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Talking out of turn: notes on participation, learning and action in REFLECT

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• Introduction

The ideas and methods of the original REFLECT pilots owed a great deal to the methodologies of Participatory Learning and Action. Now, a few years into its development, it seems fair to ask what REFLECT has to give back to the wider community of practitioners of participatory methods, particularly to those not working in the fields of literacy or adult education.

Other articles in this issue have documented practical innovations of REFLECT projects around the world: ideas about training (see Cottingham or Gautam, this issue) or about how to work with folk models of mathematics (see Foroni and Newman, this issue), which could be used in work that has nothing to do with literacy. In this article, however, I want to look at some of the contributions of REFLECT from a more theoretical point of view. In particular, a three-year study of women learners, which is now underway in Uganda and Bangladesh,¹ has produced some insights about 'participation', about 'learning' and about 'action'.

• Talk, silence, and the limits of participation

One of the surprising findings from the early stage of our study is that women who belong to literacy circles say that they joined in order to learn how to *talk* and be listened to. As Jahan Ara, a 36-year-old rickshaw-puller's wife, expressed it: "*I can talk to anyone now, but previously I could not, because I did not*

know how to read, write and count." Participants do mention a few of the more conventional uses of literacy, such as being able to keep better records of expenditure or decode written addresses. But their most vivid and detailed stories are not about reading and writing; they are about being listened to by people to whom they would not have 'known how' - or dared - to speak before. Instead of considering what this tells us about literacy, I want to explore what it tells us about 'talk', which is, after all, the essence of any participatory methodology.

Educated professionals, development workers and academics intuitively feel that 'sitting around talking' is an easier, more spontaneous and naturally participatory kind of communication than written language. But this is not a perception that makes much sense to the Ugandan and Bangladeshi women we have been interviewing (nor is it one that Freire, sensitive to culturally imposed silences, would endorse). In their experiences, power and domination operate as much, in fact more, through the informal channels of face-to-face oral communication as through the formal apparatus of writing and texts. For them, there is no such thing as 'just talking'. Talk, in their societies, is still the daily currency of social relationships, and social relationships are always power relationships as well: you talk in one way to the landlord, in another way to the neighbour who is your sharecropper, and in yet another way to your son's wife. But these relationships are not fixed in stone; the balance of power can subtly shift from day to day. Thus to talk is always to negotiate.

As poor, younger women, the REFLECT circle participants must constantly be aware of complex rules of deference and propriety,

¹ 'Literacy, Gender and Social Agency', an ActionAid study funded by DFID.

which govern what they can say, how, and to whom. Many of these are to do with gender, others stem from hierarchies of generation, class, or ethnicity. For example, when Bangladeshi or Ugandan women address a male relative, they may have to avert their eyes, avoid using his proper name or words which sound like it, adopt a submissive bodily posture and lower their voices. Certain subjects, too, will be off limits for debate or discussion. When Ugandan women speak in family councils or local government meetings, they may be restricted to certain topics which are seen as women's affairs (unless they are senior in age, or unless they are visiting government officials or middle-class NGO employees). And the most powerful forms of speech that a culture has created may be off limits to women altogether. In many African societies, for example, only older men can address the ancestors in order to ward off sickness and calamity.

It is not going too far to say that in the areas we have been studying, access to power (even bureaucratic power) depends far more on the socially constructed capacity for speech than on skills of literacy. Women's restricted voice is closely bound up with their supposed lack of self-possession, of moral understanding and of rational judgement and their lack of experience of the wider world. Conversely, it is through (the right kind of) talk that men demonstrate their self-control, their command of reason and their moral capacity, and so prove they deserve full rights to participate in community affairs.

In these communities in Bangladesh and Uganda, if women, or for that matter men, break the rules of speech outright, if they talk 'out of turn', they will be ridiculed, ignored or even physically beaten. At the extreme, they may be labelled crazy, or persecuted as witches. But at the same time, the highly political nature of speech creates strategic opportunities for subversion or tactical manoeuvring. Women may 'gossip' in private about political matters that they are not supposed to be competent to discuss in public, they may tell each other the 'secrets' that their menfolk learn during initiation rituals, and they often develop 'secret' discourses of their own (for example, about abortion and sexuality), or even use 'black' speech such as witchcraft spells to appropriate male cultural

knowledge. However, these covert or heretical forms of speech are unlikely to be used in an important public occasion, such as a meeting with powerful outsiders, which is of course what a PRA activity is for villagers. The discussion that results can be fascinating both for locals and for outsiders, but participating in it is unlikely to be 'empowering' for women; unlikely to expand their options for overcoming culturally imposed silences.

Learning

Participatory methodologies value local knowledge and the experience of insiders over the expertise of outsiders. As a corrective to the top-down professionalism of most development work, this is immensely useful. However, for the 'insiders' themselves, exploring and validating their own experience of the world around them is not enough; what they seek from literacy programmes are the levers to *change* that world. While affirming existing social and cultural identities is part of REFLECT's success, even more important is the opportunity to construct new identities, drawing on resources beyond the boundaries of their immediate social world. In order to do that, they need to be able to put external sources of knowledge, influence and authority into play; and they need an institutional foundation. In the case of REFLECT, the 'literacy program' plays that role.

Many women in REFLECT circles are anxious to structure their activities in what might seem to us as the most conventional, 'top-down' ways possible; spending hours copying out letters and phrases from the blackboard, scrupulously taking the register of attendance, demanding exams and certificates and even uniforms. Indeed, they often attempt to treat participatory features of REFLECT as a part of this 'schooling' (learning how to draw, in some Ugandan cases, or learning health and hygiene rules in some Bangladeshi ones). Their expectations may seem highly non-participatory, and even authoritarian, and the content of what they want to learn, may even seem irrelevant; but to deny their aspirations would seriously limit REFLECT's value to women in their ongoing gender struggles². If

² See also C. Kell, 'Literacy practices in an informal settlement in the Cape Peninsula', in *The*

we think harder about why women should want to recast a participatory discussion as a 'lesson', a circle as a 'school', and a facilitator as a 'teacher', the following points come to mind.

First of all, 'school' has a socially validated status as an important and permanent institution; it can't be dismissed as a mere gaggle of noisy women gathering to gossip. Thus, the fact that REFLECT circles meet regularly, over the course of nine months or more, at the same time and in a 'public' place, is extremely important to participants and facilitators alike.

Likewise, 'school' has an explicit code of rules, a hierarchy of authority and a set of disciplinary practices which are *different* to the norms which govern the rest of women's lives, and which are not under the control of the people who dominate the rest of their world. Whether it is arriving each day at the same time, sitting in a certain arranged order, taking the register, chanting the alphabet, or copying words into a copybook, *what* is done is less important than the discipline of following formal rules. When a woman is amongst a gathering of her fellow villagers, even one expertly facilitated by a person experienced in participatory techniques, a woman is inescapably the daughter of X, the mother of Y, the tenant of P and that is the (socially recognised) identity from which she speaks. But in the classroom it is possible for her to be a student; by participating in the regular rituals and disciplines of school learning, she is creating a different identity, a different place from which she can legitimately speak. This may be why learning to sign one's own name is such a central symbol of the whole social process of becoming literate. The fact that all circle members follow the same rules as learners inside the circle may also help them suspend the rules that stratify women outside the circle, making differences of age, class, etc. less of a barrier.

Second, both Uganda and Bangladesh idealise 'schooling' as a process by which 'ignorant' people, through hard work over time, become 'educated', successful, and rich. In reality this may be far from true, but the value attached to

social uses of literacy, ed. M. Prinsloo and M. Breier (Cape Town: SACHED, 1996).

education as a means of 'bettering' oneself rubs off on any kind of organised learning, and thus also helps women fashion alternative identities. It is not surprising, then, that many REFLECT participants demand exams, certificates and marks or that they emphasise the 'hard work' involved in their learning. When women say that becoming literate has enabled them to talk, in part they just mean that acquiring education has increased their status and thereby entitles them to speak more freely to a wider range of people. As Sahera Begum said, "*After joining literacy I have become more powerful. What ever I say my husband listens to me.*"

However, literacy for these women is not just about status. It is also about gaining access to knowledge from outside their own experience, and particularly 'book' knowledge, which is associated with the ideologies of progress, science and modernity. In Uganda this includes mastery of the English language. The women in our study are not naive about the 'objectivity' of such knowledge: they know that it underwrites the power of the state and of international organisations such as ActionAid, just as so-called 'local', unwritten knowledge underwrites the power of traditional village elites. But they can play the 'formal', impersonal authority attributed to written texts off against the informal, personalised authority that they transact through talk every day.

For example, some Bangladeshi women use their new ability to keep written accounts as an argument for being given more control over household expenditure. As Sahera Begum said, "I can take active decisions (in financial matters) because now my husband thinks that as a literate person I know something." In the original Ugandan pilot, mastery of the 'scientific' arguments for limiting family size, promoted by health departments and NGOs, helped women open up the previously off-limits issue of contraception, making it a legitimate topic for discussion between husband and wife. In both countries, possession of skills (thought to be) needed to get a waged job may entitle women to negotiate for greater economic freedom, even if there is no prospect of actually landing a position.

In short, the (mainly oral) forms of knowledge most widely used in their immediate

community often deny women the capacity to reason and to speak as full adult members of that community. For these women, 'just talking' is where the daily realities of hierarchy and domination bear down most heavily. Access to external knowledge, in this case, the knowledge represented by literacy or English, is an alternative way of constructing an authoritative and legitimate voice. Unlike conventional literacy programmes, however, REFLECT initiates a dialogue between local and external knowledge, using one to interrogate the other. This seems to be important in explaining the empowering potential of the circles: learners are not simply substituting one ideology for another but constructing their own interpretation of both.

Another important difference between REFLECT and traditional methods is that it encourages learners to define and manage for themselves an alternative structure, an institutionalised 'place' to speak from. Like other forms of 'school', it is socially recognised and has a robust public presence; but crucially, it allows women to experiment with 'counter-cultural' principles of social organisation.³ This process is what enables and entitles women to re-negotiate the 'rules' of gender, age, class, and ethnicity, first inside and later outside the literacy circle.

• Action

A few concluding words about how we understand 'action' and, more broadly, the socially constructed capacity *to act* (agency). Many development workers are predisposed to look for concrete changes in the 'real' world as a measure of impact. But for many of the women in our study, the most exciting possibility and the most compelling work that REFLECT circles hold out is the task of imagining (inside the circle) and experimenting with (inside and outside the circle) a new identity: a person who speaks, and is listened to, as a competent adult in a variety of public and private settings. Bangladeshi women interviewed were most impressed that candidates in local elections came to them to seek their votes, as literate and therefore influential members of the community.

³ Thanks to Anne-Marie Goetz for this insight.

Because agency cannot be created out of thin air, women need to find ways to validate to others their right and their competence to act (and to speak) in new ways. This is a prerequisite for any kind of action that would genuinely change the relations of power that restrict women's voices and their ability to 'participate'. In REFLECT, both the institutional structure and appropriation of the formal, written knowledge involved in literacy learning, have been crucial to women's ability to create a different voice for themselves without being punished for 'talking out of turn'. Of course, I am not recommending that all kinds of participatory development programmes should turn themselves into literacy projects. My conclusion is rather that the voices of participants cannot be taken for granted: practitioners of participatory methodologies need to think seriously about how they can provide participants with the institutional support and the knowledge resources they need to expand their own voice.

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