sense of solidarity in the group.

At the final systematization workshop, we did an activity where everyone had to describe each other anonymously by writing adjectives on cards and putting them into an envelope. Mariana was described as: sensitive, hard-working, responsible, affectionate, enthusiastic and dedicated. In her final reflection on the project she wrote how important that had been, that she could not have imagined that people thought these things about her. It was the participation in the ALF group that had been the most powerful experience for her and had increased her self-confidence.

I could go on. There are many more stories. But I think what I am trying to say is that when we work in an education role we cannot presume to know what the people we work with will gain from a process. We can never assume that people will learn what we have set out in our learning outcomes or our objectives. We cannot set empowerment as an objective. People's agency is not predictable, we cannot know in advance how people will respond to an initiative or which aspects of an intervention will have an impact.

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