

Brian Street and the LETTER Project: Teaching with Experience

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One of the many activities Brian was fond of quoting was the LETTER Project.¹ He referred to it several times in his publications and it was this which caused him to write his book (with Alan Rogers) *Adult Literacy and Development: stories from the field* (2012). I am therefore glad of an opportunity to record something of this programme for him.

It started during an Uppingham Seminars international workshop on Urban Literacies held in New Delhi in 2000 (see Rogers 2005). Nirantar, a women's development organisation working on a programme of education for women's empowerment in many parts of India and nearby countries, asked to see Brian for a discussion and Brian invited me along as representing Uppingham Seminars.² As normal with Brian, there had been a long period of prior engagement – members of Nirantar had been working with Brian in Sussex for some time.

The question Nirantar raised with him was this. While developing a science curriculum for some village women in the course of Nirantar's educational programmes, their workers had come across a problem. Discussing the difference between animate and inanimate entities, the Nirantar staff discovered the women believed that a river was animate. This and other things had alerted them to the view that these women had a different set of self-learned concepts, almost always unconscious until drawn into consciousness, and Nirantar felt that they needed to understand these concepts before adapting their curriculum to these women's experience. As Nirantar put it in their report:

bringing an educational curriculum to women who, while unschooled, routinely drew on a complex, even sophisticated, body of local knowledge based on their collective life experiences. (Nirantar, 2007)

Nirantar knew from previous contacts with Brian of his work on ethnography, and so they asked whether Brian could give some of the Nirantar staff some training in ethnography for the purpose of exploring local knowledges. At their invitation, a brief visit to Lalitpur (Uttar Pradesh) was made to meet some of the participants – a visit which shaped the thinking behind the emerging LETTER programme.

Brian and I took the request away and developed a draft training programme. With Brian's key interest and with the agreement of Nirantar, the course focused on literacy rather than a more general approach to ethnographic research. This, as ever, drew on Brian's previous experience, especially the model he had developed during a project he had overseen in South Africa, the Social Uses of Literacy Project (SOUL) (see Prinsloo and Breier, 1996). In this British Council-funded project, in addition to some teaching on ethnography, Brian worked over a period with a small group of academic staff on researching local literacies. All the participants undertook a small-scale ethnographic-style research project, and under Brian's guidance wrote up their report which others in the group then critiqued. It was learning by experience and by participatory critical reflection. Brian suggested that this should be the model for the Nirantar programme.

The LETTER programme was built around three elements: a) ethnography as an approach to research; b) literacy as social practice rather than as a universal skill, based on Brian's ideological approach to literacy rather than an autonomous approach (Street 1984); and c) adult learning, based on the adult education adage that adult learners bring much unconscious knowledge and skills to the learning, so that an exploration of *how* they learned this knowledge and skills through experience was needed. Brian would focus on ethnography and literacy; I would focus on informal learning (see Rogers 2014).

¹ Further details about the LETTER (Learning Empowerment through Training in Ethnographic Research) project can be found here: <http://balid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/summary1.pdf>

² Uppingham Seminars <http://uppinghamseminars.co.uk>

The plan was for three one-week workshops with gaps between them, long enough for the participants to engage in their own local project but not too long that the momentum was lost. The first workshop would outline the three components, ethnography, literacy as social practice, and (informal) learning. Built in during each workshop was a one-day field trip either in groups or individually for the participants to look with new eyes at their own contexts and perceive literacy practices for themselves. The second workshop would briefly revisit these three elements but most of the time would be devoted to reports on the local projects and participant critiques. Time would be devoted to writing up, for it was envisaged that some of the participants had not engaged in what they might see as a more academic approach to research for a long time. The third workshop would finalise the written reports after participatory critique and try to work out the implications of these findings for teaching adults.

This was developed between Uppingham Seminars (the partner in this proposed programme) and Nirantar – but then came a problem, funding. Nirantar worked hard at this, as did Uppingham Seminars. It was not until 2005 that Nirantar was able to make an agreement with ASPBAE to include this project in its training programme. on condition that it would be open to other members of ASPBAE than Nirantar staff. We all welcomed this and in the event eight organisations sent staff from different countries of south Asia (Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, as well as India). All was fixed for January 2006.

At the very last moment, a major change had to be made. I had a heart attack and could not go. Brian suggested we see if Dave Baker was available to stand in for me; he lived in Brighton where Brian was located, was likely to be free, and he and Brian had recently worked together on a numeracy ethnography project. Dave promptly agreed – but it meant one major change; instead of informal learning, he would contribute from his own expertise some teaching on numeracy as social practice. Because of the short notice, the informal learning element would need to be made during the second workshop, not the first.

What we did not envisage was the enthusiasm which the participants of the workshops showed for the numeracy element. This was due in large part to Dave Baker's lively teaching but also to the fact that – when looking at the local scene – numeracy practices could be seen more clearly than literacy (shop payments, time, work-related activities etc). The contrast between (for example) local measures in the market and the standardised measures being taught to adults in the adult literacy classrooms (kilos and metres etc) was very clear and one which many of the participants navigated frequently in their daily lives (see Brian's work in this area in, for example, Yakusawa et al 2018). And it was also clear that the existing teaching of numeracy during the standardised adult literacy classes was only related to the formal numeracy, not the everyday informal numeracy practices.

We all know that non-literate adults calculate and use maths in their daily lives, but how and in what ways? But when it comes to teaching numeracy, such knowledge is ignored and what ensues is a decontextualised transfer of technical skills, which adult learners often do not use in their everyday lives. (Nirantar Report, 2007)

The first workshop took place in Delhi in January 2006 facilitated by Brian and Dave Baker with help from Nirantar staff. It dealt with ethnography as a research approach, and literacy and numeracy as situated social practices. During the workshop, the participants went out for a day looking at different activities (one for example talked to taxi drivers about their literacy and numeracy practices). The kind of local project each of them could engage in when at home was discussed, first with Brian and Dave and then by the whole group.

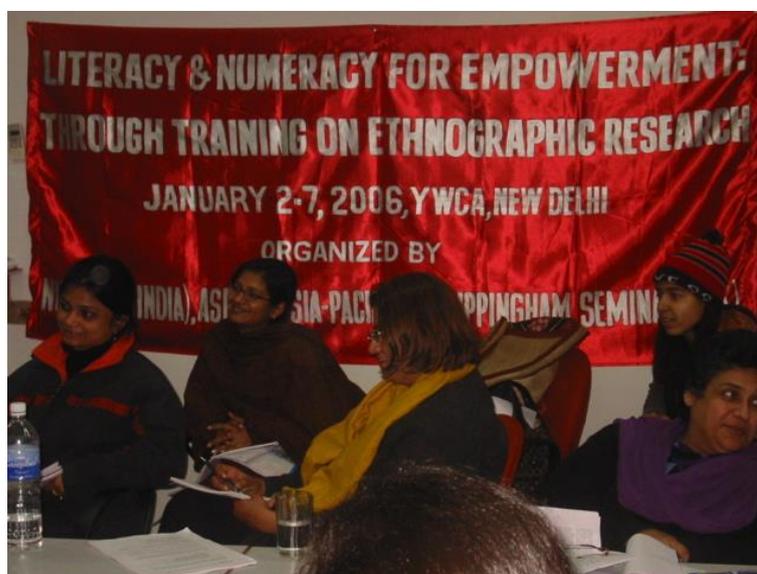


Figure 1: India workshop 1, 2006 (copyright Nirantar)

Between January and August 2006, the participants went home and engaged on a small-scale ethnographic style project. They reassembled in August 2006 and once again Dave Baker was pressed into service; a lengthy paper about learning, formal and informal, was sent to the workshop and formed the basis of a group discussion. This second workshop focussed on discussing the results of the research projects into local literacy and numeracy practices (both the methodologies and the findings) with a view to using these findings to develop for each participant some locally relevant teaching-learning materials based on the project reports. It was intended that this would form their main activity between the second workshop and the third. But unfortunately, funds ran out and there was no third workshop.

The range of research projects was wide and Brian and Dave monitored them all. A study of a particular literacy environment in Uttar Pradesh, India; local games in Bangladesh; numeracy and skills training in Nepal; literacy in the slums of Jaipur; local examples of numeracy practices in Andhra Pradesh, India; and the reconciliation of local weights and measures in a local market with standardised measures, again from India. These were the ones written up and included in the final report which Nirantar produced (see Nirantar 2007) and which is intended to serve others as a guide to this approach to planning adult literacy teaching programmes.

Ethiopia and Uganda

Engaged on a different project in Ethiopia, Uppingham Seminars found themselves working with Alemayehu Gebre, at that time employed by ANFEAE (the Adult and Non-Formal Education Association of Ethiopia). He was most interested in the LETTER programme and, through his contacts with both DVV³ and PACT⁴ in Ethiopia, obtained funding for a three-workshop programme as a joint venture between PACT, ANFEAE and Uppingham Seminars. This ran from September 2007 to May 2008. This time the programme was able to have three workshops held in different locations in the country with intervals for home research projects. The team included Brian and Dave Baker and we brought in Dr George Openjuru from Uganda to work on the project. Dr Rafat Nabi from Pakistan, who had worked recently with Brian and Uppingham Seminars on an ethnographic-style research project in Pakistan into 'hidden literacies' (i.e. the more or less unconscious uses of literacy by persons claiming to be 'illiterate') (see Nabi et al 2009), attended the programme. We were also able to bring Malini Ghose from Nirantar to link this project with the earlier one. Once again, a publication was aimed at sharing the literacy as social practice and ethnographic approaches with others in Ethiopia (see Gebre et al 2009).

George Openjuru then took the project to Uganda funded by the British Council (2010 to 2012). It became much more elaborate. Four workshops were held, a final one aimed at dissemination of the findings and the approach to a wider audience in the country; it was also combined with a separate workshop run by Elda Lyster from South Africa on writing 'easy readers' for beginner adult literacy learners – a theme which did not blend easily with a literacy as social practice approach but which appealed to many of the participants. There were also – for logistic reasons – large gaps between the workshops, so that the participants in each workshop were not always the same. Once again there was a publication – made available like the others on-line (see Openjuru et al 2016). Details of the LETTER approach can best be seen in these three publications.

Several other approaches for the LETTER programme were discussed (for example in Tanzania, South Africa and Kenya); Brian was keen for these to take place, but they did not materialise; more recently, there has been an approach from a group working in Argentina.

Brian Street and Teaching

Brian participated in each of these three events fully. He did a large part of the teaching in the workshops on ethnography and literacy but tribute must be made to the others who also taught, especially Dave Baker for his great enthusiasm and commitment. But the focus here is on Brian Street as a teacher in the LETTER programme.

³ DDV International is the Institute for International Cooperation of the Deutscher Volkshochschul-Verband e.V. (DVV), the German Adult Education Association: <https://www.dvv-international.de/en/worldwide/africa/east-africa/ethiopia>

⁴ PACT: <https://www.pactworld.org/country/ethiopia>

Brian drew up the balanced curriculum of literacy (and it was his suggestion that numeracy was brought in), ethnography and informal learning. He taught a good deal directly face to face, though in an informal manner, using drawings on a flip chart and other illustrative material. His teaching was deeply practical, he encouraged active learning – for example, by the use of photographs which were intensively analysed. Reflexivity was a key theme – mainly in group discussions. Brian was not always easy to understand when explaining concepts apart from instances but he used many examples and analogies. Many of the participants had difficulty mastering the difference between literacy as social practice and literacy as universal taught skill as they had learned it in school. Brian time and again patiently explained what he meant by an ideological approach (he sometimes admitted this was not an ideal word for the concept but nothing else seemed to fit). He realised that many participants (few of whom were from academic institutions, but mostly government and NGO employees) found the concepts of literacy events and practices difficult. This was, I believe, because he saw the concepts so clearly himself and thus perhaps found it difficult to see how others could not see them equally clearly. So this subject was repeated, sometimes several times. Brian was nothing if not patient in his teaching relationships. But he was also rigorous in his standards: he provided copious reading materials in bulk and left spaces in the timetable for reading these and on occasion discussing some of them.

On the other hand, his teaching on ethnography was more immediately effective, although many participants still saw it as a set of tools to be applied rather than the complete change of perspective which Brian emphasised; he wanted an ethnographic frame of mind rather than a mechanical application of ethnographic methods. His key tool for his approach to teaching ethnography was the memorable story of the turtle and the fish which all participants took away and many used for themselves (see LETTER publications for this) – a device he used effectively to explain issues such as insider and outsider, distance and proximity, and especially the language needed to convey descriptions of one culture to another. Above all, he used photographs – his was a concrete ethnography, not based on generalisations. He would, for example, show a scene and ask: ‘what is going on here at this time?’ It was practical, immediate, developing new ways of looking at the localised context, trying to see the global in the local, while also trying to avoid over-generalising.



Figure 2: Exploring the literacy environment Uganda

But his best work was done very informally – indeed I believe he taught most when walking. He was constantly on the prowl, looking out for things in the immediate context which caught his eye and persuading the participants to reflect on them, to critique what they saw. He even drew attention to what was *not* there – in Uganda, walking along a road, he and his colleagues came to some large ornate gates with one very small and inaccessible notice – and rather than passing it by, Brian asked them all to try to say “what was going on” (his

favourite saying) – in this case, what messages did the owner wish to convey to those who passed by or who came to visit him or her.



Figure 3: Gates with inaccessible notice: what messages does this send to visitors and passers-by? Uganda

And he taught also in his lively social life – sitting in the evening around a table with a bottle (or two) and lots of glasses; random discussions from which those who participated took away what they needed or found interesting.



Figure 4: Debriefing after workshop Uganda

Everything he did was participatory in the true sense - he opened himself up to those he met. He wanted them to discover for themselves by critical reflection the concerns they were discussing – and that, I think, was the cause of the problem with literacy events and literacy practices: the participants wanted him to tell them what these were; Brian wanted them to work it out for themselves from their own studies in a Socratic way.



Figure 5: Leaving them to it – workshop Uganda

For throughout all his teaching, he insisted on this practical element - reading and critiquing the texts; above all going out singly or in small groups to look ‘at what is going on’ and trying to explain it in literacy (and numeracy) terms. All the participants in each workshop spent either one full day or half a day out in the neighbourhood of the training centre and reported back (with photographs, if possible) to the full group for discussion. There was much peer learning in Brian’s teaching portfolio – it did not all come from the ‘great authority’. He was very humble in his approach to the participants as well to the other resource persons.



Figure 6: Brian in a group visit to a synagogue Ethiopia (copyright Elemayehu Gebre, permission received)

Brian loved to learn while he was teaching – constantly asking questions, trying out new scripts (learning to write his own name in devanagari script, for example); encountering new situations. He frequently said that the best thing about his involvement in the LETTER project was that he was always meeting new people in new situations and learning new things.



Figure 7: Brian writing his name in Devanagari script (copyright Nirantar)



Figure 8: Taking the bull by the horns – warily.



Figure 9: Hands-off teaching; hands-on learning, Ethiopia.

Brian's approach to teaching on the LETTER project was one of building relationships – between himself (and the other resource persons) and the individual participant and also between the participants themselves. Learning by doing (rather than listening) was supplemented by learning by sharing. Brian's personal commitment to his subject and to his students was whole-hearted and it showed.

Brian was mostly concerned with undergraduate and graduate students but in LETTER many participants had little or no formal education but much experience. Brian adapted to this new group of learners quickly, patiently reiterating key points and encouraging them to value their experience and to try to solve their own questions by reflecting critically on that experience.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.
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