

Literacies for the twenty first century? The view from below



Colloquium on “Advancing Towards a Literate Twenty-First Century”

International Literacy Day Celebrations, UNESCO Headquarters, Paris, France, 9 September 2013

*by Professor Asha Kanwar
Commonwealth of Learning*

Transcript

It is an honour to be at the Colloquium on ‘Advancing towards a literate C21’ and I thank the Director, Division for Basic Learning and Skills Development, Mmantsetsa Marope and Dr Subbarao for the invitation. My topic today is ‘Literacies for the twenty first century? The view from below’ and I will explore this theme in light of some of the literacy interventions made by my organization, the Commonwealth of Learning or COL.

As we know from the report of the World Illiteracy Foundation, the social and economic costs of illiteracy to the global economy are over a trillion dollars each year. What can be done to mitigate these costs? In which ways can technology help? It is clear that it cannot be business as usual and the global community needs to adopt alternative and innovative approaches to address the unfinished business of illiteracy.

But first let us reflect on what C21 literacy skills are. Are these different from the literacy skills required in the 20th or the 19th centuries? And does technology offer solutions to address the issue of global literacy?

Prof Alan Rogers refers to the ‘fault line’ that seems to appear in the field of adult literacy in the developing world. At one level, adult literacy is seen in terms of adult schooling and very much within the education sector. Adult literacy is seen as essentially basic education, with a prescribed curriculum, in short, a substitute school for adults. At another level, adult literacy is seen as embedded within social and economic development. Literacy programmes are placed within some development activity. For example, a group of farmers learn literacy skills through materials related to crops, pests, weather etc. Here the specific needs of the particular learning community determine the content of what and how it is learned. The emphasis is more on the use rather than the acquisition of literacy skills. (ICT & Literacy: who benefits?, Dr Glen M Farrell, Editor, COL 2004, Foreword, xiii-xv)

Let us take the example of a literacy project that COL carried out in India and Zambia with funding from DFID. Literacy workers in these two Commonwealth countries received technical assistance from COL to use ICTs to design, develop and deliver literacy programmes in rural areas over a three year period. As a consequence of this project, the International Institute for Communication & Development (IICD) report points out that people who were holding the country cigarette ‘beedis’ to begin with, were now holding CDs—a radical transformation. Under this project, the needs were defined by each learner and her family—likewise the curriculum and content was specific to each learner—developed as a powerpoint and simple visuals. Each learner then had specially customized learning materials in CDs. The process was facilitated by animators (1 per 300 learners) from within the community, who had been trained under the COLLIT project.

The learners had access to a Telecentre and learned using the touchscreen facility at a time and pace convenient to them. Families were involved in evaluating the skills acquired, for instance, the children could see if their mother was able to read their progress report; the wife could see whether her husband was able to catch the right bus after reading the signboard. This strategy was so effective that the State Resource Centre estimated that 98% of the learners became proficient in functional literacy skills within six months.

Saraswathy, had dropped out of school due to lack of interest in studies but she was proficient in vocational skills and qualified as a tailor. She did not display any analytical skills, was hesitant and diffident about asking for clarifications or dealing with strangers.

However, she needed functional literacy to support her vocation. Through the COLLIT project, she was able to access the facilities at the Telecentre and was able to expand her business successfully. The COLLIT project was not simply about literacy or numeracy but embedded these skills within the wider social and economic needs of the stakeholders.

COL’s approach to literacy has been to enable the community to ‘domesticate’ the technology and to use it for various literacies. While functional literacy programmes usually operate at one level, the COL approach is to mobilise literacy strategies at three levels so that the learner acquires functional, interactive and critical skills.

At present, COL is working in the areas of financial and health literacies using appropriate technologies. As we know, financial literacy is ‘the ability to use knowledge and skills to manage financial resources effectively for a lifetime of financial well-being’. Similarly, health literacy refers to ‘skills to enable access, understanding and use of information for health’.

These are participants of COL’s Lifelong Learning for Farmers in Kenya. Under this initiative, COL catalyses the links between civil society, institutions and micro-finance institutions to develop multi-media based learning. Such a linkage in which every agricultural borrower is also a learner has led to vibrant entrepreneurial behaviours among the poorer and marginalised communities. This model, which was first successful in India and Sri Lanka, is now spreading to Africa and the Caribbean.

COL’s Healthy Communities initiative, helps local organisations to create non-formal educational programmes about community health and development. These are photographs of a learning programme called the Bag of Life in a district of Malawi with extremely high rates of maternal and child mortality.

The programme is a collaborative venture between a community network of some 15,000 women, a local health NGO, the district hospital and a community radio. The Bag of Life centres on 60 minutes of weekly audio content that combines information about maternal and child health, i.e. vetted by doctors and nurses, with the voices of local women and their real life stories. Some 3,000 women participate directly in weekly listening and discussion groups. Our evaluation shows that 2/3 of active participants have learned the importance of simple key messages, e.g. to deliver in the hospital or clinic. In perhaps the most powerful illustration of the value of the Bag of Life, over 150 women's groups representing over 2,000 women contribute their own money to keep this programme going. The community was mobilized, facilitated in health literacy and linked to community health institutions.

In all these initiatives, appropriate technologies such as audio CDs, mobiles and community radio were used.

Three important lessons can be drawn from the three COL projects. One, that financial and health literacies need not necessarily begin with functional literacy. Two, literacy must be located within the specific social and economic value chain. Three, functional literacy could be a natural outcome of financial and health literacies.

These are very context specific programmes that reach thousands rather than hundreds of thousands. How can we reach the other unreached? The twenty first century offers a phenomenal range of technologies that can help us address the issues of access, flexibility and personalization.

As more governments begin to distribute low-cost tablets to their citizens, COL has created a prototype of a Classroom Without Walls, which makes it possible to access the internet even in remote areas far removed from power grids and connectivity. The sudden rise of affordable Tablet computers has made it possible to connect learners even in remote areas to experience the power and advantages of connected learning. Today, there is enough computing power in Tablets to make them function as servers. They can run a Learning Management System such as Moodle. Learners can access materials in the server using hand-held tablets.

In the picture here, the white device serves as power source and WiFi hot spot for the black device which is actually a PC. Together these two devices cost just under \$100 and form the core of what COL calls "Classroom Without Walls"

However, technology by itself cannot advance literacies in the C21. Literacy must be seen as part of the whole development process. Illiterates are not mere students but partners in learning.

To achieve literacies for the C21, we need to make the transition from capacity or simple acquisition of skills to capability for the use of these skills for social and economic development. It means moving beyond outputs to outcomes and finally it is not literacy that can lead to development in a unilinear way but that literacy and development complement and reinforce each other.

Thank you