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Speaking 'Literacy' To Power.

Reflections on Brian Street's Contributions to Enriching Feminist Adult Literacy Praxis

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This short reflective piece draws on my interactions with Brian Street from the time we worked together on the LETTER project – an action-research project that introduced adult literacy facilitators to ethnographic research methods in 2005-2006 – and more recent insights from my conversations with facilitators who had participated in the LETTER project.[1]

Beginnings

I met Brian Street in the early 1990s, soon after we – a group of five feminist educators – had founded Nirantar, a New Delhi based gender and education resource centre.[2] One of the goals we had set ourselves was to develop feminist pedagogies and literacy material and curricula that that empowered rural women. Our work was informed by a critique of the available (primarily Government produced) literacy material, which, we found, was didactic, reinforced stereotypical gender roles, and portrayed rural women as 'backward' and in need of 'civilising'.[3] The problem, in part, was the centralized processes through which such material was developed by institutions and experts – usually educated urban men from privileged backgrounds – who were far removed from the lived realities of rural women from socio-economically disadvantaged communities[4] for whom they were writing. We were committed to involving women participants of literacy programmes in developing material to ensure that their worldviews, language and culture would be reflected. Nirantar's mandate was not just to empower women by making them literate, but to make the process of learning to read and write an empowering one, by developing critical thinking skills and allowing women to question power relations in 'classroom' interactions.

By the time we met Brian Street and Alan Rogers from the Uppingham Seminars (UK),[5] Nirantar had already developed a body of alternative literacy material and pedagogic strategies.[6] As practitioners and programme designers we had tried hard to dismantle dominant power structures – of language of instruction and content, for instance— only to find that participants had raised questions around some of our intentions. For example, while we argued for material in the local language, women wanted to learn the 'official language', and while we were keen to build our curriculum around local knowledge', women demanded to be taught 'mainstream school content.[7]

While many of these contestations were animatedly discussed and worked out during workshops, our conversations with Brian led us to consider whether a more rigorous engagement with the social practices

[1] This article draws on a presentation I made at the 4th Brian Street Memorial Webinar (18th November 2020) and a follow-up blog interview published by BALID (7.5.21). https://balid.org.uk/blog/2021/07/05/decolonising-literacy-blog-series-texts-in-context-speaking-literacy-to-power/

[2] See, http://www.nirantar.net/

[3] For critiques of Indian literacy primers see, Dighe 1995, Patel 1996

[4] Literacy in India is perceived to be a 'female problem' as women comprise a lion's share of illiterates. According to the 2011 Census of India, the literacy rate among females was 65.5 percent (rural female literacy was 58.75 percent) whereas the literacy rate among males was 82.1 per cent (male rural literacy rate was 78.57 per cent).

[5] Dipta Bhog, another Nirantar founding member also interacted with Brian and Alan in the early 1990s.

[6] For examples of see, Mahila Samakhya & Nirantar (1996:37-48) for an account of literacy strategies; for an account of Nirantar's work in combining handpump training skills and literacy see, Mahila Samakhya & Nirantar (u.d), and Nirantar's curriculum for a residential educational programme see (Nirantar 1997, Patel 2003:155-159)

[7] For examples of these see Ghose 2002: 1615-1620, Ghose & Mullick 2012: 147-163.

approach could provide us new ways of seeing and of understanding the inner workings of literacy embedded within specific contexts. To take the conversation forward we invited Brian to conduct a training workshop on ethnographic research methods and theoretical perspectives on literacy for Nirantar members.[8] The workshop proved to be a stimulating learning experience and led us to believe that not only would our praxis be enriched through further engagement but that we could also contribute to by bringing a feminist lens to these theoretical discussions. "Lets do this for other practitioners but we need to cut out the jargon!" we joked amongst ourselves! And we felt that Brian was quite open to doing this.

The LETTER Project

The "LETTER project" thus developed as a collaborative action-research project undertaken by Nirantar, the Uppingham Seminar (U.K.) and the Asia South Pacific Bureau of Adult Education (ASPBAE[9]). The participants were drawn from South-Asian NGOs that worked on adult literacy and included myself and other colleagues from Nirantar. The key elements of LETTER were to train practitioners on ethnographic perspectives and research methods related to literacy, document local literacy and numeracy practices and to incorporate insights gleaned to create facilitator training and adult literacy curricula. During the first training workshop the participating organisations designed micro field-research projects, which they then conducted on returning to their field areas. Participants reconvened a few months later to share their findings and to think about how they could incorporate these in developing literacy material and training content.[10]

The research project that Nirantar undertook was in a rural district in North India with poor social and development indicators, where we ran adult literacy programs with labouring women belonging to so called 'low-castes' or Dalits.[11] A key part of our project was to document and analyse everyday literacy and numeracy practices. We were keen to try and break hierarchies – such as those between the knowledgeable 'outside' researcher and 'insider' field informants. And we thus embarked on a shared process of research, where the research team comprised a diverse group of literacy facilitators ('insiders') and programme developers ('outsiders'), like me. To bring us on a common platform before we began we conducted an orientation for the facilitators in Hindi where Nirantar members adapted the training process that we had undergone as part of LETTER.[12] The research was conducted in a 'workshop mode' where we would go to the field in groups and share our observations every evening.

For our research, we used 'Literacy events' and 'Literacy practices' as conceptual tools, a unique theoretical contribution that Brian made to literacy studies. Following Brian's elaboration, we understood, 'literacy events' to be observation-based descriptions of situations where any kind of literacy and/or numeracy activity was taking place and 'literacy practices' linked such separate events to broader social and cultural institutions, power relations and assumptions regarding the nature of the event, in order to reveal its meaning and to establish patterns.[13] Brian dwelt on the idea of literacy events and practices during the trainings to introduce literacy practitioners to what he referred to as 'ethnographic perspectives', as distinct from training us to be 'ethnographers' in the conventional academic sense.[14]

As research tools, these proved to be very useful on the ground in facilitating nuanced observations, collective reflection and analysis. For example, we found that even though the 'local' facilitators belonged to the same community as the women they taught, they too had previously not 'seen' many of the literacy and numeracy texts and practices they observed during the research or had glossed over them as being unimportant. We realised that a reason for this was that facilitators saw themselves as 'educated' and were keen to set themselves apart from other women in their milieu, and to establish their 'authority' as teachers. The profile of the literacy facilitators – female, Dalit, and not highly educated – did not fit the typical, socially acceptable teacher image. Powerful

[8] Workshop held in Delhi, June 2004.
[9] The acronym currently stands for Asia South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education. It is a regional network of more than 200 civil society organisations and individuals operating in around 30 countries of the Asia-Pacific. http://www.aspbae.org/
[10] See Nirantar 2007 for a detailed documentation of the training process and reports of the research projects.
[11] The local team Sahjani Shiksha Kendra, based in Lalitpur District in the state of Uttar Pradesh, has since been registered as an independent community based organization. https://ssklalitpur.com/services/literacy-and-education/
[12] Brian Street and Dave Baker from Uppingham Seminars also visited Nirantar's field site and interacted with the facilitators and programme team.
[13] Street 2001
[14] See Nirantar 2007:21-23

members of the community and even women challenged them about their knowledge and skills. [15] The facilitators were all 'local' but were not a homogenous group as they belonged to different sub-castes, class backgrounds, education levels and had different experience bases (some were more 'urban' than others, for instance). Our daily debriefing sessions therefore revealed not just the obvious differences in observations and interpretations between outsider-insider researchers but also amongst the facilitators as well.

Our research findings also differed from the common policy perception that rural contexts lack literate environments.[16] The range of material we found was diverse –calendars, diaries, billboards, wall writing, handbills and receipts, to name a few. Such material does not find a place in literacy programmes, which depend on expert-produced material.[17] But more importantly we found that not everyone in the community had similar access to texts available in the environment. Women (due to gender hierarchies) and Dalit women (due to intersecting gender and caste hierarchies) were particularly disadvantaged.[18] For instance, with regard to information about a Government scheme on a notice board, we found that upper caste men were both aware of the information and could read the dense officialese, Dalit men were aware of the information (but in generalities) but were unable to read it, and women from either community were both uninformed about the scheme and unable to read about it. They told us that even if they could read it would be difficult for them to remove their purdah (this was especially true for the 'upper' castes) and stand in a public space to read.

And lastly, we found that women's stated status as 'illiterate' was not necessarily reflected in how they acted. Most appeared to be engaged with a number of 'hidden'[19] practices and sometimes even managed to negotiate literacy texts. For instance, in the village women used designated vessels to measure grain. When women went to sell grain they often measured it beforehand but using local measures. We found however that they 'lacked' confidence to use or reveal these skills in 'real-life contexts' such as when they went to the bazaar. They were unable to convert the local system to the metric one used in markets, but mostly felt intimidated to confront traders – all upper caste men – even when they knew they were being short-changed.[20]

Such observations are now an integral part of the New Literacy Studies research canon but the process of conducting research collaboratively with facilitators showed us in simple but tangible ways how literacy practices were embedded within multiple and intersecting power relations. It also brought home the point that we needed to step back from our own affirmed positions, observe and not accept simplistic 'assessments' of learner needs. Further it was in revealing the connection – between literacy 'events' and 'practices' – and thereby the power inherent in everyday literacies that we found synergies between the social practices and feminist approaches. When we started out with LETTER we were wary that simply highlighting local literacy practices may lead us towards making relativist or simplistic claims or to 'exoticise' the local or to be hesitant about questioning local forms of discrimination for fear of undermining women's beliefs. For us, moving between research and practice as we did in the project helped us clarify what using a 'feminist lens' while remaining reflexive about preconceived assumptions meant. When we reconvened to discuss our research findings, Brian kept reminding us to ask ourselves what it meant for them (the women) and not only for us (the researchers).[21] What resonated with us was that using an ethnographic perspective would allow us to first understand the internal dynamics and develop a theory of meaning emerging from that. This helped us to suspend judgement and yet, as the examples above and in the next section illustrate, we were able to put women's experiences and their perspectives – their ways of being and seeing -- front and centre while documenting and analysing the larger field of power relations within which literacy is located. This helped us to carve out a space to confront gender norms and stereotypes and expose silences around women's knowledge.

Implications for Material and Curricula

Working to connect feminist perspectives to those of the social practices approach, so that that we could bring the observations from our research of everyday literacy and numeracy practices into the process of developing

[15] Ghose 2002:1616-1617
[16] UNESCO 2005:189-212
[17] Alan Rogers (1999) refers to such written texts as "real literacy material" and has advocated using texts found in local communities to be used literacy classes rather than expert-produced literacy primers.
[18] Nirantar 2007:41-51
[19] See Nabi et. al. 2009
[20] Nirantar 2007: 91-103
[21] Nirantar 2007:15

fresh teaching-learning material, was challenging. I offer two examples to provide a glimpse of the nature of debates around issues we encountered.

During our research we would walk around the village just observing what texts were available in the environment and what men and women were doing. In the afternoons we inevitably came across groups of men playing cards. This became a point of discussion with the facilitator-researchers at many levels. For instance, was 'card-playing' a numeracy event? If so, what broader field of power relations was this located in? Many facilitators were emphatic that this was a 'bad habit' that only men engaged in. Women were essentially 'good' and therefore did not play cards. But some of us probed further – could it also be that only men played cards because women were systematically excluded from the public sphere? Many of the facilitators then revealed that they had secretly longed to play cards but were too scared to express this desire.

However, when we suggested that we should include a card playing session in a literacy class as a way of learning numeracy, this was met with incredulity and resistance. We went ahead anyway, saying "Lets give it a try!" In the end it proved to be not just a way of teaching a range of numeracy skills but simultaneously challenged several gender norms, including a discussion on strategies to address problems of gambling. I have used this example not to suggest that women should start playing cards or that male gambling was not a very real problem that women encountered, but it did open up discussions on a range of other gender issues. It helped to transgress entrenched gender norms in a non-confrontational way.

A second example is around the values assigned to local and mainstream knowledge. During our research we had found that almost every home had an 'English' calendar.[22] These were kept mostly for 'official' reasons – for example to mark a court date or an appointment with an official. Mostly men and school children 'read' these, for women these calendars were purely decorative. The Hindu 'panchang' calendar is a lunar one and marks all the religious festivals etc. and these were also found in several homes. However, most people just consulted the priest to determine auspicious dates.

We also found that facilitators typically wrote the date on the blackboard at the start of class. Some women merely copied this in their notebook and most didn't seem to know what it stood for. When we asked them to tell us the date they explained it using the lunar calendar. Learning to read and write the date or learning to read the calendar are often included as 'functional' literacy skills that learners should know to make them 'function' more effectively in their daily activities. On the one hand, we knew already that women did not seem to 'need' to read calendars, and on the other women wanted to learn to read the 'English' calendar, as they knew it was something the 'educated' knew. However, we had many questions ourselves: if we taught women to only read 'English' calendars were we not negating their existing knowledge base? But then they used priests or others in the community to figure out important local dates, so maybe we wouldn't be negating their existing knowledge? Was there a way to connect both types of knowledge?

We experimented by collecting calendars from various homes and then discussed these in class – How are they used in the home and who uses them? Why are some calendars solar others lunar? What are the differences? We then asked one group of women to make their own lunar calendars and mark important dates on these and another group learnt the 'English' calendar. We then went about asking them to mark todays date on both. In the end women learnt a number of numeracy and literacy skills and in the end were able to connect both systems of knowledge. We recognized that women want to be schooled in dominant literacies even when they know they may not be able to 'use' their skills. How could we make that experience more meaningful?

Revisiting LETTER: Texts in Context

In November 2020, when I was asked to speak at Brian Street's Memorial Webinar, it spurred me to revisit the work I did during LETTER. I asked some of the facilitators who had participated in the LETTER project to recall their experiences and reflect on the meanings these hold for them today. [23] As it was several years since we had conducted the research it was difficult to get the conversation started and I eventually asked them to explain their perceptions through examples. The conversations led me to revisit two interconnected ideas we grappled with when we conducted the research, namely, unpacking the literate/illiterate binary and the power relations embedded in everyday literacy practices as a way of de-centring hegemonic ones and validating local practices.

[22] The English calendar refers to the solar Gregorian calendar.

[23] Very few were still with the programme. Due to the pandemic I conducted phone conversations.

Given that the pandemic had devastated the lives of the marginalized in multiple ways, the examples the facilitators shared reflected current concerns. Literacy took on new and charged meanings. Let me share one example. Among the Indian Government's relief measures during the lockdown was the provision of free food rations through the public distribution system. Elaborate rules had been formulated pertaining, for instance, to eligibility criteria, the quantities of grain allowed vis a vis the type of ration card one had. Two problems that people repeatedly encountered were the denial of food rations despite meeting eligibility criteria and getting less than the stipulated quota of grain while the stipulated quota was recorded on the ration card. Inevitably, these problems were most acutely experienced by women from marginalized communities for whom such measures were crucial, to stave off starvation during the pandemic. The ration dealers were invariably literate, well-off upper caste men who wielded considerable power locally.

Ration cards are 'literacy texts' and are typically included in functional literacy primers and we had also found these in almost every home during our research. Women who enrol in literacy classes are often keen to learn to read such documents, as a way of accessing mainstream power. Some of the problems related to food ration distribution mentioned above should therefore have disappeared or become irrelevant if one had literacy skills and information. However, the facilitators found that even the women who had literacy skills were refusing to confront the ration dealers for fear of reprisal, given the hugely unequal status positions between them. In some cases, when the facilitators started challenging the dealers, women asked them to stop. "You will go away, we have to live here. Maybe it's better not to have food. It's better not to show them we can read," they said. The facilitators reflected that as much as they still valued the lessons they had learnt about privileging local practices, it was difficult to build on this because of highly hierarchical contexts within which they work. Here, rather than revealing the 'hidden' local literacy practices, as the LETTER Project had urged, women sometimes concealed the dominant literacy skills they had learnt. However, in a different situation related to the same ration card problem, women who had mobile phones strategised with the facilitators to subvert such attempts at corruption and repression. They clandestinely sent photos and even voice and video recordings to the facilitators, skills they had learnt informally. The facilitators sent copies of the government order over the mobile phone, not just the text but also a voice recording of the order explained in Bundeli, the local language. Women and facilitators thus used a combination of strategies and literacy practices, which typically do not come within the ambit of literacy or even digital literacy programmes.

Concluding Observations

In conclusion, I would like to reflect on how these examples speak to the ideas I sought to revisit. One abiding yet fundamental lesson is the need to go beyond various binaries that we tend to construct. Literacy practices could not be seen as a binary between dominant and local literacy practices. Instead, what was observed was hybridity and messiness. Women wanted to be schooled in dominant literacies even when they were unable to use their skills. They also resorted to self-learning and negotiating texts through a variety of methods. Secondly, literacy programmes assess whether women are more 'empowered' as a result of becoming literate. We found that it is not a question of empowerment vs. disempowerment. From the example regarding ration distribution it would be difficult to assess whether the women were empowered or not. Even for women who had acquired literacy skills it was important to teach them how to constantly negotiate the relationship between literacy and empowerment. And thirdly, the skills of negotiation, as the example showed, included switching between different modes. Rather than oral vs. written or textual vs. visual literacies, negotiating multimodal contexts is the new normal.

Ultimately, the lesson that comes forward strongly is that literacy is always a matter of power but it was also always shifting. Our research and practice should interrogate the larger field of power relations within which literacy may be embedded. We should expect to be surprised at the different meanings people ascribe to literacy(ies) as these are continuously being constructed and re-constructed. We need to go beyond the binaries that we tend to create in our literacy research, policy, and programme frameworks, such as literate vs. illiterate, dominant vs. local literacy practices, oral vs. written or text vs. visual literacies.

However, we also recognise that such insights are often difficult to communicate to policy makers who want simple solutions as they argue their programmes must be on a large scale. Indeed, our own efforts at systematically taking forward the material development did hit roadblocks, in part due to a lack of resources and time. Where we were more successful was in bringing some of these insights into the facilitator trainings we conducted. Trying to change the way facilitators see, in the face of limited resources, had greater potential in catalysing change. LETTER had shown how collaborations between dissimilar partners like academics and

activists, or facilitators and providers, can be valuable learning grounds, connecting theoretical debates with grassroots practice and vice versa. A fitting tribute to Brian's legacy would be to keep such conversations alive in different ways.

Disclosure statement

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