DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 472 436 CE 084 382

| | |
|---|---|
| AUTHOR | Rogers, Alan |
| TITLE | Re-Thinking Adult Literacy and Post-Literacy: From an International Perspective. The Roby Kidd Memorial Lecture. |
| ISBN | ISBN-0-9542114-0-5 |
| PUB DATE | 2002-03-00 |
| NOTE | 31p.; Lecture delivered to the Indian Adult Education Association, New Delhi, October 4, 2001. A version of the lecture was published in the Indian Journal of Adult Education in January 2002. |
| AVAILABLE FROM | Uppingham Press, Noel Close, Adderley Street, Uppingham, Rutland LE15 9PP (5 British pounds). |
| PUB TYPE | Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150) |
| EDRS PRICE | EDRS Price MF01/PC02 Plus Postage. |
| DESCRIPTORS | *Access to Education; Adult Basic Education; *Adult Literacy; Adult Programs; Basic Skills; Developing Nations; *Development Communication; Foreign Countries; Illiteracy; Improvement Programs; *Literacy Education; Public Policy; Role of Education; Skill Development; *Transfer of Training |
| IDENTIFIERS | India; *Post Literacy Programs |

ABSTRACT

This booklet presents a summary of contemporary understandings of adult literacy in the context of development. It suggests that literacy is best seen as one of a number of different means of communications rather than a single essential basic skill; that learning literacy is not essential to development (many non-literate persons are already fully engaged in development activities); that the issue of access to literacy skills may be more important than the universal development of such skills; that most adult literacy learning programs have failed to help the participants to use these skills in their everyday lives; and that "post-literacy" seems to be most effective when seen as a separate program of assistance (like extension) for adults to use their everyday literacies outside of the classroom. (28 references) (Author/YLB)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original document.

ED 472 436

# RE-THINKING ADULT LITERACY AND POST-LITERACY FROM AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE.

## The Roby Kidd Memorial Lecture

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

° Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

A. Rogers

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Alan Rogers

Uppingham Press

ERIC

# RE-THINKING ADULT LITERACY AND POST-LITERACY

## FROM AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE.

**The Roby Kidd Memorial Lecture**

**delivered by Alan Rogers**
**to the Indian Adult Education Association,**
**New Delhi, 4 October 2001**

**Uppingham Press**



ERIC

© Alan Rogers
March 2002
ISBN 0 9542114-0-5

Published and distributed by
Uppingham Press
Noel Close
Adderley Street
Uppingham, Rutland LE15 9PP

Note: a version of the text of this lecture will be published in the *Indian Journal of Adult Education* during 2002.

## INTRODUCTION

I feel honoured indeed to have been invited to give the Roby Kidd Memorial Lecture in the year 2001. At the same time, I feel hesitant about your invitation. For I am aware that there are many persons in India who could give such a presentation with more substance than I can give to it; that I still have much to learn from the work which your organisations and many other organisations and individuals in India are currently engaged in; and that it is easy for me from the West to make suggestions about what ought to be done while it is you who have the responsibility of trying to do what can be done in the field. I want to avoid any sense that I am coming here to tell you how to do the tasks which you have been doing for so many years. What I would like to do is to share with you some of my own re-thinking about adult literacy which comes from engaging with various programmes in other countries. You may find yourself agreeing or disagreeing with my perspectives, but I hope that you will find them stimulating.

**Roby Kidd, adult literacy and India:** I came and still come to this question of literacy from an adult learning perspective. So that I must start with a tribute to Roby Kidd. He greatly contributed to our understanding of 'how adults learn' with his book under that title which appeared in 1959 (just after I started my career in adult education). And his work in that book and in the numerous articles which he wrote was very influential on my own thinking and practice. For many years, in association with Mohan Singh Mehta and others, he and his colleagues from Toronto such as James Draper worked in India, especially in Rajasthan, and this experience shaped his own work in the promotion of international adult education, especially the International Council for Adult Education. The fact that in some ways I have followed in his footsteps, both in the training of adult educators and in working in India, a country I have come to love over the past 28 years, is an accident, one which I value and which I still regard with much surprise.

## RE-THINKING FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

I received an e-mail only two weeks ago from Namibia. It asked "When does a person become literate?" It cited the case of an individual who could read but not write: "is he literate?" the writer asked.

This question is being asked all over the world. Only a week ago, I received a paper from Uganda where the government is launching a new functional adult literacy programme: and in the paper was a question: what are we aiming at? what do we mean by 'literate'? In Egypt, they want to know whether someone who can read the Koran but cannot read anything else is 'literate'. In Nepal, a woman told me, "I can read the primer but I cannot read anything else" (I tried her on a newspaper and she could not read it). Is she 'literate'? In Ethiopia, I met a market trader who wrote down notes about his customers and his sales, but he could not 'read' in the conventional sense; so he is classified as 'illiterate'.

We are then going through a period of questioning, of critical reflection. This is not just concentrated on strategies, *how* we can achieve universal literacy, although there is a good deal of discussion on this. It goes into matters of basic concepts. Books are being written challenging what exactly we mean by 'universal literacy'. Is it a set of skills common to all persons; or is it a set of activities which people engage in? This is of course not new, for most of these issues have been heard at several stages in the past. But they are being asked with a new urgency today.

And this questioning is not just an academic matter, a policy irrelevancy. For it is leading to new strategies. If we are building our adult literacy learning programmes on a false model of what literacy is, we shall be ineffective. We need to be clear about what it is we are aiming at if we are to achieve any success. To aim at the wrong target will be to waste our energies.

**The meaning of 'literacy':** Let me first address an issue which seems to arise often today. The word 'literacy' is frequently used as a metaphor, as in computer literacy, environmental literacy, legal literacy etc. But for me, literacy means working with written texts. Texts are made up of words and numbers which are written down on a variety of surfaces - a computer screen, paper, walls, blackboards and whiteboards, the back of your hand, an overhead projector slide, a video film etc. I am therefore becoming uncomfortable with the use of the term 'literacy' without any reference to written texts. I am willing to accept 'visual literacy' in the sense of 'reading' (making sense of) signs, symbols and pictures on a variety of surfaces. But literacy is different from *'awareness'* (as in 'environmental literacy' to mean 'environmental awareness') since one may become environmentally aware without being 'literate' or able to work with texts. Literacy is not the same as *knowledge* as in 'legal literacy' which I take to mean 'having legal knowledge'. Literacy is different from *skills* as in computer literacy, which seems to me to mean 'having the skills to use computers'. Indeed we even hear from time to time of 'oral literacy' which appears to mean the ability to communicate through speaking clearly. This use of the word 'literacy' to mean something different can lead to what I see as confusion. I attended a workshop in Nepal at which it was said quite seriously, 'Illiterate people are literate'. I simply find it hard to use words like that, although others clearly find it easy. So I shall be talking about people working with written texts.

I have picked out four issues which strike me as important - although there are more.

- First, the relationship between literacy and development is being debated again.
- Secondly, access to literacy skills is coming to the fore in what seems to me to be some exciting new work.
- Thirdly, I find myself reassessing the objectives of adult literacy learning programmes and with that the measures of deciding on success.

- And fourthly I have been led into some new thinking in the field of post-literacy.

I want to conclude with what I see as my greatest challenge.

## LITERACY AND DEVELOPMENT

I think that for me the most significant re-thinking about the relationship between literacy and development is the questioning (which I suspect not everyone here will share) of whether literacy is really necessary for development or not. I have been so long immersed in the rhetoric of UNESCO and others that "literacy is not only an indispensable tool for lifelong education and learning but is also an essential requisite for citizenship and human and social development" (UNESCO 2001 p2), that I have not listened to other voices. I, like others, have felt the need to justify literacy to policy-makers as well as to prospective literacy learners, and I believed that this can most easily be done if we assert often and loudly that there can be no development without literacy. I like others have urged the benefits of literacy from improved health to improved school attendance of children, from the dissemination of new knowledge to enhanced decision-making, from increased wealth to better citizenship.

**Development is possible without literacy:** But I have ignored until recently the fact that there are other voices, that this view has for several years been challenged. These voices are now getting stronger. To give but three examples:

> "Literacy is not a precondition for the spread of some forms of basic knowledge, however much it would be facilitated by literacy" (UNICEF 1990 pp 53-54)

> "Literacy is neither an entry requirement, nor necessary for the clientele to learn. ... The facilitation of adult and continuing learning can be provided without first teaching learners to read and write" (Bas 1991; cited in Lynch 1997 p90).

> "While literacy is a prerequisite to 'schoolability', it is not crucial to either the ability or the need of non-literates to learn" (Grandstaff 1976 p300).

I have now come to believe that adults can and do learn effectively without being 'literate'. They learn from each other; they learn from the radio, television and especially in India from films. I have seen adults who have become aware of their situation (including their oppression) without being literate, adults who engage in decision-making about their futures and their community's futures without being literate, who run substantial enterprises without working with texts. Let me quote from two recent reports which show that both power and knowledge can belong to so-called 'illiterates':

> "Of 21 community leaders in the area, only four could read and write. But it was these men who possessed the social capital to engage in discussions with power holders such as the local mayor regarding resources for the community, which their younger, more educated and 'literate' neighbours could not" (Betts forthcoming p5).

> "In a country like India, there are millions of men and women who still possess traditional knowledge in areas as diverse as medicine, health practices, architecture, water divining, agricultural practices [and] .. knowledge about self-fulfilment, but most of them could be illiterate" (Sanshoden 2000 p29).

So that I have been re-thinking my literacy, as not being essential to development. And this immediately chimes in with a moral imperative which I have felt for some time. We are told by UNESCO and others that there are currently some 900 millions and more non-literate people in the world. Most of these will never become literate. I find it hard to accept that these 900 million people can be excluded from their own development for ever, simply because they are designated 'illiterate'.

However we define development, whether economic growth, Basic Human Needs, Improved Quality of Life, or Sustainable Livelihoods, I now believe that adults can become involved *without first learning the skills of literacy*. Of course, they will be able to engage in developmental activities more effectively and more quickly by using literacy skills than by using other strategies to achieve their tasks. Literacy is important but it is not a 'pre-requisite'. For me, non-literate persons can engage in their own development.

What are the policy and practical implications of this re-thinking? I think I can identify four such outcomes.

**Literacy can come second:** First, in several places, there is an adoption of a 'literacy comes second' approach (Rogers 2000). If literacy does not come first, then our participants can start with developmental activities - for example, with PRA assessments of needs and intentions (as with REFLECT) or with sustainable livelihood activities or income generation, with environmental enhancement like tree planting, with improved farming or fishing practices, with urban slum improvements, with new housing projects, with health improvement schemes etc - in short, with whatever development task the participants themselves wish to do. And in some of these cases, the learning of literacy skills can be undertaken *through the literacy practices of that developmental activity*. Indeed, it has been argued that this is a more effective way of helping adults to learn literacy skills than traditional literacy classes.

> "We came to the conclusion that literacy education could be introduced where appropriate into classes on business skills, for example, or .. training, but it [literacy education] was unlikely to attract large numbers of learners on its own" (Prinsloo and Breier 1996 p231).

We can cite the work of Nirantar (India) in various places with women who have been learning about water pump



ERIC

maintenance and awareness animators, where the learning of literacy skills came after starting on a development project (Rogers 1994 pp11-22). In Bangladesh, a group of men running a tempo (small bus) service have been learning literacy through the literacy tasks attached to that project - and making money at the same time. Several years ago, I met a group of women in India who were learning their literacy skills while making banners to hang across the street - perhaps the project still exists. Again, in Nepal,

> ".. a group of women .. wanted to learn how to sew. When they were given a sewing manual and told they needed to read it before they could learn to sew, they lost hope. [They were told that] in order to read the sewing manual, they would have to take a literacy class. They felt that by the time they had learned to read well enough to understand the sewing manual, their interest in sewing would be gone. Literacy was seen as a barrier to their goal, because they and their teacher assumed that reading was a prerequisite to all forms of learning.
>
> .. Why should these women wait to learn sewing after reading? Why can't the sewing manual be adapted for use as a literacy [learning] text? Why can't the sewing class serve as motivation for the literacy lessons? It can, if we open our minds to new ways of teaching reading and writing" (Dixon and Tuladhar 1994).

I particularly like the account of Lalita Ramdas:

> "Literacy by itself had no meaning or relevance for those with whom we worked... Women attended our literacy classes only as long as it took them to find work, anything to help them to augment the family's meagre .. income. They bluntly told our teachers to go away or stick to teaching children. Learning how to sign their names or write the alphabet would not help to fill empty bellies.
>
> So we stopped worrying about literacy as an end in itself or as being central to our work. We began to work

> together with the people in trying to understand their immediate and daily concerns and difficulties; learning together to analyze the problems and understand the root causes; then planning how we could, together, find the answers and, above all, to take action" (Ramdas 1987).

Learning literacy skills then is coming second in a number of programmes. I have learned that I cannot reasonably ask adults to wait to learn literacy skills before engaging in developmental tasks; that I cannot say to all those who will never come to classes that they are permanently excluded from development. I have come to think that we can start with developmental activities and fit literacy in as one of the many different sets of skills and knowledge the group will find themselves acquiring in the course of that activity.

**Contextualised literacy:** Secondly, in these cases the teaching-learning materials are being sought in *different* texts. There is no common primer because all of these groups are engaged in different developmental tasks requiring different literacy tasks. Literacy is contextualised - that is, learning literacy skills depends on the kind of group and the activity it is engaged in, not on a uniform learning programme. A credit and savings group will be learning different kinds of literacy from an urban community-based organisation seeking to reduce the pollution of its area of residence. "Learning and literacy are enhanced" wrote Mezirow, one of the world's most eminent adult educators, "when the program is contextualized (that is, associated with personal realities)" (Mezirow 1996 p118). To seek to promote a common literacy learning programme may in fact hinder the learning of literacy skills, not help it.

**Which literacy?** And this raises the question as to which literacy is being taught. For many people have come to recognise that there are several different kinds of literacy - religious literacy or school-based literacy or commercial literacy etc. And there are language literacies also. Each society privileges a dominant literacy, and it demeans the many other less formal literacies which appear

everywhere - although we all use informal literacies all the time (I have been wondering today about mobile phone text messaging which seems to be another literacy). So when we say that someone is literate, we need to ask 'in which literacy?' Those programmes which use a 'Literacy comes second' approach find themselves concentrating on *the literacy in use* in the particular group, the texts the group itself wishes to use and create, rather than forcing them to learn the dominant literacy.

**Mixed learning groups:** Fourthly, and I wonder if this may not be the most important implication of this re-thinking, these programmes are moving away from selecting groups of all non-literate persons for teaching literacy skills. Most adult literacy learning programmes start by choosing groups of about 30 persons or smaller groups of about ten persons, all of whom are 'illiterate'. But it is a school-based model of adult literacy learning which urges that we should have all the learners at the same level of ignorance. It seems to imply that all the learning comes from the teacher, that the students cannot learn from each other.

But Roby Kidd (1959) among others has taught us that adults don't learn like that. Studies of adult learning have shown that adults in their daily lifelong learning normally learn from other adults. Persons with some limited literacy skills can help others in their group to learn literacy skills through participatory (sharing) methods. Such literacy groups are moving away from top-down, whole-class teaching by the teacher to 'shared learning', adult learner learning from other adult learners. I have seen this small group approach working in Bangladesh with striking results in both achievement and in motivation. Mixed economy groups of learners seem in some cases to be more effective than homogenous groups. I find myself wanting to experiment more and more with different kinds of literacy learning groups.

## ACCESS TO LITERACY

My second major theme is that some recent research relating to what I call 'access to literacy' seems to me to be very exciting and suggestive for new strategies - but it does not seem to have received the coverage which I believe it deserves.

**Literacy tasks:** It starts from the assumption (which I believe can be demonstrated) that everyone, literate and non-literate alike, has literacy tasks they want or feel the need to do. Everyone engages in literacy activities of some kind. They all adopt different strategies to fulfil these tasks, to engage in these activities. And all these literacy tasks are different. As some research in South Africa has clearly shown (Prinsloo and Breier 1996 pp213-234), the literacy activities which a taxidriver needs to do are different from those of other occupational groups such as a hospital porter. An older woman whose family has left home will have different literacy activities they wish to engage in from a younger woman with very young children.

**Literacy and families:** In order to fulfil those literacy tasks, people need *access* to literacy skills. There are two dimensions to some research into this area. First, the World Bank has explored what it called 'family literacies'. Families were assessed as to whether they had much or little 'access' to literacy skills. Those with high access (for example where one of the spouses or some close relatives were literate) were compared with others which had rather less access (for example, a young person in the family had literacy skills). A good deal of work is now being done on family literacies, for example in Pakistan, revealing how literacy is used by different members of the family for what purposes (Street 2001 pp188-204). It has been suggested that those who live in families with little in the way of literacy activities might be more motivated to attend adult literacy classes, but I wonder - my experience makes me query whether most of those who attend classes come from families which already have substantial access to literacy rather than from families which have few such activities. We need to research this.

**Literacy and communities:** But perhaps more important still is some work done in the Philippines on community literacies (Doronilla 1996). This research explored the literacy levels of thirteen different local communities. Some had very few literacy activities at all - fishing villages for example where the literacy tasks were mainly fulfilled by Chinese merchants rather than by the fisherfolk themselves. Some farming communities had rather more in the way of literacy activities, while some urban communities had many such literacy activities. Not all communities were the same in literacy terms.

**Non-literate persons in literate communities:** Now when these communities were examined in more detail (Bernardo 1998), it was found that the non-literate members of the those areas which had many literacy activities were more fully engaged in developmental initiatives, in decision-making and in innovations, in participating in group activities, than were the non-literate members of those communities with few literacy activities. In other words, it was demonstrated that learning literacy skills for oneself was not essential to development. What was useful was *access* to literacy skills and especially sharing in the developmental activities which characterised these communities such as group projects, decision-making and planning ahead. The same may be true of families with many or few literacy activities in them.

**Policy and strategic implications:** It seems to me that there are some policy and strategy implications arising from these studies. It may be that what we should be doing is to strengthen literacy activities in low and middle level communities and families. It may sound strange but it can be argued that to spend money on the *literate* members of the community, helping them to engage in more and more effective literacy activities, may be more beneficial in the long run to non-literate persons than spending money on literacy learning programmes from which in the end few will benefit. I throw this out because what I would like to come out of all of this is much more experimentation, much more diversity of

approach - provided there is proper monitoring and evaluation and the dissemination of the findings, both the positive and also the negative results of such experiments.

## CHANGING OBJECTIVES AND MEASURING SUCCESS

**Re-defining 'literate':** The third aspect of my subject comes from the process we have noted above of re-defining what we mean by 'being literate'. We have already seen the questioning that is going on about what is meant by the terms 'literate' and 'illiterate'. In one research study into the concept of success in adult literacy (Charnley and Jones 1979), it was pointed out that we cannot simply say that a literate person is someone who can 'read' [in general] or 'write' [in general]. We need to ask 'read what?' 'write what?' - for the verbs 'to read' and 'to write' are transitive verbs, they take an object. There are certain things we would expect a literate person to be able to read and other things we would not expect them to be able to read.

And they went on to assert that to be 'literate', we surely need to be able

- to read and write these texts with fluency rather than hesitation
- to read and write them with understanding rather than mechanically.

This is of course already well known. But a further question is now arising about whether a person is literate if they **can** read something or write something but never **do** so. One very perceptive statement puts it like this: being 'literate'

> ".. is not simply knowing how to read and write a particular script but applying this knowledge for specific purposes in specific contexts of use" (Scribner and Cole 1981 p236).

Indeed, "Literacy for the sake of literacy is not only fruitless, it is impossible" (Fiedrich 1996 p8). So, can a person who is not applying their skills really be described as 'literate'?

Throughout the international literacy world of literacy, there is then an increasing recognition that (to quote a recent report)

> "it is not the *learning* of literacy skills which brings about economic and social development but the *use* of literacy skills in real situations .. to achieve their own goals which will bring whatever benefits literacy can bring to the participants and their communities" (DFID 1999 p80).

It can be argued that to learn literacy skills and not to use them will help nobody.

**The goal of literacy classes:** Now this is one of those simple statements which have far-reaching implications which we can only begin to explore. For it means that the objective of adult literacy learning programmes is not to help someone to *learn* literacy skills but to help them to *use* literacy skills in their daily lives. Every facilitator in every literacy class is there not just to help the student learners to master letters and words on paper but to help them to transfer these skills into daily activities outside of the classroom. The Community Literacies Project in Nepal is founded on the principle that the objective of the project is to increase the use of literacy in the community.

**Measuring success:** And with the changed objectives comes a changed measure of evaluation. I quote from a recent government paper setting Guidelines for the national functional literacy programme from Uganda:

> "5.1.33 Learners' homes should be visited to monitor how they are practising what they learn in the FAL programme".

What the evaluators find will form part of the final assessment of the programme.

Let me give a simple example. If I have a class of thirty literacy learners; if at the end of the course 25 of these literacy learners pass the test; and if after six months I visit them in their homes and find that fifteen are using the skills but the rest are not, what is my success rate? 25 or 15? A recent evaluation of a skills training course in Thailand (Oxenham 2001 p28) showed that of those who completed the course satisfactorily, 27% were using the skills as intended, 17% were using them for other purposes, and 56% were not using the skills at all. If such figures apply to adult literacy learning programmes, then it seems to me that we really are wasting money and need to address the question of use seriously. But again we need research into the use of literacy skills.

**'Values' in evaluation:** But there is more to it than this. For we will find, when we do this research, that these literacy skills are being used for many different purposes, not all the same. Some will be writing letters, some reading newspapers; some will be using the bank, others will be circulating election notices. What do I do if I find, in my final evaluation, that the participants are reading film advertisements or sports journals rather than reading health literature or writing credit and savings applications? An evaluation in Brazil discovered that many of the women in the empowerment literacy programmes were using their newly developed skills to read fashion magazines and writing Christmas cards rather than "using reading for new learning" (Stromquist 1997 p151). Value judgements (my values, of course) come into this kind of assessment. Is the increase of consumerism through my literacy classes a good thing? - in South Africa, literacy classes have led to an increased interest in sales catalogues sent through the post.

**Developing statistics:** And how can I put all of this onto a comparative basis? This is one of the key questions being addressed today - how to measure the outcomes of literacy learning programmes when these outcomes are all different. Donors and

international agencies still demand from national and local programmes statistics of "how many people have been 'made' literate". It has been said that formal literacy evaluations "made what can be measured (i.e. tests of learning) important", whereas what some evaluators now wish to do is to find ways of making "what is important (i.e. the various *uses* of literacy skills) measurable". A good deal of work has been done on this and continues to be done on it; but the policy and strategy implications have not always been fully explored. A recent Save the Children (USA) literacy programme in Guatemala set out, as the project proposal said, "to make 250,000 illiterates literate". What kind of literacy? what uses would the literacy be put to? And how different would the programme have been if the objective had been "to encourage 250,000 persons to use literacy in their daily lives"? That would certainly have had more impact on society than just to learn literacy skills.

## POST-LITERACY

And this brings me to post-literacy; for much of what I have been discussing in the past few minutes will be what some people call 'post-literacy', not 'literacy'. They will argue that we should first help people to learn literacy skills and then secondly encourage them to use those skills in a post-literacy programme. The very word 'post-literacy' implies that it is a further phase *after* the initial literacy learning.

**Traditional post-literacy:** The approach currently adopted in many programmes thus sees post-literacy as a second stage activity, something that comes after the first stage. It argues that some further period of teaching or guided learning is needed; and it argues for the production of simple or easy-reading texts which are felt to be more suitable to people at an early stage of literacy development. It sees adult literacy in the same terms as children's literacy - simple words and phrases first and then more complex words and phrases, building up to 'full literacy'. And it often (but

not always) assumes that post-literacy provision needs to be made for a smaller group of persons than the initial literacy provision, normally some ten percent (one post-literacy centre for every ten literacy classes).

Studies and evaluations of post-literacy programmes (e.g. Mathew 1998 etc) have revealed a number of problems which have undermined the effectiveness of the very real efforts already being made in this area of literacy. For example,

- Who is it for - groups or individuals?
- How long should it last - for a short period of teaching or for a longer period of assistance?
- What does it aim at - equivalent levels of learning to formal schooling? entry into a continuing education system? self-reliant learners? self-help groups?
- What are the best strategies - more classes? village libraries and reading centres? independent reading?

I detect a good deal of uncertainty about post-literacy today.

And this era of questioning has led to a number of studies into the foundations of post-literacy - what do we mean by it and how can we best implement it? Once again some recent research seems to me to be important for my understandings of post-literacy and for the policy and strategy implications. I want to pick out two such strands.

**Adult learning:** The first is into adult learning as distinct from children's learning, Roby Kidd's own field. There has been a great deal of new research into adult learning which is slowly finding its way into some textbooks. Adults learn in different ways from children. Their time scale is different; they do not normally learn first and then practise afterwards; they learn through practising. Unlike children in school (but like children in the home), adults learn to cook by cooking, not by going to cooking classes. Adults learn farming and fishing by farming and fishing. Adults learn to care for a baby by having a baby. They learn **on** the job, not **for** the job. One of the most noticeable features of current approaches to

education, especially vocational education and training, is the approach through apprenticeship learning. Krashen for example has drawn a distinction between 'acquiring' skills and 'learning' skills formally (Krashen 1982). And while adults do both, they seem to learn most effectively through acquisition within their social contexts rather than through formal learning in set contexts.

So it can be with literacy: adults can and some do learn literacy by 'doing literacy' for real. In several pieces of research in countries as far apart as Brazil, Sierra Leone and the Philippines, it has been discovered that a number (perhaps about ten percent) of the adults surveyed in different settings have 'acquired' some skills of literacy without going to school or to adult literacy classes. They have developed these skills in the home or in the market or in their daily lives. And this is not a simple linear progression, from illiterate to semi-literate to literate. It is a messy process of acquisition of skills rather than formal and sequential learning.

**Easy readers?** And this brings me to my second point. Different research (Moon 1993) indicates that there is no such thing as easy words and phrases and difficult words and phrases. The 'easiness' and the difficulty lie not in the texts but in the reader/user. The difference between being able to cope with a text with fluency and understanding relates to the experience of the reader, not the text. There are texts I can read quickly even though they use quite technical terms, because I am familiar with what these texts are discussing. Other texts I find I cannot read because I lack any experience of what is being discussed. Even in languages which have simple and complex letters, the research indicates that the complexity of texts relates to the experience of the reader, not to the words used. And it has been demonstrated that adults do not find things difficult when they really want to do them. They can cope with even a 'difficult' text when they understand its meaning and when it is important to them to do so. One of our action research projects found women being able to read film advertisements very quickly and easily, despite the fact that some of the words were

long and complicated, because they knew all the words in the texts; it was all within their experience.

This rather changes some of the assumptions behind the post-literacy programmes aimed at the production of easy-reading texts. It does not of course get rid of the fact that persons with limited literacy skills and limited literacy confidence need special provision. Some for example indicate that they can read newspaper headlines but not the closer text in the newspaper columns. But these differences seem to lie not so much in the words used but in the formatting of the texts. To produce a text using what the writers assume are easy words about subjects outside the experience of the readers will (if this research is correct) still produce unusable texts.

**Re-defining post-literacy:** Recent thinking thus suggests that a re-definition is needed for post-literacy altogether. What we are dealing with are those persons who have been able to develop some literacy skills but these skills and the confidence to use them are limited. Now, if that is the target group for post-literacy, then that group is *larger*, not smaller, than those in initial literacy classes, for there are all those who have had some experience of primary schools (formal and non-formal) as well as those who have been in adult initial literacy learning programmes. We shall need more post-literacy provision than initial literacy classes, not less.

> I therefore like the re-definition of post-literacy as *"the provision of assistance to all those who feel that they are having difficulties with the practice of literacy in real situations"* (DFID 1999 p82).

Post-literacy is not only to help a few people to use village libraries to read specially prepared easy-reading texts. It is to help *all those who have some, but limited, literacy skills and confidence* to engage with the texts they find surrounding them, to develop new strategies to deal with the literacy tasks which face them.

I can see some clear policy and strategy implications of such a re-definition. For, if we define post-literacy as *helping people with limited literacy skills with the use of literacy in their daily lives*, then we shall need to add to the existing range of post-literacy activities a number of new approaches. Let me outline three that I have identified in various countries.

**Transfer from classroom to daily lives:** First, several programmes are trying to develop ways of helping those who are in initial literacy classes to transfer their skills into use in their daily lives. Those who are learning in the classroom through a primer are being helped to adapt what they are learning to the world outside of the classroom. In some cases, this is left until after the primer is finished, but in other cases, the classroom learning is being reinforced from texts to be found in the home. For example, if the word *'agni'* is being used in the primer, a newspaper article which uses this word in the context of some slum disaster is being used; if the word *'pani'* is being mastered through the primer, a report on a flood or on a drought shows that word being used in significant contexts. Such reinforcement of adult learning from the texts around them is helping both the learning of literacy skills and the transfer of literacy from the classroom into daily lives.

There have been several programmes devoted to this. For example, World Education in Nepal has been encouraging mothers to keep a written record of their children's growth and development. Initially much of the work is done by the facilitator/animator but gradually it is being transferred to the literacy learner for them to keep their own records. Several groups have started helping the participants to keep their own credit and savings records rather than the facilitator doing all of it. In one group in Bangladesh I visited, all the participants could write from the start not only their own name but also the names of all the other members of the group; and all of them also wrote down the dates of payments. They found this motivating - although not all groups would feel the same about it. I find myself thus asking of every

class I visit how the group can bring *daily literacies* into the classroom and how the group can take the *classroom literacy* out into the daily lives of the participants. This is of course a tall order for many of the facilitators - but without it, it seems to me that what is learned in the classroom through the primer will seem to be separate from the everyday literacy tasks of the literacy learners.

**Helping non-participants:** Secondly, how can I help all those who will never come to my classes? To say that I ought to persuade them to come in appears to me to deny their adulthood. There are many who have decided for whatever reason that they will not or cannot come to my classes. Do I just ignore them? I have seen two approaches which have been impressed me considerably. The first of these is the 'real literacy' approach (Rogers 1999). This starts by identifying with the people who do not come to classes what kind of literacies they are engaged in - through for example a group of which they are a member; and it seeks to use those literacy activities to help them to develop their own literacy skills. One of the major developments in adult literacy in many countries today is work-based literacy - not just holding literacy classes in factories and other workplaces but using the literacy tasks and texts of those factories and other workplaces to help the participants to develop relevant literacy skills. In Botswana, some 40% of the government's adult literacy programme is work-based, and Namibia is expanding its work-related provision significantly.

**Literacy extension?** But a second approach is a more individualised approach. It looks something like an extension service for literacy. It recruits people with more literacy skills and asks them to help those with less skills on a personal basis. It establishes 'drop-in centres' where people can go to get help with their daily literacy tasks. In Nigeria, a 'literacy shop' was set up in Abuja Market, Ibadan, where traders, customers and others could get immediate help with literacy problems. Again, I would not like to propose any prescriptive approaches - each agency in each context should surely devise ways of helping such people with their

own tasks. And innovative, experimental projects do not always scale up into programmes.

**Adapting texts:** A third post-literacy strategy is also being explored in some places. Until now, I have assumed that people need to adapt themselves to the texts which they find - they must learn to read what is provided. But more recently I have been asking whether those who produce texts should not try to adapt these texts to the people, to those who have some but limited literacy skills and literacy confidence? Can we help those who publish to think more carefully about their users? In Nepal, literacy agencies have been working with (for example) the Annapurna Conservation Area Programme (ACAP) and with Forest Users Groups to produce texts which are appropriate to those with relevant experience but limited literacy skills. In South Africa, one project is working with those who publish sales catalogues which get into many homes in that country to include sections printed in a format which make them accessible to those with limited skills and confidence.

**Increasing diversity, not uniformity:** My general conclusion from all of this is that one common form of helping all adults to learn literacy skills, one national programme, may not be as helpful as one which uses a wide diversity of approaches, a number of different materials and methods. For it seems to me that adults are different and their contexts are different; and they will respond best when they are approached in a way which respects rather than diminishes these differences. Some will want formal teaching using textbooks. Some will want individual help with their own literacy tasks. Some will want immediately relevant literacy. We do not need uniformity in the provision of adult learning of literacy skills.

## A WORD OF WARNING

**Danger of reinforcing inequalities:** I have however most recently begun to feel some hesitation about some of these newer approaches. For it has been suggested that if we concentrate (as I

have indicated some workers in adult literacy are) on the *current* literacy tasks which adults engage in already, on the existing uses of literacy, we shall simply be confirming the current inequalities in society. Such an approach will not in itself transform society; it will not undermine the existing power structures. Almost all of those engaged in adult literacy programmes wish to change society - although sometimes within careful limits. They wish to bring the excluded in, to change the elite balance, to challenge the power assumptions behind existing literacies.

**Critical literacies:** Now I could argue that some of the suggestions listed above will in fact contribute to that process. For example, challenging those who produce texts to think hard about the users of those texts will bring about significant changes. But perhaps this is not enough; perhaps we can go further than that.

The key issue (which so many writers on adult literacy have already discussed several times) is whether we can help those who engage with us in developing their literacy skills to become more critically reflective of their experiences of literacy. I would like to finish with one case study which I found most suggestive. In Bangladesh, a group of women wished to learn to read the marriage registration form, so that they could register their own marriage. But they found the form 'too difficult'; the text was too small in print, the language used was too legalistic. So they gave up. Except that they didn't. They began to question - why was it like this? why were those who produced it asking this question or that question? Why was this word used when another one would be more relevant to them? So the group began to write their own form. These people learned more literacy skills as well as current law in the course of three meetings working on this text than they had done in the previous thirteen!

**Horizontal learning:** And the upshot of this was that those who produced the text found themselves learning from the literacy learners, just as the facilitator found herself learning more about the realities of the women's own lives and perceptions. Literacy had

become not a one-way activity, from the learned to the unlearned. It had become what I heard being called in South Africa 'horizontal learning', learning on both sides.

**Learning from the experience of others:** And this brings me to my last point. I have become increasingly concerned about the need for more research in adult literacy. But there really is no point in such research if it is not being read and acted upon by practitioners in the field. We all need to read about the experiences of others, to engage in horizontal learning. This lecture has been based, not only on a number of field visits to adult literacy programmes in various parts of the world, but also on reports of research such as that in South Africa (Prinsloo and Breier 1996) and in the Philippines (Doronilla 1996; Barnardo 1998) which have been among the most influential books I have read on adult literacy in recent years. We cannot do our work effectively if we are not learning from others. I find myself reading because I feel I must.

And not just ourselves as planners and managers and trainers of adult literacy programmes. It will also apply to those who teach adults in the various villages and towns in our country. The concept of horizontal learning may be the most important development in adult literacy today - for like so much of what I have said, it has profound implications for our greatest allies, the facilitators/animators. It is of them that Roby Kidd was speaking when, describing the most important attribute of the teacher, he wrote:

> "he [sic] must be a learner himself. If he has lost his capacity for learning, he is not good enough to be in the company of those who have preserved theirs" (Kidd 1973 p303).

Our 'partners in literacy' (Rogers 1989), the animators/facilitators, and their learning are perhaps the things we should be most concerned about - but that is another story which requires another lecture.

| Subject | New insight | Policy and practice implications |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Literacy and development | development can start without literacy | start with development projects and fit literacy learning into development projects. 'Literacy comes second' model. |
| 2. Literacy and community | non-literate persons in highly literate communities/families show more developmental initiative than non-literate persons in less literate communities/families. | help to develop literate families and communities rather than concentrate on non-literates only. |
| 3. Literacy programme objectives | main aim of literacy learning programmes is to encourage **use** of literacy skills in daily lives rather than **learning** of literacy skills in the classroom | a) concentrate on transfer of skills from classroom to daily life<br>b) evaluate **use** of literacy skills, not how much has been learned |
| 4. Post-Literacy | redefine post-literacy as helping all those with limited literacy skills with their literacy tasks | a) help those who will never come to class (e.g. extension service for literacy)<br>b) help those who produce texts to adapt texts to people rather than expect people to adapt to the texts |
| 5. Critical literacies | using existing literacy tasks for learning will not transform society; need for critical dimension to literacy learning | help participants to review their own found texts critically and revise them - and they will learn literacy skills in the process. |

## REFERENCES

Bernardo A R 1998 *Literacy and the Mind* UNESCO Institute of Education, Hamburg

Betts J Literacies and livelihood strategies: experience from Usulutan, El Salvador (forthcoming).

Charnley A and Jones H A 1979 *The Concept of Success in Adult Literacy* Huntington, Cambridge

DFID 1999 *Re-defining Post-Literacy in a Changing World*, Research Report 29, DFID London

Dixon J and Tuladhar S 1994 *Whole Language: an integrated approach to reading and writing* CIE, University of Massachusetts, Amherst Mass.

Doronilla M 1996 *Landscapes With Literacy* UNESCO Institute of Education, Hamburg

Fiedrich M 1996 *Literacy in Circles* Action Aid, London

Grandstaff Martin, 1976 Non-formal education: some indications for use, *Comparative Education Review* 20, no 3 pp 294-304.

Kidd Roby 1959 *How Adults Learn* Association Press, New York

Kidd Roby 1973 *How Adults Learn* (revised edition) Association Press, New York

Krashen S 1982 *Principles and Practice of Second Language Acquisition* Pergamon Press, Oxford

Lynch J et al 1997 *Education and Development: tradition and innovation* vol. 4 *Non-formal and non-governmental approaches* Cassell, London

Mathew A 1998 'Sustaining literacy in a non-literacy environment', unpublished paper, National Institute of Adult Education, New Delhi.

Mezirow J 1996 Contemporary Paradigms of Learning, *Adult Education Quarterly* 46, no 3 pp 158-172

Moon C 1993 *Individualized Reading* International Reading and Language Centre, University of Reading, Reading

Oxenham John and others 2001 Study of Programmes of Adult Education and Training which incorporate training for livelihood skills, prepared for IIZ,DVV, Bonn.

Prinsloo M and Breier M 1996 *Social Uses of Literacy* Benjamin, Amsterdam



ERIC

Ramdas Lalita 1987 Literacy and empowerment: a definition for literacy *Convergence* 20. no 3-4 pp 54-57.

Rogers A (edited) 1994 *Voices of Literacy* Education for Development, Reading

Rogers A 1999 Improving the Quality of Adult Literacy: the 'Real Literacies' Approach, *International Journal of Educational Development* 19 pp 219-234

Rogers A 1989 *Partners in Literacy* Education for Development, Reading

Rogers A 2000 Literacy comes second *Development in Practice* 10, no 2 pp 236-240

Sanshodhan 2000 *A Matter of Quality* published by Society for Integrated Development of Himalayas, Mussoorie India

Scribner S and Cole M 1981 *The Psychology of Literacy* Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass

Street B V (edited) 2001 *Literacy and Development* Routledge London

Stromquist N 1997 *Literacy for Citizenship: gender and grassroots dynamics in Brazil* State University of New York Press, New York

UNESCO 2001 Discussion Paper on United Nations Decade of Literacy, http://www.unesco.org/education/litdecade/discussion.html

UNICEF 1990: Meeting Basic Learning Needs: a vision for the 1990s, UNICEF NY, background document to Jomtien, 1990



BEST COPY AVAILABLE

## RE-THINKING ADULT LITERACY AND POST-LITERACY FROM AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

In this controversial booklet, Alan Rogers draws upon a wide range of recent publications and his own extensive experience of many developing countries to summarise contemporary understandings of adult literacy in the context of development. He suggests that literacy is best seen as one of a number of different means of communications rather than a single essential basic skill; that learning literacy is not essential to development (many non-literate persons are already fully engaged in development activities); that the issue of access to literacy skills may be more important than the universal development of such skills; that most adult literacy learning programmes have failed to help the participants to *use* these skills in their everyday lives; and that 'post-literacy' seems to be most effective when seen as a separate programme of assistance (like extension) outside of any classroom for adults with their everyday literacies.

This publication will be an essential tool for all policy-makers and practitioners seeking a survey of modern approaches to adult literacy.

Copies may be obtained from
Uppingham Press
Noel Close
5 Adderley Street
Uppingham, Rutland LE15 9PP
Price: £5 (£6 overseas).

CE054382

0

**U.S. Department of Education**
*Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)*
*National Library of Education (NLE)*
*Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)*

Educational Resources Information Center

# REPRODUCTION RELEASE

(Specific Document)

## I. DOCUMENT IDENTIFICATION:

| | |
|---|---|
| Title: Re-thinking Adult Literacy & Post-Literacy from an international perspective. | |
| Author(s): ALAN ROGERS | |
| Corporate Source: Uplands Press (UK) | Publication Date: 2002. |

## II. REPRODUCTION RELEASE:

In order to disseminate as widely as possible timely and significant materials of interest to the educational community, documents announced in the monthly abstract journal of the ERIC system, *Resources in Education* (RIE), are usually made available to users in microfiche, reproduced paper copy, and electronic media, and sold through the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). Credit is given to the source of each document, and, if reproduction release is granted, one of the following notices is affixed to the document.

If permission is granted to reproduce and disseminate the identified document, please CHECK ONE of the following three options and sign at the bottom of the page.

The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 1 documents

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Sample

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

Level 1

☑

Check here for Level 1 release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche or other ERIC archival media (e.g., electronic) *and* paper copy.

The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 2A documents

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE, AND IN ELECTRONIC MEDIA FOR ERIC COLLECTION SUBSCRIBERS ONLY, HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Sample

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

2A

Level 2A

☐

Check here for Level 2A release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche and in electronic media for ERIC archival collection subscribers only

The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 2B documents

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Sample

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

2B

Level 2B

☐

Check here for Level 2B release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche only

Documents will be processed as indicated provided reproduction quality permits.
If permission to reproduce is granted, but no box is checked, documents will be processed at Level 1.

*I hereby grant to the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) nonexclusive permission to reproduce and disseminate this document as indicated above. Reproduction from the ERIC microfiche or electronic media by persons other than ERIC employees and its system contractors requires permission from the copyright holder. Exception is made for non-profit reproduction by libraries and other service agencies to satisfy information needs of educators in response to discrete inquiries.*

**Sign here, please**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Signature: Alan Rogers | Printed Name/Position/Title: PROFESSOR ALAN ROGERS | |
| Organization/Address: Uplands Seminars in Development (UK) | Telephone: 00-44-1572-821282 | FAX: 1572-823078 |
| | E-Mail Address: ALANROGERSA@AOL.COM | Date: 5/1/2003. |

(Over)

## III. DOCUMENT AVAILABILITY INFORMATION (FROM NON-ERIC SOURCE):

If permission to reproduce is not granted to ERIC, *or*, if you wish ERIC to cite the availability of the document from another source, please provide the following information regarding the availability of the document. (ERIC will not announce a document unless it is publicly available, and a dependable source can be specified. Contributors should also be aware that ERIC selection criteria are significantly more stringent for documents that cannot be made available through EDRS.)

| |
|---|
| Publisher/Distributor: |
| Address: |
| Price: |

## IV. REFERRAL OF ERIC TO COPYRIGHT/REPRODUCTION RIGHTS HOLDER:

If the right to grant this reproduction release is held by someone other than the addressee, please provide the appropriate name and address:

| |
|---|
| Name: |
| Address: |

## V. WHERE TO SEND THIS FORM:

Send this form to the following ERIC Clearinghouse:

**Acquisitions Coordinator**
**ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education**
**Center on Education and Training for Employment**
**1900 Kenny Road**
**Columbus, OH 43210-1090**

However, if solicited by the ERIC Facility, or if making an unsolicited contribution to ERIC, return this form (and the document being contributed) to: