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Using PRA for a radical new approach to adult literacy

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• Introduction

One of the often-quoted roots of PRA is the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire whose own predominant focus of work was in the field of adult literacy. It is thus surprising that developments in PRA have not fed back into advances in adult literacy methodology. ActionAid is now attempting to close the circle by drawing on the principles and visualisation techniques of PRA within three adult literacy programmes in Uganda, Bangladesh and El Salvador.

Freirean theory

Freire is now almost universally quoted as the inspiration behind adult literacy programmes. He believed that reading the word must be linked to reading the world and that adult literacy should thus be linked to a process which he called "*conscientization*". Literacy classes should allow people to reflect on local problems which will lead to action to address those problems. To achieve this the traditional hierarchical relations between the teacher and learners must be replaced by a "*dialogue*" between equals.

Freire used "*codification*" to develop such a dialogue. Codification is a visual image which represents local conditions. In theory these codifications enable learners to gain a distance from their daily lives while allowing them to analyse them. "*Generative words*" are linked to these codifications. These words, which arise from the vocabulary of the learners themselves, are broken into syllables and rebuilt into new words by the learners, enabling them to understand the structure of written language and thus learn to read and write.

Freire's work is notoriously difficult to read. A good foundation in political philosophy helps before reading key works "*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*" or "*Cultural Action for Freedom*". It is thus not surprising that most people who refer to Freire have not actually read his work. This has led to widespread distortions and abuse.

Distorted Freirean practice

Most literacy programmes around the world that claim to use Freire's methods are in fact seriously distorting both his theory and his methods. These pseudo Freirean programmes have reduced his method to the use of a literacy 'primer' (or textbook) which has a series of photographs or pictures on social issues linked to words that are regarded by literacy planners as socially relevant. Most primers are produced in urban areas or after cursory surveys of rural areas that are generalised for whole regions or countries. Even where primers have been produced locally after serious research, the fact that the result is packaged in a primer presents serious problems.

In most cases literacy teachers are not the expert educators Freire had envisaged. Usually they are from the same community as the learners. Often they themselves have completed just six grades of primary education, or two or three years of secondary education. They receive one or two week's training - and then they are set loose with a primer and a teacher's guidebook, expecting to generate profound dialogue on local issues using codifications (which at the end of the day are just a set of pictures), generative words (which are just words) and a list of (pre-defined) questions. In many cases the common response to their questions is embarrassed silence or single word answers. Within a few weeks most facilitators

have given up trying and get on with what they see as the 'meat' of literacy, the mechanical teaching of reading and writing, often falling back on the methods they know best - those they learnt from themselves in school. The result is that adults are taught like children, literacy classes are boring and there is a high drop-out rate.

There are exceptions. In some highly politicised literacy programmes the facilitators are keen to keep the focus on social issues. But in these cases, without an adequate methodology for generating dialogue, the result is usually that they attempt to impose a new consciousness on learners rather than allow learners to analyse their own problems.

In my experience, I estimate that there is no dialogue in about 95% of literacy classes. Literacy has become detached from other development programmes and there is widespread doubt about the value of adult literacy at all. Most programmes are failing even to teach basic literacy skills. A recent World Bank discussion paper estimates that literacy programmes over the past 30 years have had an effectiveness rate of just 12.5%.

The new approach

This analysis has led ActionAid to develop a new approach to literacy, based on PRA techniques. The new approach has become known as the REFLECT approach (Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques). The approach seeks to build on Freirean theory but provide a more effective methodology by drawing on PRA visualisation methods.

In the REFLECT approach the literacy primer is abolished. Each literacy circle develops its own learning materials through the construction of local maps, matrices, calendars and diagrams. These techniques can effectively help to create the Freirean dialogue which is so elusive in most literacy programmes. As in PRA, these maps or matrices are initially constructed on the ground using locally available materials. They are then translated onto large flipcharts using visual symbol cards as a guide.

This step is fundamental. The move from three dimensions (on the ground) to two dimensions

(using pen and paper) is the first step to literacy. The problem we encountered was that literacy facilitators are not great artists and yet we could not use words to copy the maps. We have thus developed for each programme a set of about 100 visual symbol cards (simple drawings of local crops, activities, illnesses, etc. designed by a local artist and pre-tested). These act as the bridge. In many cases learners add their own cards (and even replace the pre-drawn cards with their own). Interestingly the learners can often draw better than the facilitators. This humbles the facilitators on their own territory (using pen and paper) and gives learners confidence. It is also a lot of fun!

Once a map or matrix has been transferred to flipcharts words are introduced on the flipcharts, either as labels (next to pictures) or comments and observations. Initially just one or two words will be chosen so that all essential syllables (the building blocks of language) are covered. As the course progresses more language is introduced. For example, an agricultural calendar can generate a whole vocabulary around local crops and agricultural activities. A big emphasis is then placed on learner generated writing, so learners are writing phrases to describe the graphics, or paragraphs about their discussions, from an early stage. The writing of local history in Uganda has been particularly exciting, with learners writing remarkable stories in their mother tongue (a language that had never previously been written) within a few months.

In each of the three pilot projects we have developed a sequence of about 30 different types of diagram (maps, matrices, calendars etc.), always seeking to use graphic techniques which will draw out local issues. For example land tenancy maps appear in El Salvador where land reform is a key issue after years of civil war; gender based household decision-making matrices appear in the programme with Islamic women in Bangladesh; and mobility maps are used in the isolated region of Bundibugyo in Uganda.

At the end of the literacy programme the learners have collectively constructed a detailed diagnosis of their villages with complementary records and testaments written by community members whose voice was probably previously unheard. This represents a systematisation of local knowledge, attitudes and perspectives

which places literacy in its true context - not as the only real knowledge (which many literacy programmes implicitly assume) but as itself a set of techniques that can help to reinforce existing knowledge.

In the process we have found that many local community activities have been promoted. These have varied from tree nurseries to demands for focused training courses in agriculture or health (with learners outlining the training agenda), from low-cost drinking water projects to programmes to systematise knowledge of local medicinal plants and herbs. Literacy has become organically linked to wider development - with the learners as the driving force.

- **Some concerns**

Are we manipulating communities?

The use of PRA techniques for literacy programmes may raise some concerns for PRA practitioners. It does not appear to be an open-ended process. We are introducing the techniques with a view to teaching literacy rather than using them to let local people decide what they want.

However, it must be stressed that in all cases the literacy programme arose at the request of the communities. It was not (and never should be) imposed! We are therefore responding to one request and enabling people in the process to identify other issues and other needs. We are not using literacy or numeracy as a way of transferring development information to the community. Rather, literacy and numeracy become additional tools to help the community determine their own development. The process of the literacy programme also provides a space for them to reflect on their needs.

Literacy skills often prove useful in addressing many of the other issues that arise through this process of reflection. So the process becomes mutually reinforcing. For example, if the learners wish to receive specific training then the literacy skills help them to keep records of the training. If the learners identify the need to put pressure on a government agency which is failing then letter writing is often an effective aid. As learners begin to take control of their

own development agenda, literacy skills become strengthened.

How can facilitators be trained?

One major concern is training for the facilitators. How can we expect them to use PRA techniques effectively when they have little education and training? In practice we have found that this is not such a problem. Indeed, the construction of different graphics is often a very structured process which is much easier than trying to structure a dialogue without such methods. Once the learners become familiar with the techniques they take over themselves and the facilitators do not need to play a central role. In all the pilot programmes the facilitators come from the communities where they teach so they become simply another participant. The problem of developing a rapport between 'outsiders' and the community is no longer an issue. In the three pilot programmes the facilitators have been selected by the communities where they teach, with the fundamental criteria being mutual respect (between facilitator and learners).

The pilot programmes have normally given ten days initial training to facilitators. Within this the emphasis is on practical field experience of the PRA techniques. This is a good foundation but it has to be supplemented by ongoing training. In each pilot we have fortnightly or monthly facilitators' workshops where facilitators exchange experiences of the previous period and prepare (and practice) for the following period. In Uganda these exchange workshops are self-sufficient, involving no external trainers. The training is also sustained through a manual for the facilitators, which provides a clear structure for each unit.

How can you triangulate for accuracy?

Another issue raised by PRA practitioners looking at REFLECT is how can you triangulate to verify the information? The literacy class is only one section of the community and will, in many cases, not reflect the full diversity of community concerns. Some therefore argue that the information is of limited value.

This concern seems to me to be misplaced. The objective of REFLECT is not to do an appraisal to get verifiable knowledge which can be extracted and used for planning by an external agency. Rather, with REFLECT, the PRA techniques are used as part of an internal community process. The product of the group reflects the knowledge, perspective and attitudes of that group and the function of the systematisation of these is internal. If the external agency which has planned the literacy programme wishes to use the information then there may be a desire to triangulate for verification. But in such circumstances the external agency will probably be planning programmes for various communities, and by comparing the graphics produced by different literacy classes they should be able to get a more objective view.

With the REFLECT approach then, we are handing over PRA principles and methods to the communities. Over a six or nine month period the learners within the communities do their own detailed appraisal without external intervention. The issue that has arisen in some cases is not so much the objectivity of the information but rather how the literacy circle relates to the wider community. If solutions to local problems have been identified and discussed in the literacy circle it is not only for the participants in the literacy circle to engage in the consequent actions.

In this context the first step of the literacy circle is often to share the results of their analysis with others in the community, in community assemblies or through regular meetings with community leaders. The literacy participants can use the graphics as the starting point to explain their concerns and can even suggest that certain PRA techniques are re-performed with the whole community (or by separate groups within the community). In many communities in El Salvador the literacy circle has initiated monthly meetings with community leaders to discuss the issues that have arisen and plan ways forward.

• **Initial results**

The results of the pilot programmes using REFLECT have been very exciting. Initial observations are that REFLECT is keeping learners motivated, teaching them literacy more

effectively and linking literacy to wider development based on the agenda of local communities. The three pilot projects are now being evaluated using PRA methods and a report on the projects will be available by the end of the year. The facilitator's manuals used by the pilot programmes and many other documents (including the proceedings of an International Workshop on REFLECT held in Bangladesh in November 1994) are available now.

Even before the full evaluation, REFLECT is spreading. There are now REFLECT programmes planned in ten countries. For further information (and to be put on the mailing list of the emerging REFLECT network) contact ActionAid.

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