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The evolving conception of literacy in REFLECT

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• Summary

There are fundamental links between literacy and power which frame the REFLECT approach as it has evolved since 1993, linking the literacy process to a wider, poverty-focused and rights-based approach to development and change. This article attempts to explore our evolving conception of literacy and the ways in which literacy is related to power.

• Introduction

The process of globalisation is creating societies in which people's level of access to information and knowledge is becoming a key factor in determining their access to economic, social and political power. Those without access to 'official' knowledge and information are increasingly excluded from significant participation in society. In this context, 'illiteracy' is increasingly becoming both a cause and effect of poverty - and a defining factor in all power relations.

Moreover, diverse field practice over the past five years has shown that, at the end of the twentieth century, traditional definitions of literacy based around the 3Rs (Reading, wRiting and aRithmetic) have become inadequate. There is no simple line to be crossed from illiteracy into literacy (indeed, there never was) and literacy can no longer be seen as just about mastery of the alphabet. Rather literacy is an extended process involving a complex set of (what may best be called) communicative practices - all of which have an impact on people's ability to assert their rights or actively engage with the external world (whether with the State, with markets, or with civil society).

There is no great gulf between the written and spoken language. The experience of many REFLECT programmes has been that the development of oral capacities is a crucial, indeed inseparable, part of the literacy process. But this does not mean that people are learning how to speak; rather it concerns people asserting their right to speak and be heard (e.g. the ability of women to talk in contexts where, traditionally, they would be silent, see Jellema, this issue). A literacy programme can help to challenge this imbalance and it is this sort of impact which is often articulated by participants in terms of 'self-confidence'.

Another form of 'communicative practice', which often becomes interwoven with 'literacy', is language. In many multi-lingual contexts, even where starting with mother tongues, accessing the 'dominant' or 'market' language is seen by participants as a key part of the learning process (see Jellema and Friedrich, this issue).

In other contexts, the dominant communication practices may not revolve around reading and writing of the alphabet and the need to expand our conception of literacy becomes even clearer. One case study in Mam communities of Guatemala revealed the potential that an interactive local radio station can offer for generating an alternative to conventional literacy. In marginal urban areas of Santiago and Chile, the active 'reading' of television (at a time of censorship) and the 'writing' of alternative realities by placing video cameras in the hands of women's groups, created a very real 'popular' alternative (see Archer and Costello 1990).

As REFLECT programmes have evolved, it has become clear that many different forms of communication practice are implicated in the literacy process and all of these are closely linked to power:

- reading;
- writing;
- listening;
- speaking;
- numeracy (see Foroni and Newman, this issue);
- knowledge of different, specialised or professional jargon etc.;
- language capacity (especially in multi-lingual societies such as India);
- access to/understanding of different technologies (e.g. computers, printing press); and,
- access to/understanding different media for communication (e.g. radio, video, television).

In the light of this, there is probably no one who can claim to be 100% literate. Similarly there is no-one who can be regarded as 100% illiterate, as even the poorest and most marginalised will have their own complex body of knowledge accumulated through experience, and will have their own capacity and means to engage and communicate with their immediate society. However, in many such cases, such people will not be able to engage in wider society as active citizens, will not be able to assert their rights or have the means to articulate their needs, and will not be able to influence even basic decisions which directly affect their lives and livelihoods. Each individual's 'biography of literacy' will be distinct, depending on their needs and aspirations for participation in different spheres of life (economic, social, political, cultural, religious etc.) and at different levels (household, community, District, State, National etc.).

If we conceive literacy in this more complex and integrated way, literacy programmes are no longer simply about transferring certain basic skills, but rather they are intimately linked to the empowerment process (a term which itself is now central to the 'specialised discourse' of development). It seems self-evident that any approach to development which seeks to be sustainable cannot be effective if people do not have the capacity to manage their own affairs. Literacy is precisely about that capacity and adult literacy programmes should be conceived accordingly. The learning process cannot narrowly focus on the 3Rs (programmes which do have almost universally failed, largely because of rejection from the learners). Rather, the literacy process should seek to focus on people's ability to participate actively in civil society (which requires a complex mix of communication practices), enabling them to effectively assert their rights (in every sphere of their life) and assume their responsibilities.
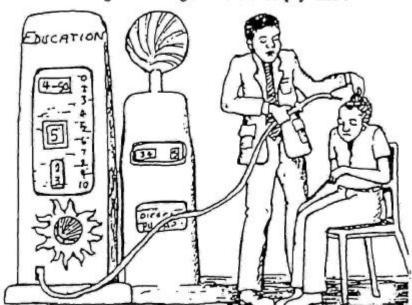
The inadequacy of functional literacy and the problem with the term 'literacy'

In the context of this introduction to a wider conception of literacy, it is interesting to re-visit one of the dominant models of literacy programmes in recent decades; that based on the conception of functional literacy. This concept underlies the primer-based methodologies used around the world.

Functional literacy is a concept initially developed by the US army and is based on enabling people to fit more fully into existing circumstances, practices and roles. The aim is 'to incorporate marginal adults into established economic and social values and practices' - equipping 'illiterate adults with just those skills and knowledge, no more, which ensure competence to function at the lowest level of mechanical performance as workers and citizens in a print-dominated society'. Being functionally literate becomes "a negative state" of "avoiding failure to cope" (Lankshear 1993).

This becomes demeaning, conceiving human beings in minimalist terms. The emphasis is placed on reading, responding to demands, understanding and following, (largely passive activities), rather than writing, leading, creating, commanding or controlling. It is particularly offensive in relation to women, who are so often seen as tools for development rather than human beings.

Figure 1. Banking education treats children (or adults) as empty vessels to be filled.

'Pouring knowledge into an empty head'

The concept of functional literacy is directly contradictory to Freire's view of literacy and humanity. It is explicitly a form of 'banking education': "the more that students put their efforts into receiving and storing information deposited in them, the less they can attain the critical consciousness that comes from intervening in reality as makers and transformers of the world." (see Figure 1).

REFLECT is not about helping marginal people to adapt to the existing order. REFLECT offers an alternative conception of literacy and points the ways towards a different paradigm of development. REFLECT aims to enable people to develop a new 'method of relating to the world', generating "thinking which perceives reality as process and transformation rather than as a static entity - thinking which does not separate itself from action" (Freire 1972). In this context, it is important to internalise what is meant when we say that literacy involves a wide range of communicative practices and that the "ultimate text to be read and written is the world itself" (Freire 1972).

- **Literacy as communication practices: a cube**

Figure 2 is an attempt to visualise what it means to say that literacy should be conceived as more than the 3Rs, involving a wider range of communication practices than just reading and writing. Literacy is presented as the combination of a range of different communicative practices which are needed in different spheres of life at different levels of engagement with the world (see Figure 2).

Beyond the cube

Whilst it communicates some basic ideas about literacy, the cube s not sufficient to capture all of the ideas which have revolved around REFLECT. It needs to be deconstructed and challenged because:

- REFLECT adds another dimension, that of critical analysis and understanding of the 'whole'. Indeed, REFLECT is about critically challenging these boxes and re-defining them (which is not captured in the diagram);
- the categories are not mutually exclusive; for example different languages clearly

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involve all the other communication practices;

- it fails to capture the stratification of society which so influences all communication; and,
- it is too static; by using squares/mini-cubes, it over-emphasises the boundaries between things and does not suggest movement or any potential for change.

An alternative visualisation for REFLECT

To try to visualise literacy as conceived in the REFLECT process, we have tried many other forms of visualisation. The visualisation which we feel best captures the essence of REFLECT is of a solar system (see Figure 3). In this visualisation REFLECT is placed at the conjunction of four factors or forces, none of which is static:

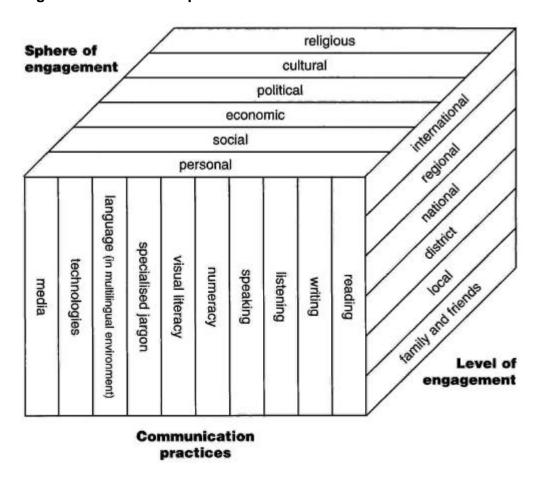- communication practices;
- spheres or engagement;
- levels of engagement; and,
- stratifications, that affect the process.

In astronomical terms, REFLECT is the sun. The four factors orbit around the sun as planets. Around each planet there are a series of moons. Everything is in constant movement so any particular moment in a REFLECT process will involve an interaction of these four elements (and their different features/moons) in different balances.

The focus of REFLECT is to enable people to:

- recognise the different forces that are at work and how they are changing;
- address those forces that determine their access to power;
- see their own centrality to any process of change; and,
- make the orbits spin in their favour.

Figure 2. An attempt to visualise a more complex view of literacy - involving a wide range of communication practices.
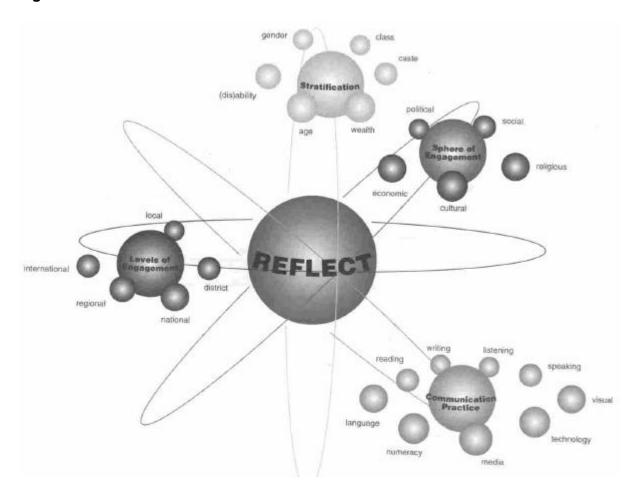
Figure 3. An alternative visualisation for REFLECT

One of the advantages of this image is that it stresses change and inter-relationships between different factors and levels. The terms 'literacy' (understood as an expanded concept) could be elucidated by being placed at the centre of this diagram (in place of REFLECT). It is very rare for any 'literacy moment' to be purely political, without any social dimension; written and oral communication are often intertwined. It is also rare to have something which involves just the local level without some external referencing. As each 'moon' has its own orbit, there will be points of convergence between levels and spheres (as well as points of divergence).

Implications for REFLECT at a local level

This understanding of literacy suggests that REFLECT programmes need be designed as multi-dimensional processes. For example, drawing on the experiences of YAKSHI in India (see Madhusudan, this issue).

Stage 1. Initially it would be important to avoid promoting REFLECT just as a literacy programme, as this would inevitably lead to narrow expectations from participants. The dominant understanding of the term 'literacy' will not just disappear and so the term 'literacy' becomes increasingly problematic. If it is used to describe REFLECT at a local level, it will inevitably generate narrow, and therefore misleading, expectations. For this reason, REFLECT practitioners often look for alternative terms. New words, ideally from the local context in each case, can offer a rich alternative (see Madhusudan and Bhattarai et al., this issue.

Stage 2. Seek to have the whole community (or at least diverse parts of it, including non-literate, neo-literate and literate) engaged in a process of constructing a series of 'core texts', which represent local reality and draw on a mixture of media (print, visual and aural/oral). The focus is very much on creating a 'democratic space' for focused work on key

local issues. Power stratifications, which exist in the circle, should be recognised, but their manifestation in the process should be minimised. This should be achieved by using participatory tools, challenging formal interactions and following a set of core principles, so that, in many cases, the stratifications become part of the object of reflection. Various core elements are contained in the process of developing these core texts (see Figure 4).

A core text may be a map or calendar, a local story or a socio-drama. It may be in print form or visual or oral. It may be that each core text is, in fact, a mixture of different texts on a specific theme (e.g. a series of maps/matrices/calendars on agriculture). The key is that it is produced by participants in an active process of reflection on reality.
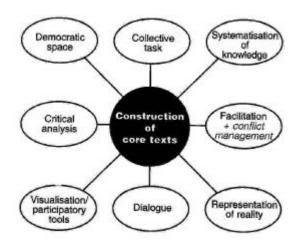
Stage 3. Each of these core texts would be used for follow up activities. These could be conceived as sub-circles, or as different moments in the work of the overall circle. For example:

- a basic literacy sub-circle where the focus is on working with the language in the core text, in order to learn to read and (particularly) to write new texts;
- a research sub-circle collecting materials from external agencies on the issue etc. and presenting these as texts for further reflection (for example, accessing the internet/using silk screen printing);
- a local knowledge sub-circle to systematise existing local knowledge on the issue;
- a culture sub-circle dedicated to production of creative/cultural materials, such as songs, drama or dances, usually in mother tongue;
- a language sub-circle using each core text for learning a second or third language;
- social action sub-circles which take the lead on organising actions (or linking to other existing organisations) to resolve issues that have arisen, though all may participate in implementing these; and,
- Other sub-circles as may be needed/identified.

These sub-circles should not be mutually exclusive but should be fluid, with people being able to move between them and sub-circles regularly meeting to present their work to each other. The sub-circles could be designed as having a rotating membership, thereby avoiding any one group becoming too powerful and to give everyone access to different experiences. Other forms of sub-circle or group could also be considered according to the context (even working in parallel with the above) such as groups by gender or age.

Figure 4. Elements involved in constructing 'core texts'

The emphasis here is on an elastic process, with everyone producing a core text, then going away to use that text for different purposes, reuniting for feedback and then, producing a new core text on a separate or related issue.

However, continuity of action must stay at the heart of the process. The whole REFLECT circle would probably need to meet at least once or twice a week to ensure continuing clarity of focus. The importance of a core fixed space and time should not be under-estimated. However, once that has been established, flexibility, movement and diversity can become a strength.
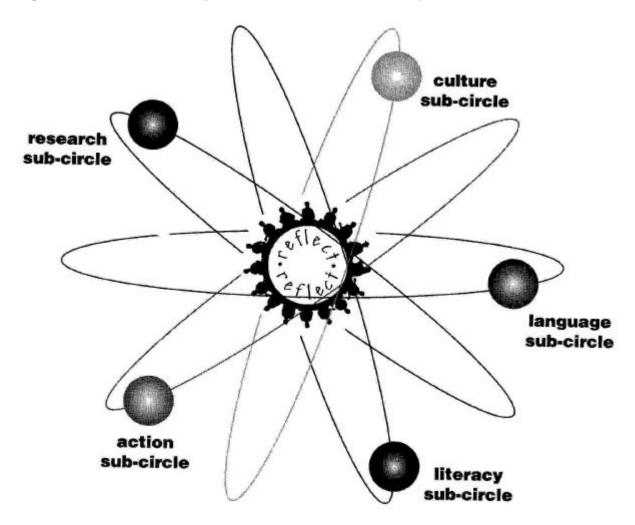
In many cases the terms "sub-circle" or "group" may not be appropriate - as these may simply be different moments or activities of the REFLECT circle itself.

If we try to visualise this, the image of the solar system is effective once more, with a core circle (or sun) which needs to be very strong, around which there are a series of

planets (sub-circles / activities) orbiting. No orbit will be maintained if there is not a strong gravitational pull at the centre and in this case, it is very important that the REFLECT circle become a source of light, heat and direction. This is illustrated in Figure 5. The effect of such a multi-layered approach will be:

- a dramatic impact on 'literacy' according to conventional definitions (with a more literate environment generated in more than one language, neo-literates using their skills and non-literates learning and having role models; the development of wide ranging literacy practices etc.);

- a strengthening of wider communication practices (e.g. language, use of media etc.); and,
- a clear linkage between the learning process and processes of empowerment and social change.

Clearly this is just one way of implementing a programme based on the conception of literacy which has evolved within REFLECT. The precise way in which these ideas will be developed in a particular context will vary. However, it is clear that there are problems with the above proposal.

Figure 5. Elements that may be involved in the REFLECT process at a local level

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These problems include the following:

- sometimes it is precisely the uncontroversial nature of 'literacy' which is useful in that it generates space for people, perhaps particularly women, to meet. If REFLECT is introduced from the start as a 'discussion forum', then probably only the men will turn up and women will be excluded;
- it will be a logistical nightmare to run lots of different sub-circles. For example, who will facilitate them and who will train the facilitators? The approach depends on certain participants taking on lead roles as co-facilitators - but is this realistic?;
- if you include the whole community in the process, then numbers may be impossible to manage and you will miss out on the relative self-selection involved in targeting those who are not 'literate'. A wider group will mean more internal stratification within the process and more conflict;
- is it realistic to expect local facilitators, who themselves are part of the power dynamics of the community, to be able to manage power imbalances and conflict?; and,
- whilst we may have moved away from the idyll of a united community as a starting point, (by recognising stratification) are we not still working on the underlying assumption that everyone is willing to work towards transforming themselves into some sort of 'perfect community'?

• Conclusion

There is no simple new package or approach which evolves from these reflections on literacy. But there are, hopefully, some important elements to retain, such as the essentially dynamic nature of the process. It is this which will have most impact on the institutions supporting a REFLECT programme. The process should inevitably lead to demands for greater flexibility and responsiveness, which institutions may support rhetorically but are often ill-prepared for in practice. Any one individual or institution involved in the process should themselves reflect on it and then, revise actions in the light

of those reflections. However, in practice few institutions have shown themselves to be good at reflection, and those which are will often have a difficult time with their donors. Therefore, the implications of engagement in this sort of process are often far-reaching.

If we return to conventional ideas of literacy then, in some respects these reflections have indicated that we need to move away from the traditional idea of having a literacy programme followed by post-literacy and then continuing education (or seeing literacy as a foundation for later action for development). All these processes can be interwoven from the start, so that people in the same process, are working on the different levels of literacy and local action at the same time, mutually reinforcing each other. Rather than seeing these processes as happening in a 'box', (inside the four walls of a classroom) these processes are directly linked with the lives and ongoing communication practices and power relationships of the participants.

The conception of literacy and REFLECT presented here is by no means an end point. It has evolved over recent years and will continue to evolve. The point at which it becomes static will probably be the point at which it loses value. The lack of conclusion may be frustrating but this article will have succeeded if, in any respect, it has helped you to see literacy in a wider or newer light, and has, perhaps, stimulated a reaction (whether positive or negative!).

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