PROGRAM OF STUDIES IN NON-FORMAL EDUCATION

SUPPLEMENTARY SERIES

NON-FORMAL EDUCATION APPROACHES TO TEACHING LITERACY

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FOREWORD

We are pleased to announce this series of Supplementary Papers in Non-formal Education, following the successful publication of our earlier Discussion Papers and Team Reports. Demand for these publications continues at a brisk pace and we invite interested readers who may not be familiar with them to write for a list of the available titles.

The papers in this new series will fill a different kind of need than the Discussion Papers and Team Reports. Those studies represent sustained inquiries into a limited group of topics in the area of non-formal education. The Supplementary Papers will be relatively short, single-topic treatments which present important data or points of view on non-formal education not otherwise readily available. Some of the papers are authored by participants in Michigan State University's Program of Studies in Non-formal Education. Others are written by persons in other positions who, in our judgment, have significant things to say on the subject. The subject matter of this series therefore ranges over a wide variety of topics and the authors represent richly diverse backgrounds. We hope readers will find this series of interest and value.

The present paper by John Oxenham of the University of Sussex directs its remarks toward one of the most persistent and continually perplexing problems in the area of non-formal education--the teaching of adult literacy. The paper, which was originally delivered by Oxenham at the Michigan State University international conference on non-formal education in 1974, was selected for this series because it addresses, in

a brief space, several very key issues. It summarizes the conclusion of major research on the characteristics of adult learners in literacy programs. These characteristics must form the base upon which any new and innovative programs are built. Oxenham then provides a brief recipe for successful programs in literacy instruction, followed by longer discussion of whether literacy instruction is a valid or desirable component of non-formal education. The final portion of the paper examines the applicability of observations about learners in literacy programs to other forms of adult, non-formal education. To this reader, this is the heart of the paper and I commend it to your thoughtful perusal and attention.

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LITERACY INSTRUCTION IN POLICIES FOR

NON-FORMAL EDUCATION

A Review of Lessons*

Since the good practitioner of adult education should always begin where the learner is, I shall start by reviewing some of the things which have been learned or confirmed about the learners in adult literacy courses of one sort or another over the past few years.

A. It has been confirmed that adults do, on the whole, pick up the skill of reading faster than children. The Iranian and Tanzanian Work-Oriented Projects showed that twelve months of part-time instruction were sufficient to bring the average learner level with a Grade 4, or even a Grade 6, primary school pupil. Self-sustaining reading ability, it seems, can be attained in much less time and at much less cost through adult classes than through the primary school. In Iran the two-year cost of a successful learner proved to be just under $100, against $250 for a 6 year primary school graduate who had repeated no classes. The difference in Tanzania seems to have been rather less dramatic, $150 to $180 against $190 for a primary school graduate.**. If, then, the ability to read is deemed a desirable

*Evidence for the various statements made in this paper can be found in the publications listed at the end.

**This is not to claim that an adult, who has learned to read as well as a pupil in Grade 6, has also covered the rest of the primary school curriculum. Nor does it claim that he or she has taken on the "modern" attitudes and values which Inkeles and Smith have shown grow steadily during attendance at primary school. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that in both Iran, Tanzania, Turkey and Zambia some "desired" differences in attitude and practice did occur in experimental literacy groups to a degree that could not have been accidental.

goal--we may consider that issue separately--it does make sense to approach it through classes of illiterate adults.

B. The difference in learning speeds between adults and children as regards arithmetic is less marked, doubtless because the skills of arithmetic are more numerous and more complex than the skills of reading. Nevertheless, the adults do learn more arithmetic in less time than children.

C. In writing, the differences are negligible. The fact that writing calls for not only mental skills, but also finely articulated psychomotor co-ordination, seems to cause the average adult learner as much trouble as it does the average child. If writing is a goal of literacy instruction, it needs either to be much less ambitiously formulated than reading or arithmetic, or else to be given a good deal more time than the other skills. Whether, in that case, it should be attempted at all is an issue for later discussion. Recent experience in Turkey tends to confirm the experiences of Iran and Tanzania. Adult learners did master reading and arithmetic much more rapidly than they managed writing. (What is more the correlations between the skills within learners were surprisingly weak.)

D. At the same time, all these countries have confirmed another feature of literacy classes: Their learners are by no means homogeneous in learning speeds. The variations are in fact very wide, and carry implications, of course, for methods and styles of instruction.

E. Of complicating relevance here is the hint of a preference by the learners to work in groups and to be a little averse to individual work, such as is found in programmed instruction. But this is only a hint, the evidence for it is slight indeed,

although it is corroborated by the experience of education by correspondence: rates of discontinuation seem to be higher among those who have to work on their own without regular support. Related to these points is an informal consensus that instruction which encourages group participation in the form of discussions or adult games is likely to be more successful both in retaining students and in helping them to learn--despite possible diffidence in the early stages.

F. The different curricula and learner groups in the Iranian project at Isfahan have confirmed several points. Where the learner is supported and encouraged by his community, he is more likely to persevere and succeed. The "Textiles" curricula were run amongst the workers of state enterprises. I understand that the learners were not only given time off to attend classes, but also had special transport arrangements made to take them home at night. Furthermore, they were learners who had a concrete and very tangible goal to aim at: success in the literacy class was guaranteed an increment of salary. Other curricula, which offered neither the goal nor the surrounding support, were much less successful in holding their learners.

G. The Iranian curricula were intensely work-oriented and very carefully based on actual functions. Their experience suggested two important conclusions. Learners who were actually working on the functions, but who might not have felt that literacy really was helpful to them, tended to be rather less persevering and successful. On the other hand, learners who were studying a curriculum unrelated to their work, but who enrolled because they needed literacy for their work, persevered and succeeded. The conclusions I draw are, first, that literacy cannot be forced on a function to which it really is immaterial.

Therefore, if it is deemed desirable that everybody should be literate, but if some people's work is not helped by literacy, other functions which they should fulfil--but cannot with complete effectiveness, if they remain illiterate--should be identified. That is, there may well be groups for whom work-oriented literacy is irrelevant, but to whom some form of life-oriented literacy may be helpful.

H. The second conclusion is very simple. If a person finds he needs literacy for very specific purposes, the instruction he will find sufficiently relevant need not be directly related to those purposes. Since the skills of literacy are general, they can be easily transferred to a variety of particular needs. Those who have the particular need, will accept the general skill in whatever form they find it. Of course, the closer it is to what they want, the more gratified they will probably be. Function-oriented literacy is necessary only for those who have felt no concrete need for literacy--even though they may have felt it would be nice to be literate.

I. This last sentence, especially its last clause, underlines the fact that virtually every literacy project in every country still starts out with enthusiastic oversubcriptions of enrollment. People would indeed like to be literate. However, the strength of their desire and its ability to carry them through to completion are still the uncertain factors. The traditional literacy programs, with their emphasis on generalized skills, found the strength wanting: dropout rates were almost everywhere very high. Functional literacy projects, oriented either to work or to some combination of occupational and other problems, have attempted to retain learners by relating the skills to specific situations. They have not hit the jackpot

of one hundred per cent or even ninety per cent retention over a full course--i.e. one leading to self-sustaining literacy--but by and large they seem to have achieved marked improvements. That confirms that literacy, or for that matter, any instruction which starts from the learner and from what is likely to help the learner in the learner's own terms, is more likely to succeed. Further, as the Turkish experience suggests, if the instruction can also be couched in the learner's idioms and styles, it has a better chance of engaging the learner permanently.

J. Naturally, the perseverance of the learner is affected not merely by the content and style of the course. Its duration may be a factor and so may its ordering. It might be thought that short courses are much less likely to suffer dropout than the long ones, but a survey suggests that this is not so. It seems--but only seems, we cannot be more definite,--that those who are going to drop out, do so fairly early in the game. Courses which are continuous, in the sense of being conducted as one unit with no breaks, have roughly similar rates of drop-out, however short or long they are. However, courses which are discontinuous and have longish breaks or vacations in between sessions are likely to lose large proportions of the learners in the breaks. This is confirmed by numerous informal reports, and substantiated by the more systematic evidence of the work-oriented projects in Iran and Tanzania. It is worth adding that the Tanzanian project tried to guard against such dropout by organizing extension training groups during the break, but appears to have had little success in reducing the leakage. The suggestion is then that many adults who attend literacy classes have their interest or ability to attend severely

dissipated by long gaps in instruction. Clearly, if possible, such gaps should be avoided.

K. If it is impossible to provide a part-time course over a long period without a prolonged break somewhere in between, how feasible would it be to offer a full-time course compressed into a relatively short period? Apart from the administrative problems of finding learners who can attend full-time and suitable instructors, there is the human problem of whether illiterate or undereducated persons can stand full days of instruction for several weeks at a stretch. Experience in Rhodesia is instructive here. During the agriculturally slack season, groups of women were given literacy and other instruction for no less than seven hours a day six days a week over a period of a month. Attendance was excellent and dropout virtually nil. The implication is that the learners found it neither a strain nor a bore. As to what they learned, those with some background in school made good progress, those who were absolutely illiterate made very little. However, the point here is simply that, if it is feasible to give full-time intensive instruction, it should be considered a viable pedagogical alternative even for unschooled or underschooled people.

Small bye-points: due to the distribution of schooling, it is found in most countries, that, even where men predominate in literacy classes, the women on the whole will come from the younger age-groups. Also, whatever the reasons are, the women in some places seem to make much more persevering students than the men. Perhaps there is less to distract them; perhaps the adult class itself is a welcome distraction, which the men need less.

A Recipe

If we can for the moment assume the general validity of the characteristics I have listed for learners in literacy classes, we may put together a short recipe for a successful program in literacy instruction. First, in order to achieve a self-sustaining level of reading and a somewhat more than minimal competence in basic arithmetic, we would need twelve months of part-time instruction, let us say some 300-400 class hours. We would forgo writing as a formal element of the course, but leave opportunities for those who wanted to develop the skill, to do so. Second, in order to cater for the variety of learning speeds, we would develop a format of instruction which both encouraged intra-group and community support and also permitted individual progress according to individual ability. Third, we would need to be very clear who the prospective learners were likely to be, whether their needs for literacy were specific or vaguely general, and, if the latter, what specific functions of theirs might be significantly assisted by the skills of literacy. Fourth, the curriculum would be built around what we learned of the learners--their wants, needs, priorities, idioms and habits. Fifth, we would look around for additional incentives and supports to promote success among the learners. Sixth, to the extent possible, we would try to complete the course in one continuous and intensive session.

The Use of Literacy

The recipe may be valid in itself as a basis for planning literacy work, but it begs the fundamental questions, whether literacy instruction is a valid or desirable component of non-formal education. From the history of traditional literacy programs and from the somewhat better record of the functional

literacy efforts, it is evident that literacy instruction is simply not viable on its own--except for the few who know exactly and urgently what they want the skills for. Literacy, to be certain of acceptable success, must always be part of a package. That is tantamount to saying that the other components of a package are necessary to the literacy. It does not say, however, that literacy is necessary to the success of the other components. Literacy may in fact be essential, but that would depend on the nature of the other components. In some cases, the objective of offering the package may require that the recipients or participants reach a certain competence in literacy before they can fully utilize the whole package. In others, the offer of literacy may be used merely as a lure to attract people who want to be literate, but are not currently interested in the rest of the package. The more abstract programs, for instance, of "conscientization" or "awareness" might be difficult for the illiterate to grasp or to respond to, whereas the opportunity of literacy is more tangible. To say this does not deny that literacy is a fundamental human right. It merely recognizes that literacy is a means of access and that giving access onto a virtual vacuum is unrewarding both to givers and recipients. It also recognizes that to be literate is not synonymous with being "modern," innovative, entrepreneurial, broadminded, or even prone to read. Such attributes are fostered by a process less of being "literized" than of being "socialized" into certain norms and outlooks. Literacy is merely one aspect of such socialization, and not even indisputably essential to it; even though reading appropriate literature will assist the process.

For development planners, then, the question resolves into two parts. First, are there development programs which

require their participants to be literate, as a necessary condition of success? In what ways would illiteracy impede or even destroy the project? Then, what degree of competence in either reading or writing or arithmetic would dissolve the block? As a very broad answer to these queries, one might say that the greater the prospective participation in the modern sector at the end of the project, the greater the probable need for reasonable competence in at least reading and arithmetic. In supplement, one might add that the greater the prospective interchange with literate persons important to livelihood and welfare, the greater the need for literacy. Acceptance of this rule of thumb might entail excluding literacy instruction from perhaps the bulk of rural projects which aim modestly at increases in the productivity of farmers or at small changes in the cooking habits of housewives.

The second part of the planner's question would concern the possibility of using literacy instruction as a bait to gain other objectives. As Paolo Freire has shown, and, ironically, quasi military governments in Thailand and Turkey have confirmed--it is perfectly possible to arrange literacy instruction so as to get questions of agricultural improvement, family planning, land reform and so on converted into live local issues; or even to get communities to call for government services they had previously ignored. However, where the bait is to be used, a question with an ethical aspect comes up. The experience of Iran, Thailand and Turkey suggest that the objectives of "modernization" might be more rapidly attained than can a satisfactory competence in reading, say. It might also be the case--I do not know--that continuing a course for the sake of literacy might not be worthwhile in terms of reinforcing the newly acquired "modern" attitudes or of translating the attitudes

into actual behaviour. The planner has to decide whether literacy, though primarily employed as a bait, will be continued to a "permanent" level, or whether it will be broken off, as soon as the requisite "modernization" has occurred.

Guides for Non-Formal Education in General

Clearly, what is said about the learners and programs in literacy instruction must have some applicability to other forms of adult, non-formal education. Very briefly, and at the risk of tedium, let me review some of the earlier remarks.

1. Goals, Pay-off, Support

Most fundamentally, people are willing and curious to learn. Even so, those programs seem most successful which offer immediate and tangible incentives at the end of a course, with strong moral support in the meanwhile. The more concrete and the less remote the pay-off, the better.

At the same time, at least some learners can and will take advantage of instruction, even though it is only indirectly related to their immediate needs. Also, provided the relevance of the instruction to important personal functions is sufficiently accepted by him, the learner is likely to persevere.

Next, programs which hold no specific goals for the learner, but which can create lively and interesting social situations around important common problems; and which open perhaps unexpected opportunities and occasions, are likely to be successful. Such programs can be derived only from a close knowledge of the perceptions and idioms of the prospective learners. That is, they should be inductively devised.

2. Individuals and Groups

Adults of many cultures seem to prefer to learn in groups. At the same time, their learning speeds vary greatly. Reconciling these two facts to the satisfaction of most learners should be a central concern of curriculum development.

3. Core Content and Aids

However relevant to the learner and however inductively designed, a program of instruction had better not be dull. Also, however bright the aids, an uninspired core will probably not get very far with its learner. Generally, a stimulating core can, I believe, surmount and survive second-rate aids.

4. Intensity and Continuity

Courses for adults should be given as intensively as possible, with an avoidance of long breaks. The capacity for long periods of learning should not be underestimated.

5. Management

Whatever the helpfulness of these guides in clarifying the mind, they are useful only when embodied in a program of action. It has been the experience of a great many literacy programs, not to speak of other non-formal approaches to education, that their faults lie less in their pedagogy than in their management. UNESCO, for example, scheduled twelve experimental functional literacy projects. One never got off the ground, two were closed prematurely, most ran months behind schedule, and only two or three seem to have produced lessons worth reproducing. The reasons for the disappointments were not the lack of expertise or creativity. They lay much more in the entire process of management--planning, forecasting, estimating needs, mobilizing the resources, (finance, manpower, facilities,

even time), synchronizing the inputs, nursing human relations, reconciling conflicts of agenda and interest. Even Turkey, with a much less ambitious effort, saw its project halted prematurely through the internal politics of organizations, that is, through the failure of the leadership to understand and take enough account of the human dynamics of the staff.

Boiled down to one simple sentence; the wider the scope of a project, the more various the inputs, the more numerous their sources, the more severe will be the problem of programming, communication, coordination, synchronization and final implementation. To state this is merely to imply that, if an organization does not enjoy a history, (i.e. experience) of activity both large-scale and complex, and if a program it proposes--or has proposed to it--is not only large scale and complex, but also innovative, introducing new concepts, procedures and institutions--then stringent caution should be exercised. Each single concept and assumption should be thoroughly defined, and more important, its implications for action and resources should be minutely explored. Else, as happened in Turkey, certain terminology will be freely used, but the assumptions of an older language will still control planning unawares, and gradually mismatches will emerge between the needs for activity and the resources set aside for them. Simultaneously, the implied demands for action, and especially for the orchestration of action, should be measured against the organization's capacity to command it. Biting off more than can be chewed is still a frequent sin.

6. Particular and General Programs

It is germane here to go back to the precept that instruction should be centered on the learner. A possible

implication of this is that general programs of standard curricula may be inappropriate. What would be required instead is perhaps a myriad small, very local programs, catering for very local clienteles. Of course, the more common certain traits or functions, the more possible to provide general programs of wide relevance. In Turkey, for instance, the cultural differences between different regions are said to be wide, despite language and other features held in common. Nevertheless, literacy curricula derived from certain occupations--cotton production, for example--were found to be acceptable and successful in communities which practiced them, but which were otherwise quite diverse. Whatever the degree of generality permissible, however, it will probably remain true that a multiplicity of programs will be needed. This will in turn require either a fairly complex organization, or, in circumstances of difficult communications, a number of simpler and smaller ones. Some assessemnt of which option is more workable in given situations has to be attempted, for each, as usual, has its own advantages and drawbacks. A single complex organization may become unwieldly and unresponsive. On the other hand, there may simply not be enough talent to man a number of smaller units effectively.

7. Bureaucracy and Charisma

With this is raised another nagging issue. In the context of developing countries, the word "organization" is apt to assume the phrase "government organization"--bureaucracy and all that goes and does not go with it. Many of the troubles of non-formal education programs are the troubles of established civil services with career structures, career rivalries, demarcation disputes and their obverse, compartmentalization, their rigidities and ritualism, their frequent concern with

their own welfare rather than with their clients. Yet, since the informal sector for community services--the voluntary secular agencies, the religious missions, the energetic individual with a one-man band--is usually so weak and restricted in coverage, if not actually declining, an alternative assumption would probably not be realistic. To reach clienteles of significant magnitude a widespread program is necessary. To sustain a program in its rural reaches requires formal and regular support. How can these requirements be met without the risks of institutional calcification? A general answer is difficult. Nevertheless, a mix might be possible of government incentive and support for individual initiative in a plethora of small projects, each with limited objectives and no pretensions to perpetuity. Each project could be accepted for what it is worth for however long it lasts. The only permanent institution might be the agency responsible for identifying, vetting and enabling the charismatic to get themselves started. Organizing such an institution, guarding against abuse without stultifying responsiveness, setting acceptable margins of waste and monitoring operations for useful feedback would present tricky problems of their own, but should not be wholly infeasible. It is, after all, what the disbursing foundations are all about. Certainly, gauging and tapping the potential of individuals or groups to provide useful forms of training without the trappings of elaborate institutions and organizations should be worth at least an experimental exploration.

8. External Assistance

A not unimportant element in the planning of most literacy and other non-formal education is external assistance and the role of expatriates. Their presence is perhaps

disturbingly prominent. It is incontrovertible that, in most developing countries at least, most of the innovating ideas and projects are not native born. Indeed, the norms of international assistance have created an accepted, even dominant, pattern that the ideas and proposals should be developed by expatriates--advisers, experts or consultants, resident or visiting. The intrinsic merit of many of the ideas would not seriously be decried. What can be asked, though, is whether the difficulties, conflicts and breakdowns which so often occur are not partly caused by too rich an input of fertilizer: the plant responds eagerly to what is clearly nutritious, but its system is unready for it. Has the time come for the expatriates to act less as ideas and action men, and much more as resource persons, perhaps with wider knowledge of other experiences, but more importantly with pertinent questions on needs, resources and linkages?

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