

LETTER; presentation to Balid ILD Monday 13th May 2013.

Alan Rogers and Brian Street

Alan presented a powerpoint on how we might think about the concept of 'learning' and Brian on ethnographic approaches to understanding the literacy practices that learners are already engaged with (see ppt). There was then a lively discussion.

The LETTER Project (Learning for Empowerment Through Training in Ethnographic Research), is a training programme that brings together ethnographic approaches to researching local literacies and educational approaches to learning and curriculum development. Started in India from discussions between a local women's NGO, Nirantar, dedicated to Women's Empowerment Through Education, the programme commenced in 2005 with a series of workshops arranged by Nirantar and ASPBAE (Asia-South-Pacific Bureau of Adult Education). Funding was obtained from various sources, and two workshops were held with participants from Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Afghanistan and India. The main focus was on approaches to exploring everyday literacy and numeracy in local communities using ethnographic-style methodologies. A short example of this kind of work was given during the first workshop led by Brian Street and Dave Baker; everyone went out to look at how different people managed their literacy and numeracy activities (for example, a taxi driver or woman selling goods in the market). Following the first workshop, the participants then undertook a longer study at home before bringing their case studies to the second workshop for feedback and further development. A book was written and published by Nirantar based on these two workshops, *Exploring the Everyday: ethnographic studies of literacy and numeracy* (Nirantar 2007), and since then, Nirantar has been developing new teaching-learning approaches based on the findings of such surveys. The key element here is to help the literacy facilitators (teachers) to learn about the existing community literacy and numeracy activities of each particular learning group – indeed, to help the learners themselves to become more aware of what they do and what they feel about literacy and numeracy.

The project then moved to Ethiopia, where funding through PACT-Ethiopia enabled a group of about twenty trainers of literacy facilitators from around the country to participate in a series of three workshops. The first was devoted to ethnographic approaches, again with a field visit during the workshop; then each participant individually or in small groups, undertook a more detailed case study at home. The second workshop finalised these case studies and began work on curriculum development for adult learning programmes. The third workshop, attended by Malini Ghose of Nirantar on behalf of the India LETTER workshops, finalised both strands, and again a book was written locally and published, *Everyday Literacies in Africa: ethnographic studies of literacy and numeracy in Ethiopia* (Gebre et al 2009).

Currently a programme is being held in Uganda with funding from the British government Department for International Development (DFID) through the DELPHE Programme, linking Makerere University with Addis Ababa University (Ethiopia), Kwa-Zulu-Natal University (South Africa) and Kings College London and the Institute of Education, London (UK). The involvement of some of those engaged on the Ethiopia and India programmes ensures that LETTER is a rolling programme in which both the trainers and the participant

learners build on previous workshops. Ethnographic studies are being completed; curriculum building has been started. Two new features are the writing of reading material for learners, using ethnographic approaches to explore original (oral) material such as local stories (cf Touray et al 2010) and practices, and secondly, each of the participants has been asked to develop and teach a short training programme in literacy for adults using ethnographic material. Thus training for teaching is part of the LETTER Project now. A publication related to the everyday literacy and numeracy practices of individual case studies from Uganda will be prepared.

The basic principles of the LETTER Project, which Alan and Brian spelled out at the Balid meeting, are that of helping the literacy learners to understand more clearly how they regard 'literacy' and numeracy and how they are already engaging with it as an essential first step towards helping them to learn more. And developing detailed local ethnographic perspectives will be a particularly effective tool for challenging assumptions and generalisations about both literacy and learning. Ethnographic explorations of the everyday are a necessary part of any pedagogic activity, whether with adults or children, whether in Europe or in the contexts of international development.

In the subsequent discussion, the following questions were raised :

1. How can we help the literacy facilitators and the adult literacy learners (ALLs) to see literacy as 'social practices' which they and other members of their community engage in rather than as a set of skills which they either possess or do not possess?
2. If we view literacy as social practice rather than as skills, and if much of the (informal) learning that the ALLs have already been doing is unconscious, how do we find out about the (often unconscious or undefined) literacy practices of the ALLs and their community? - by 'needs surveys' or by ethnographic approaches?
3. How can we help literacy facilitators to develop truly ethnographic approaches which de-centre them and acknowledge the power of the ALLs?
4. How can we help the literacy facilitators and the ALLs to recognise and value the literacy practices they already engage in?
5. How can we help the literacy facilitators to use the local literacy texts they and the ALLs find in their own local communities in different ways from the way they use the literacy primers?

There was a full and lively discussion of the issues raised and the event was a useful grounding for the next stage of Letter in which Balid will play a significant role as the main organiser, with Alan and Brian continuing to play a part but within the Balid framework. The next Letter Project will probably be in Kenya and the Kenya Adult Literacy Association have asked Alan to play a leading role in organising this. Brian is in discussion with colleagues in Brazil about holding a series of workshops there. And the Balid EC is looking to other sites, such as following up the successful Balid Conferences in Africa (Sierra Leone and South Africa) in liaison with local British Councils. Balid

members are encouraged to suggest further contexts and also ways in which the programme can continue to develop and adapt, including in the UK.

Some Publications

- Gebre, A, Openjuru, G, Rogers, A and Street, B 2009 **Everyday Literacies in Africa: Ethnographic Studies of Literacy and Numeracy Practices in Ethiopia** Fountain Publishers; Addis Ababa esp Ch 1 'Ethnographic approaches to literacy and numeracy' pp. 1-38
- Nirantar 2007 Exploring the Everyday; ethnographic approaches to literacy and numeracy www.nirantar.org Nirantar: Delhi
- Street, B, Baker, D., Rogers, A 2006 'Adult teachers as researchers: ethnographic approaches to numeracy and literacy as social practices in South Asia' **Convergence** Vol XXXIX (1) pp. 31-44
- Nabi, R, Rogers, A and Street, B (2009) **Hidden literacies: ethnographic case studies of literacy and numeracy from Pakistan** Uppingham Press
- Rogers, A and Street, B 2011 Teaching Literacy: Perspectives From Both Developing And Western Contexts' *Viden om Læsning (Knowledge About Reading)* special issue, *Jorden læser* (Literacy Around the World), No. 10, Sept 2011 Nationalt VidenCenter for Laesning, Kobenhaven pp. 38-47
- Rogers, A and Street, B (2012) **Literacy and Development** NIACE: London cf Ch 8 Literacy as Social Practice: using ethnographic perspectives in programme development
- Papen, U 2012 Review of Nabi et al and Gebre et al in **International Journal of Educational Development** xxx (2011) xxx-xxx
- Lopez, D 2010 Review of Everyday Literacies and Hidden Literacies in *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, Vol 41, 2010