

HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH: THE QUESTION FOR BASIC LITERACY PROVIDERS

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ABSTRACT

A basic concern for adult literacy providers is "how much is enough." In beginning to answer that question, this paper defines literacy in three ways: functional literacy, cultural literacy, and critical literacy. A second dimension to answering the question deals with the assumptions about how literacy skills will be used once they are attained. Thirdly, the community and linguistic contexts for literate practice will be considered. The author concludes that the answer to the question posed lies in one's basic assumptions about literate practice.

1. THE STATE OF BASIC LITERACY

1.1 Definitions

Elvit is a young woman living in Sultan Kudarat province. She has three children and is recently divorced. Elvit dropped out of formal schooling when she was close to completing grade six. She reads well in Manobo and also understands texts in Filipino and Cebuano. She writes me letters in English occasionally which are barely understandable. Is she literate?

Anduy attended school for less than one year. He learned to read in a non-formal reading class and reads well in Manobo. His wife attended elementary school and helps him to write letters (his non-formal classes did not cover the use of cursive writing). He understands texts in Filipino and Cebuano reasonably well. Recently, he was elected to the barangay council. Is he literate?

Alifio was forced to drop out of formal schooling part way through grade two. He learned to read by sheer determination. He reads fluently in Tiruray, his mother tongue, and also understands texts in Manobo, Filipino, and Cebuano. He received non-formal training as a village health worker and as an adult vernacular literacy teacher. Is he literate?

Defining literacy is much more than deciding if a person can read and write independently. As these three case studies point out, formal schooling may or may not be a factor. Other factors may be equally important to a definition of a literate individual.

For many years, I have wrestled with the important question of knowing when a person is literate enough. Is a basic course, taught in 120 hours or so, enough to satisfy the person's learning needs? Will that person be able to use literacy in a functional way to meet daily needs? Is learning to read and write in one's mother tongue enough or should basic instruction also include second language acquisition? I think that I am closer now to the

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answer to these questions than when I first started asking them, but certainly there are many aspects of these important questions yet to be explored.

Williams and Snipper (1990), writing with a focus on the bilingual student, point out that a viable definition of literacy must go beyond skill level, "to aim, purpose, audience, and text" (p. 4). They suggest three types of literacy as important to defining literate practice: functional literacy, cultural literacy, and critical literacy.

Functional literacy has long been the target of literacy campaigns. At one time, functional literacy was concerned with just the ability to read and write, but more recently that definition has been augmented with questions of how that basic skill is applied to real life situations, such as filling out forms and understanding what is read in the newspaper. As Williams and Snipper (1990) note, "implicit in the expression 'functional literacy' is the notion that it represents a level of reading and writing that enables people to function in society" (p. 5). This, however, does not address the community context or demands for literate practice, or the lack thereof. In many Filipino communities, for example, reading demands are very low and reading material almost non-existent. Furthermore, this definition does not take into consideration the coping strategies of illiterate people for functioning in a literate environment. For example, the non-reader may develop a network of people to fill in forms and pass on information, or non-readers may learn non-print cues, such as the color of buses or the shape of signs, to help them get where they want to go.

"Cultural literacy refers to a much broader range of behavior associated with what is seen as the socio-historical context of writing. In this view, meaning is not inherent in discourse; readers and writers *construct* it as they process texts" (Williams and Snipper, 1990, p 6). In the view of some, students must learn more than a skill, they must also be given the context for the literature to which they are exposed. For example, what must a reader know about Philippine history before reading a story about World War II?

What makes this problematic, however, is deciding just what the common understandings for learners should consist of. Who decides the norm, especially in a heterogeneous society? In countries such as the Philippines, it cannot be assumed that all students come to school with a common cultural understanding. Is there room in an educational system for diverse cultures and diverse understandings of texts? When literate behavior means making texts personally meaningful, instructors should aim to include all learners, not to exclude some on the basis of cultural differences (Williams and Snipper, 1990, p. 9). How an Ifugao child understands a story may be different than the meaning derived by a child living in Cebu. Can the same story be personally meaningful to both, but in differing ways?

A further question might be, is there room in the educational system for speakers of various languages? Language is a means of social definition, and reading and writing in those languages are an important part of this identity (p 9).

A third form of literacy, according to Williams and Snipper (1990), is critical literacy. This type emerged in part as a response to the notion of a common cultural literacy. "Critical literacy denotes not only the ability to recognize the social essence of literacy but also to understand its fundamentally political nature" (p 10). If literature is created on the assumption of a shared cultural background, then it is important to note that certain non-mainstream groups will be excluded. Williams and Snipper note, for example, that functionally illiterate people in the United States are largely either women or immigrants who do not speak English well, two politically disenfranchised groups (p. 11). In the Philippines as well, literature written for an urban population who speaks a major language

and have access to TV and internet, will largely exclude speakers of the smaller language communities who live in rural settings. Critical literacy skills will enable students to understand "the intended audience as well as the aim and purpose inherent in a text" (p. 11).

Whereas functional literacy skills can be developed in a relatively short period of time, cultural and critical literacy take longer to develop. These aspects will largely determine if reading skill will become literate practice or whether the skill will be deemed impractical and excluding to their own personal and community context.

1.2 Models for delivery

While the attainment of literacy skills has been the focus of much attention by UNESCO and member countries during the decade of the 1990s, the methods of providing instruction have not changed a great deal. As noted in the EFA report of 2000, among the approaches used were non-formal classes, media, and contracting out classes to non-government agencies under the Literacy Service Contracting Scheme.

It is interesting to note the content of cultural literacy in the programs mentioned in the EFA 2000 report. For example, the report mentions "the formation of values and consciousness" (p. 26). "The literacy intervention aims to improve the status of women in the community and enhance their capability to improve family life and conditions" (p. 26) and "beneficiaries also join classes in livelihood skills such as food preservation, baking, cosmetology and hair science" (p. 78). There is an implicit 'cultural' message, even on the surface of these programs. Do participants have no values? Do women not care for their families properly? How does hair science relate to reading skills and life in general?

The Philippines has every reason to be proud of the near universal primary education it has attained. This should translate in future years to a more literate citizenry. What is interesting to note, therefore, is that the nationwide simple literacy rate for the 15+ age group has not changed over the last decade (p. 50). Is there perhaps a cultural or critical literacy deficit that should be addressed?

2. WHAT ARE THE GOALS OF THE LITERACY PROVIDER?

Before answering our initial question, "how much is enough," we must address the assumptions and purposes behind learning to read and write both for the literacy provider and for the literacy learner.

Scribner (1997) offered three metaphors as a way of understanding how literacy skills are conceived. The first metaphor is *literacy as adaptation*. This metaphor "encapsulates the survival or pragmatic value of literacy" (Goldman, 1989, p. 2). An important feature of literacy from this point of view is noting the uses which people find for literacy and how literacy answers the felt needs of the individual. It is the functional components of applied literacy that are in focus. There is an implied message that everyone needs literacy to meet his or her individual needs.

Scribner's second metaphor is *literacy as power*. From this viewpoint, literacy is seen as "a necessary tool for socio-political and economic advancement" (Goldman, 1989, p. 2). There is the assumption that the group or community will be empowered, or advanced, as they become more literate. The level of literacy attained by individuals will impact both their own standing within the community and the lives of others in the community. This is a common assumption of development-based literacy programs, but also of social reformers, such as Paulo Freire. As Scribner notes, "Paulo Freire bases his influential theory of literacy

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education on the need to make literacy a resource for fundamental social transformation” (1997, p. 209).

Street (1984) asserts that many formal literacy programs assume this *literacy as power* metaphor. The programs he observed were not aimed at making all members of the community literate, but rather literacy providers selected a few community members for training. “UNESCO programmes, being related to economic growth models and productivity, tended to be selective: they were not trying to make everyone literate but selected out those most likely to be productive, which tended to be those in a stable political structure and who already had some skills” (p. 186). Perhaps the assumption was that the betterment of a few in the community would raise the standard for the whole community.

Scribner’s third metaphor is *literacy as a state of grace*. “This individual has access to the accumulated knowledge of humankind and enjoys a favored intellectual status among the populace, the majority of whom do not possess such skills” (Goldman, 1989, pp. 2-3). Following this metaphor, the literate is seen as a specialist, one who possesses a skill that is unattainable to the rest of the community members. Scribner notes that reading holy books, such as the Qur’an in Islamic traditions and the Scriptures in early Protestant groups, accrued a certain benefit almost apart from the content of the text (1997, p. 210). Similar benefits were noted in secular writings and practices of such ancients as Plato and Aristotle. Latin, for example, was taught as a subject long after it became a dead language. To study Latin was symbolic of a well-educated, sophisticated person.

In the case of this third metaphor, that is, *literacy as a state of grace*, the focus is on individuals and their status in the society. Such may be the case, for example, when a community member attends a seminar or specialized course, or completes a level of formal schooling. Thus, literacy skills or certification may increase social stratification; it does not necessarily benefit the community as a whole.

How the literacy provider views the target community and its needs will impact the type of program they will offer. For example, will the focus of the program be on individuals or on the community as a whole? How will the clientele be chosen - the most needy or the most likely to benefit from the new learning? Is the content of the instruction student-driven or defined by a supervisor, sponsor or set curriculum? What are the anticipated outcomes of the literacy program?

Street (1984) notes that the basic premise for the great majority of national literacy campaigns in the past 50 years has been the functional uses to which literacy can be applied for economic gains and nation building. UNESCO originally saw literacy as a neutral technology, but more recently, critics have pointed out that their campaigns were “tied to a particular developmental and economic ethos. It subserved the interests of foreign investment and multinational companies on the premise that productivity and profits could be raised if ‘literacy levels’ were raised” (p. 184). Street takes this political stance one step further when he points out that some literacy training “may be used to disguise the fact that some forms of literacy programme actually impair criticalness and that what is being imparted is not a technical skill but an ideology” (p. 186). Could this also be thought of as a form of cultural literacy?

A 1996 special edition of the *International Journal of Educational Development* carried articles relating to the World Bank’s 1995 “Priorities and Strategies for Education.” It was noted that the Bank’s principle mission is to reduce poverty worldwide and that the Bank provides 25% of the external funding for education in developing nations. The Bank sees its main contribution as advice (p. 254) and, to support that, it fields a team of

educational researchers. A current goal, related to universal primary education, is rationalized in this way:

“Education is a powerful instrument for reducing poverty and inequality, improving health and social well-being, and laying the basis for sustained economic growth. It is essential for building democratic societies and dynamic, globally competitive economies.”
(www.developmentgoals.org/Education.htm)

Returning then to Scribner's three metaphors, it would appear that widespread literate practice is more likely to result from programs based on the metaphor of *literacy as adaptation*. Some community members may benefit from programs based on the *literacy as power* metaphor, with the possibility of trickle-down effect. The results of programs, either intentionally or unintentionally, based on the *literacy as a state of grace* metaphor will not be literate practice, but rather social status.

When the expectations of learners and the assumptions of literacy providers do not mesh, frustration and failure will result. Thus, it is important to identify the assumptions of the literacy provider in order to determine how closely they relate to the expectations of learners.

3. A CONTEXT FOR BASIC LITERACY

3.1 The community context

As I wrote this paper, I was sitting at my kitchen table in a quiet, remote village in southwestern Mindanao. The younger children were beginning their school day in the municipal-sponsored multi-grade school. A group of men visited nearby before heading off to work in their rice and cornfields. The women tend their cooking fires, do the laundry and look after younger children.

This village has no electricity, no radios (that I heard) and no passing vehicles (though a road was bulldozed just before the last round of elections). Marketing is done in the barangay center more than an hour's walk away. Nearly everyone speaks Manobo for all daily interactions. Roughly 80% of the community is literate to some degree.

Is there a context for literate practice here? Does being literate benefit the community or its individuals? Yes, on both counts. Let us return to my village vista in a bit.

As noted earlier, a common theme of literacy providers has been the linkage of literacy rates to economic and social gains. There has, however, been a shift in thinking toward a focus on economic gains within a broader context of development (Rassool, 1999, pp. 82-83). UNESCO cites developmental, economic, social and political aims of literacy provision (Wagner, 2001). As mentioned earlier, even these expanded notions of literacy in community context smack of a 'cultural literacy,' a standard measure, a value judgment from an outside source. SOMEONE is looking in upon a community and saying, "They need to be developed. They don't earn enough money. Their values are not good. They need to be part of the nation, of US."

One of the important lessons that has been learned through past UNESCO literacy programs is that “[v]ery little significant change took place in the quality of life of people generally, despite the fact that there were relative levels of increase in the Gross National Product (GNP) of some countries” (Rassool, 1999, p. 93). As Rassool further notes,

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“[f]ocusing on literacy in relation to the work-place *per se*, outside of a consideration of cultural, sociohistorical, and political relations within different societies was highly problematic.” Again we are drawn to look at the context for literacy within the community.

Let us return now to my village vista. The men are now in the fields and the children have returned early from school (absent teacher). How does literate practice fit here?

Most of the adults in this village became literate between 1986 and 1991 through non-formal classes in their own Manobo language. Interest in literacy was sparked when the New Testament in their language was nearing completion. Many people moved here in order to avail of literacy classes, as well as of a health clinic, which was opened in 1987. In fact, some of the first health workers to be trained were graduates of the first literacy class. As well, those adults who learned to read were the driving force behind establishing a school here for their children a few years later.

The real motivating force to become literate in this community was that they wanted to read the Scriptures in their own language. But literacy skills didn't stop there. They also learned simple math so they could buy and sell without being cheated. They learned some basic health lessons (demonstration supported by print) which used locally available materials. They learned that they were capable and valued human beings. In fact, two of my former adult literacy students were elected as *kagawads* in the last election. Others use their literacy skills as health workers, church leaders, PTA members and adult literacy teachers, or just for personal uses such as shopping lists and letters. The most popular book is still the Manobo New Testament.

The context for literacy in another community might be quite different, especially in a community where multiple languages are spoken. A hard look at the community will yield insights into the existing and potential contexts for literate practice.

3.2 Linguistic/language considerations

The previous section has already hinted at the importance of language choice in literate practice. We will now consider this aspect in more depth.

In Scribner and Cole's (1981) seminal research among the Vai people of Liberia, West Africa, they noted that education, or literacy, was attained in three ways, employing three languages. Education in Arabic was largely a matter of rote memorization of the Qur'an. This might well illustrate the *literacy as a state of grace* metaphor. Secondly, the formal school system used English as the language of instruction. Success here was like a ticket out of the community, since there was no context for English skills locally. This formal education in English seems to illustrate *literacy as power*. Finally, some Vai learned to read and write in their own unique language and script informally as adults. People learned for personal reasons and the skill was directly applied in the local setting. Here we see an example of *literacy as adaptation*.

The Vai example is quite enlightening in regard to language of instruction, when set against the three metaphors. Only in the case of *literacy as adaptation* is the vernacular language an important feature. In the case of *literacy as power*, a national or international language would seem helpful for accessing outside resources and for power-brokering. In the case of *literacy as a state of grace*, an unfamiliar language would only enhance the distance and mystery of the learning process.

On the international scene indigenous communities are beginning to make their voice heard regarding language rights in education. The Maori of New Zealand, the Sami of

Sweden and Native Americans of the southwest United States are well-documented examples of communities who have adapted the formal education system to fit their own language and cultural context. "The 1993 United Nations Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Article 14) has supported the right of indigenous peoples to maintain their 'languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures'" (May, 1999, p. 49). Article 15 of the same document highlights educational implications to this: "All indigenous peoples have...the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning" (May, 1999, p. 50).

While these statements appear radical, perhaps they are prompted by the 'cultural literacy' imparted by the formal education system. "...the language and culture of the dominant group comes to be viewed as the only vehicle of modernity and progress, and the only medium of 'national' identity. Alternatively, other cultural and language affiliations are viewed pejoratively as merely 'ethnic' and, relatedly, as regressive and pre-modern" (May, 1999, p. 45). The assumption, then, of a cultural literacy is that the "objective of education, as defined by the majority ethnic group, should be the same for all ethnic groups within the nation-state" (May, 1999, p. 51).

Though the previous discussion may sound like rejection of the formal/national school system, it need not be. It is more a desire by indigenous communities to retain their identity through the use of their own language and cultural grid, while also learning the cultural literacy of the dominant group. This will hopefully result in an additive bilingualism and biliteracy rather than a loss of the local language and culture in the process of attaining educational goals.

Such models of additive biliteracy do exist in multilingual societies such as Papua New Guinea, Cameroon, Ghana and Peru. Pilot projects also exist here in the Philippine context.

4. LITERACY AS ADAPTATION

In light of the definitions and assumptions which have been discussed, I propose that the answer to the question "How much is enough" lies in the three areas suggested by Williams and Snipper. In proposing this answer, I am starting from Scribner's metaphor of *literacy as adaptation* because it best fits my assumptions about literate practice. The answer will be different for one who assumes a metaphor of *literacy as power* or *literacy as a state of grace*.

4.1 Skills-based

Each individual learner will approach literacy training as a way of meeting basic needs. Adult learners must feel a need and then have an immediate application of what is learned to real life. This is the mainstay of functional literacy.

The important issue here is identifying what knowledge or skill is being sought. For example, a person may wish to become a Village Health Worker. What must the person know in order to take the training? In what language and to what level must a person be able to read? What are the attitudes that will enable the person to succeed in becoming a Village Health Worker? These are the areas that should be targeted in the Basic Literacy Program.

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Taking this individualistic approach may not be totally practical when there are large numbers of learners to deal with. However, there can be real pay-off for both learner and instructor if these assumptions and learning needs are raised and addressed early on.

An underlying assumption of the *literacy as adaptation* metaphor is that learning will take place in the learner's primary language. If a second language is needed to meet the learner's goals, then speaking and literacy skills will build on what is learned first and best in the learner's primary language.

4.2 Life-long learning

Becoming literate is good, but knowing how to continue to learn is even better. Without on-going growth in literate practice, the basic skills can easily be lost.

What might be the barriers to life-long learning? One barrier would simply be limited reading materials and resources for learning. In many Philippine communities, reading materials are extremely limited. Without adequate and appropriate reading materials, learning to read is meaningless.

Another barrier to life-long learning is a linguistic one. If the only available reading materials are in a language unfamiliar to the learner, reading will be extremely difficult. Fortunately, the mechanics of reading in another Philippine language are not difficult, since the reader can quickly learn to transfer skills in one language to reading in another. However, a Basic Literacy Program should seriously consider including some instruction in reading in a major language, in order to make life-long learning a more realistic option.

This is also where 'cultural literacy' becomes an issue. The Basic Literacy Program can act as a bridge to the wider society outside. Both local and national themes can be used and discussed to prepare learners for life-long learning opportunities.

Finally, the learners' attitude should be considered. Many adults who are just learning how to read have a low estimate of their abilities and may decide that continuing to learn is too difficult. Again, the Basic Literacy Program should include many positive moments, when learners are respected and recognized for their wonderful abilities and accomplishments.

4.3 Discriminating and aware

As learners are exposed to new reading materials, it is important for the literacy instructor to also impart some skills in reading with a discriminating eye. Not everything in print is true, nor is everything worth reading. The instructor can assist the learner to consider the author's intent in writing, the intended audience and what are the potential options for the readers' response. For instance, does one buy the brand name product just because there are numerous signs bearing that name? When an author writes a shocking story of violence, is the intent to recount what really happened or to attract people's interest and sell more books? If something is written that goes against personal or group values and beliefs, how might the reader respond to it?

In many ways, critical literacy skills are an extension of life skills. Just as individuals must be aware of the intent of spoken messages, such as campaign promises or

persuasion to act in a certain way, so too the reader must discriminate when dealing with text.

It may seem rather idealistic to think that neoliterates can be taught these skills, which many well-educated people do not possess. However, I do think it can be modeled and discussed in the context of a Basic Literacy Program.

5. CONCLUSION

In trying to determine "How much is enough" when it comes to a Basic Literacy Program, the first considerations are the expectations of the learners and the assumptions of the literacy provider. Scribner's three metaphors, *literacy as adaptation*, *literacy as power* and *literacy as a state of grace*, have helped me to understand my own assumptions and better understand the learners' expectations as well. Of course, the three metaphors often overlap and intersect. But these basic understandings are foundational to a successful literacy program.

The answer to our question comes in three parts. **Functional literacy skills** will lead the learner to literate practice, whatever the individual applications might be. A **cultural literacy knowledge** will enable the learner to become a life-long learner, to reach beyond the basics and the local level setting, both culturally and linguistically. And finally, a **critical literacy attitude** will enable the learner to evaluate and discriminate when faced with new ideas in print, as well as in life.

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