

16

PRA: a new literacy?

Anna Robinson-Pant

• Introduction

PRA has evolved by "trying out practices, finding what works and what does not and then asking why" (Chambers, 1994). Occasionally PRA practitioners have also asked "how appropriate is this particular method in this cultural and social context?". Gerard Gill, for example, points out in RRA Notes 18 that "the concept of a pie or cake cut into wedge-shaped servings is quite alien" to many people in rural areas of the developing world. Introducing Western visual materials raises questions about whether "images are recognisable, evident and culturally acceptable to people living in non-literate cultures" (Epskamp, 1984). The visual methods of PRA might also be seen as a new technology being introduced into a traditional context. Although local materials such as beans and rangoli powders are used to create maps or matrices, the methods seem to belong very much to a Western literate society.

In this article, I explore the idea of PRA as a *new literacy*, where ideas are represented visually through symbols. I focus on diagramming methods as specific skills which are being introduced to non-literate, and literate, villagers. I look not just at what this literacy consists of but at how it is being introduced.

• Two approaches to literacy

Many issues that have been the focus of critical reflection by PRA practitioners can be related to current discussions on literacy. The starting point that *"we may simply be imposing assumptions derived from our own cultural practice onto other people's literacies"* (Street,

1993), is characteristic of recent work by anthropologists. Their detailed, in-depth accounts of actual practice have generated concepts that can provide an interesting framework for analysing how PRA 'works' in different cultural settings: in particular, the distinction between *"autonomous"* and *"ideological"* models of literacy (Street, 1993).

The notion of the 'Great Divide' (Goody, 1968) suggests that it is literacy that distinguishes 'modern' from 'primitive' societies. This has come to be known as the *"autonomous"* model of literacy. Literacy, for Goody, is a *"neutral technology"* (Street, 1993) and is independent of the social, cultural and political contexts in which it is practised. In contrast, the *"ideological"* approach sees literacy as social practice, and literacy practices as aspects not only of 'culture' but of relations of power (Roberts and Street, 1995). Rather than a single universal literacy, this approach argues that a number of literacy practices may exist in a given society.

Does participation in PRA require a new literacy?

The ideological approach can help to analyse what kind of literacy is being introduced by PRA practitioners through activities such as seasonal calendars and mapping. This may explain not only why some methods work or do not work, but also why PRA does not always easily lead to planning and local action.

PRA is often described in terms of stages, where the discovery stage is followed by a stage of formulating action plans and implementing projects. Many development agencies find it hard to keep up the momentum generated by the initial phase. Some of the problem lies in implicit contradictions between

organisational and local agendas. However, part of the problem may be related to the kinds of literacy that are used in the planning and 'action' stage in which reading and writing skills become prominent.

Many PRA practitioners are aware of the implications of transferring maps made with beans and stones on the floor onto paper, when a different kind of literacy, ie. reading and writing, comes to dominate. But this process seems inevitable when plans are translated from verbal discussions at public fora into proposals for action that are channelled through agencies. Shah reports an experience where: *"An illiterate man made a map with no names or writing. He put the map on the wall for a presentation but then someone else added names; during the presentation the illiterate was isolated and the literates took over"* (1991).

The kinds of skills needed for visual literacy and numeracy also need to be looked at, if we are to ensure that certain groups are not excluded. Mosse (1993), for example, suggests that one possible explanation for women's sometimes limited participation in PRA activities may lie in a failure to take account of their own preferred ways of communicating, such as song or drama.

Researchers have similarly questioned to what extent illustrators draw on local visual images. Applying this idea to PRA, we can ask to what extent PRA both draws on local literacies or numeracies and introduces new concepts and skills.

The idea of PRA as a means to support empowerment processes links clearly to the 'ideological' model of literacy. By using the more visual literacy of diagrams, the dominant power of reading and writing in project planning can be reduced. If PRA aims to empower disadvantaged groups through this new kind of literacy, we need to look at whether (and if so, why) the PRA diagrams actually hold more meaning for some participants than the printed word.

• PRA methods

In this section I discuss three PRA methods to see whether PRA activities build on existing skills and practices or whether they require *new literacy* skills.

Mapping

It is widely accepted that people in both urban and rural areas carry mental maps. Transforming a mental map into a physical map seems remarkably straightforward, judging from the experience of PRA practitioners. Research on visual literacy has found that people only had problems interpreting pictures when three dimensions were represented in a two dimensional medium (Walker, 1979). Two dimensional symbolic representations such as cartoons and drawings were interpreted as easily as photographs. Fuglesang (1982) observes that people *"expect the pictures to contain what they know about the objects, not only what they see of the objects"*.

Similarly, with PRA mapping we can see that people are being encouraged to represent what they *know* rather than what they *see*. Social aspects such as caste, number of members in a household and gender, can be illustrated on the map as well as physical features. Mapping clearly uses the visual literacy skills that people already have. As there is no defined 'correct way' of mapping, participants can choose their own methods of representation.

Although mapping can be used to explore different perspectives and viewpoints in separate gender or age groups, it is often assumed that the facilitators (usually external to the community) interpret the map in the same way. How can we be sure that this is so? PRA facilitators are encouraged to see things from the villagers' point of view, rather than imposing their views. But to what extent are existing conventions or local literacies used to represent reality?

Matrix ranking

Shah suggests that *"every village has its local taxonomy and classifications: these are often more diverse than those used by outsiders"*

(1991). Ranking and scoring is used in PRA to understand people's preferences and choices, drawing on their own categories and classifications rather than imposing those of outsiders. To what extent, however, does the process of ranking represent an introduced practice? And how do people make the step from classification to visual ranking in PRA?

Rather than using numerical symbols, ranking in PRA is done with locally available materials, such as beans or stones. These are used to represent quantities according to local counting systems. In Mongolia, *Shagaa*, a bag of sheep and goats' knucklebones are used like dice or counters in games. Cullis reports in *RRA Notes 20* how these bones were used with herders to rank livestock losses: *"the exercise was enhanced by the use of the bones, which to the herders already represented animals"*.

The form of the matrix, however, is introduced to structure the exercise, and this is usually a foreign notion. Rather than introducing what is essentially a Western 'game' of ranking variables on a matrix, using or adapting local games can draw on local cultural forms in a similar way to how literacy professionals adapt local literacy practices. Barker (1979) describes how the Yoruba game of *Ayo* was adapted as a research tool for farmers to compare different kinds of weeds.

Considering ranking as 'new numeracy practice', however, raises several questions. How far does the form of the matrix itself shape the information that is presented in a matrix? Goody (1977) suggests that the use of columns and rows presents information so that *"each item is allocated a single position, where it stands in a definite, permanent and unambiguous relationship to the others"*. Tables, he contends, *"may simplify reality for the observer but often at the expense of a real understanding of the actor's frame of reference"*. To what extent does the process of ranking resemble the complexity of real life decision making in different cultural settings? The idea of making choices between two variables, a process whereby *"we sort matters out analytically, relate them logically and test them systematically"* (Geertz, 1983) in itself represents a way of thinking that may be peculiarly Western. What, then, is ranking

introducing and to what extent is the resulting information and analysis of value?

Time lines and seasonal calendars

The idea of a time line or calendar could be seen as a Western innovation or a new literacy practice. Fuglesang describes how we tend to talk about time in English in terms of objects and events. We objectify time and *"even push our luck and talk about seven days just as we talk about seven stones in a row. This is extraordinary since seven stones can be clearly perceived, but seven days cannot be perceived"* (Fuglesang, 1982). He suggests that this contrasts with Swahili where the word *"future"* means *"later"*, *"afterwards"* or *"next"* (ie. not an object as such). As the *"seven stones for seven days"* suggests, the visual representation we choose is influenced by our language.

Research in Nepal found that non-literate people found it easy to represent a sequence pictorially and moved pictures into a line to represent a sequence of events (Walker, 1979). This suggests that the 'before' and 'after' distinction may be what is guiding PRA participants, rather than the divisions of the different months or seasons (the 'objectifying' of time). Shah (1991) stresses the importance of starting from people's own use of time: *"As the frame of reference for many villagers does not correspond to a calendar month, it is important to get these terms right at the beginning"*. And as with ranking, form can dictate the 'meaning' of the results. Chambers reports an instance where after a facilitator had worked with a woman to create a timeline, she turned the axes around and said *"It looks better, but your way is all right also"* (Chambers, pers. comm.).

The visual aspect of PRA is seen to be a bridge between the oral and written ways of communicating and a means of sharing the power usually limited to literate groups of people. Research into how people 'read' pictures has shown that we can all see, but do not necessarily understand or interpret pictures or diagrams in the same way. What is interesting for PRA practitioners is how quickly people can learn to interpret pictures once they have seen examples. These findings support the use of sequences within PRA. As

people become familiar and confident with representing ideas visually, one method can lead to another with relative ease. The visualised product acts as a focus and anchor for discussions (Cornwall, 1995). The practice of "interviewing the diagram" means that diagramming forms but one part of a social process, which is both verbal and visual. People's different interpretations of a diagram are also revealed through this 'interviewing' process and help counter the common assumptions that diagrams are value-free or without bias.

- **PRA as a literacy practice**

The use of visual representations in PRA is based on certain beliefs about people's understanding. As I have suggested, many of these assumptions are supported by research on visual literacy and numeracy. However, the way PRA activities are facilitated also determines their success. The term *literacy practices* refers not just to the skills of reading and writing but to the associated behaviour and contexts in which they are used. We can also look at PRA as a *literacy practice*, that is, less in terms of skills or techniques and more as a social process where two groups of people enter each other's perspective.

The PRA activity is shaped by the social context and the interaction of the facilitator and the participants in a particular situation. Research into people doing arithmetic concluded that they could perform more complicated calculations in a supermarket than in a school or laboratory, simply because they felt comfortable in the setting and were not objects as in an experiment. Any discussion of context brings in questions of motivation. The extent to which we feel that what we are doing is useful or has some purpose greatly affects how we perform. The role of the facilitator is key to the whole process of PRA, as much in building up confidence as in passing on specific skills. Educational research shows how teachers' expectations have contributed to black and lower class children under performing in UK schools. Similarly, whether or not the PRA facilitator expects 'illiterate farmers' to be able to rank variables on a grid, can affect participants' confidence and motivation.

The outcome of PRA activities thus depends not only on acquiring certain skills, the setting and the perceived purpose of the exercise, but also very strongly on the style of facilitation.

- **Conclusion**

PRA consists of much more than just using individual methods such as ranking or mapping. The sequence and combination of activities and methods is significant, as are practices like 'interviewing the diagram' and cross-checking and linking information between different groups and different methods. The facilitator's expectations and relationship with participants, the familiarity of the setting, and whether people feel they are in control of the process all play an important part too.

The PRA methods discussed above seem to hold meaning for the participants because they are still in context. People can choose the symbols and remember what they represent. But as the diagrams become more abstract, I wonder whether non-literate participants can still interpret them. Similarly, when the immediate context is taken away from the maps and matrices by transferring them onto paper, what conditions are needed for people to still make sense of them? Is it enough, for example, for people to do the transferring themselves?

As visual literacy is often taken for granted, we may fail to recognise that people see things differently or have varying visual literacy skills. When diagramming and mapping are introduced into a community, we also need to be aware of what ideology goes along with those skills. The *making* of diagrams perhaps needs to be seen as distinct from the interpreting stage, just as the skills of writing and reading receive separate emphasis in literacy courses. PRA practitioners are usually aware of how writing on diagrams or even using pens and paper may alienate certain groups. But perhaps they need to look more closely at what expectations they have of people's visual literacy skills and understanding. As with 'new' literacy users, we need to ensure that the visual activities of PRA are helping to extend people's visual literacy by building on the skills they already

have and making the most of the existing local visual literacy and numeracy systems.

- **Anna Robinson-Pant**, Institute for Development Studies, University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton BN1 9RE, UK.

Shah, P. 1991. PRA in India: review and future directions. *RRA Notes* 13. IIED, London.

Street, B.V. 1993. *Cross-Cultural Approaches to Literacy*.

Walker, D. 1979. *Understanding Pictures*. University of Massachusetts, USA.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Brian Street, Robert Chambers, Andrea Cornwall, Judy Pointing, Pat Norrish and Alan Rogers for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper. Their suggestions of further literature to explore and our discussion of certain ideas have contributed greatly to this version.

REFERENCES

Barker, D. 1979. Appropriate methodology: an example using a traditional African board game to measure farmers' attitudes and environmental images. *IDS Bulletin* 10 (2). IDS, Brighton, UK.

Chambers, 1994. Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA): analysis of experience. *World Development* 22 (9).

Cornwall, A. 1995 (forthcoming). Towards participatory practice: PRA and the participatory process. In: de Koning, K. (ed.) *Participation and Health*. Zed Books, London.

Epskamp, K. 1984. Cross-cultural interpretations of cartoons and drawings. *Media Asia* 11 (4): 208-214.

Fuglesang, A. 1982. *About Understanding: Ideas and Observations on Cross-cultural Communication*. Dag Hammarskjold Foundation, Uppsala, Sweden.

Geertz, C. 1983. The way we think now: toward an ethnography of modern thought. *Local Knowledge: Further essays in interpretative anthropology*. Basic Books, New York.

Goody, J.G. 1968. *Literacy in Traditional Societies*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.

Goody, J.G. 1977. *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.

Mosse, D. 1993. Authority, gender and knowledge: theoretical reflections on the practice of Participatory Rural Appraisal. *ODI Network Paper* 44. ODI, London.

Roberts, C. and Street, B.V. 1995 (forthcoming). Spoken and written language. In: Florian and Coulmas (eds.) *Handbook of Sociolinguistics*.