

From Literacy to a Learning Society: An African Perspective

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Literacy and the pains of its lessons

Literacy has been a crucial aspect of the discourse, practice, and policies in education and the world at large.

Over the years, large and small-scale campaigns involving the introduction of the alphabet has been carried out in many countries on this continent.

This much can be said: the problem of illiteracy has been recognised by governments to the extent that the right to literacy is felt to be the first point in the Right to Learn, and as a pre-requisite for the exercise of the other Human Rights¹.

Its definition and the slant in emphasis has, however varied over time, and today, it can be said that the field has reached some form of maturity in terms of the meaning and expectations given to literacy.

Just recall the manner in which we pursued, traced and exposed the illiterate, liquidated and purged them of the disease? Recall the righteousness with which we felt them to be besieged by this monstrous, scandalous scourge, and how we sung hymns in literacy campaigns, and called these hymns machetes to eradicate illiteracy with one blow²?

Well, Africa's response has varied in intensity from a desire to rid its society at once of this evil once and for all, to more *laissez faire* attitudes and functionalist approaches.

Either way, we succeeded in getting several millions of people to go through literacy initiatives in some countries, even entire masses of the population.

Women seized the opportunities that the literacy efforts brought along, and, against many odds, did come, even though to drop out fairly quickly. For their part, men were often troubled by the idea of admitting relative vulnerability.

But in many other respects, we scored these successes at great cost to our very societies.

Because instead of looking at literacy as a continuum in different modes of communication from the oral to the written, we equated being ignorant of especially the western alphabet with **total ignorance**. We had no qualms in pitting what is not written as thoughtless, as a weakness, and at its limit, as primitivism³.

Instead of putting literacy as the service of a complex range of African knowledge - in botany, crop and animal husbandry, climatology, medicine and midwifery, philosophy and pedagogy, architecture and metallurgy - knowledge that we KNOW have been subjugated by the processes of colonialism and modernity, we

¹Hautecoeur J-P. 1997. A Political Review of International Literacy Meetings in Industrialised Countries, 1981-1994. In Hautecoeur J-P. ed. 1997. *Alpha 97: Basic Education and Institutional Environments*. UNESCO institute for Education, Hamburg, Germany & Culture Concept Publishers. Pp 11.

²Takala T. 1992. On the Implications of The Literacy Rhetoric for the Education and Development Debate. Paper Presented at the NASEDEC Annual Conference on Education and Development Revisited. Swedish Royal Academy of Sciences. Stockholm.

³Hountondji P. 1997. Introduction. In Hountondji P. 1997 ed. *Endogenous Knowledge. Research Trails*. CODESRIA.

arraigned literacy as a new supreme force, standing there aloft, talking to itself, on its lonely hill, unable to connect its objects with anything else - i.e. neither reconnect them with their umbilical selves, nor with their new alien selves.

Instead of letting literacy serve an organic function to enable our societies to engage in the critical but active re-appropriation and authentication of our cultures and knowledge (i.e. to strengthen what we HAVE); it was our absolute conviction that learning the alphabet was not a cultural matter.

You learnt literacy or went to school, but it was never enough to make you white enough to become part of that happy global family we are seeking to become, the inevitable enculturation poised in a seemingly permanent standoff with the expression of original culture.

We forgot that behind the statistical charts that year after year, show decreased illiteracy rates, there are unmeasurable, ungraphed events of pain and love⁴.

We so baldly wanted to eradicate illiteracy; to vaccinate, purge, or scrub our people clean of something we had clearly equated with illness, that we did not bother to listen to ourselves. Nor to the distinct echoes of social Darwinism in our impatient voices as we waved carrots and sticks in the bid to attain rapid modernisation and get just the right quantitative numbers on our billboards to secure places around various banquet tables.

We forgot that it was the same social Darwinism embedded deep in the groins of development practice that had, in the first place, belittled us, non-western peoples, and sent us to the back of the queue⁵.

We forgot that part of our obligation as the class that had proven that we could read and write, was that we were to turn this pressure on its head, and make it our goal-post to return humanity to the centre, to drown the jingles of individualism with an overwhelming chorus of human solidarity and ethics of responsibility to the Other, which is OUR gift of heritage from this continent, to be brought out as a contribution to globalisation.

We forgot that it was part of our responsibility and obligation to our people to consistently, but resolutely invite the West to abandon its superiority complex, abandon its intolerant and exclusive assumptions about the gross ignorance and backwardness of all others⁶.

We forgot that we were to become crucial links in re-contextualising global processes; to create globally oriented yet indigenously rooted futures; to return to the roots with a future oriented point of view.

We forgot that the objectives of basic education, or literacy for that matter is *minimally*, not to worsen the life situation of anyone; *maximally*, that it should consist of recreating links that have been destroyed; and the prevention of school failure, intensifying social action among the disadvantaged, as well as protection of the rights of the excluded⁷.

Instead, when we finally realised that literacy was not something hanging from a ceiling on its own, we shifted focus to the link between literacy and societal development, but in a narrow functionalist paradigm, and found great cognitive difficulties when we were to link the goals of literacy and societal development in the organic sense.

We found ourselves tongue-tied whenever we had to find conceptions of learning that ***did not stigmatise***,

⁴Torres R.M. 1995. Adult Literacy: No-One Should Be Amazed at the Results. Unpublished notes. UNESCO/UNICEF.

⁵Esteva G. 1992. Development. In Sachs W.ed. 1992. *The Development Dictionary. A Guide to Knowledge as Power*. London Zed Books Ltd. pp:6-25.

⁶Luyckx M. The Transmodern Hypothesis: towards a dialogue of cultures. In *Futures*. Volume 31 Numbers 9/10. November/December 1999. Pp: 971-983.

⁷Hautecoeur J-P *ibid*.

that **enhances**, and that grows from **what is there**... because we had been taught, and learnt well, that **there is nothing there**.

For years, we helped make deeper the ravine between the oral and the literate, and now, challenged by new trends in thinking globally, we are trying to find a bridge between the two, because the search is now, to **create learning societies**.

In search for a vision of Africa as a learning society

At the end of the twentieth century, Africa stands at crossroads, with bitter memories of its colonial past. It faces awesome challenges in its efforts to overcome its experiences of history, and search for a way forward.

Through the four development decades, it has been difficult to crystallise a vision of Africa that is progressive and generative from a platform of denial of the continent's heritage and knowledge.

This has become more and more obvious as globalisation rears its head, and seeks to deny existence to the local - in our case, a submerged local.

The concept of learning societies now dares us construct new premises upon which we move to dialogue with others in the 21st Century.

It dares us to think of the complete learning processes, on lifelong motivation and readiness to learn, not only from books, but also from whichever source the learning can be availed.

In our process of making Africa, like many countries of Europe a learning continent, we have to make a resolute commitment never again to cast African people who are not literate as a self-defeating otherness - **pre**-this, **un**-that, **non**-this, or the other.

We will remember that our first task is to ensure that never again shall we wilfully sell our people cheap, or facilitate the systematic process of making them lose their life spaces and their word, the parameters for interpretation, their domestication, and their truth.

We shall endeavour to make literacy socially, culturally and economically useful, by defining *well before the fact*, precisely what aspects of culture, knowledge and latent resources literacy is going to help unearth. and how it is going to help recast African societies as legitimate locations of human imagination⁸.

Making literacy serve the goals of human development, and especially of the African Renaissance requires that functional literacy is interrogated from the perspective of to what extent it has consciously taken on the vision of Africa in the coming millennium, or whether that is still left to whom it may concern.

We also would have to ask the question: at what stage exactly is the literacy empowerment supposed to occur? Is this a question for posterity, or is it an issue of implementation design and strategy?

We would have to link literacy efforts closely with such processes and frameworks as the *Recognition of Prior Learning* process so that its utility is immediately realisable in legitimate contexts.

The Golden Riches in the Nordic Grass

When the Nordic Council of Ministers prepared its vision of Lifelong Learning for All, they took from Nordic mythology, The Prophecy of Sibyl as their guiding light¹.

⁸Dias P. 1993. Democratisation and Education as a Political Challenge to Social Authoritarianism in India. In Nord-Sud Aktuell-- Themen. 2 Quartal 1993.

¹The Golden Riches in the Grass. Lifelong Learning for All. Report from a think tank issued by The

Today the skies are dark and people are suffering we cannot ignore their plight. We hope that they will live to see a new greening path, and we hope that our Nordic skies will not turn black... We must assume responsibility for ensuring that this does not happen...

From this, they drew ideas about the human condition which reminded them that intellect without feelings is fatally flawed; that visions and substance, spirituality and intellect must be assigned an equal value.

It was from this that they drew the conclusion that the education for the future should encompass international understanding, linguistic skills, the ability to interpret symbols, a spirit of co-operation and participation, the ability to use both sides of the brain... in other words, it is a learning that is rooted in upbringing, family ties, respect, self esteem and inner strength.

It must unite the ring and the arrow, fusing them together to form a creative spiral.

Having laid this basis, they proceeded to devise strategies by which the competence of the entire population could be raised, with a high priority placed on the promotion and development of local initiatives and a recognition of the fact that the most effective learning instruments consists of human qualities, qualities which every individual can continue to develop - throughout his/her life.

They contested the rule by the regime of experts, and named the risk of technocratic dehumanisation as a distinct threat to the development of lifelong learning.

Africa's manifesto for a learning society

Africa's manifesto for lifelong learning and the making of Africa a learning society must include a statement in capital letters that begin with the assertion on Africa to say YES to itself, and thus allow itself to heal from the injuries caused by centuries of denial and denigration.

The learning continent we must commit to building is one that seeks to join and compete with the rest of the world, but on terms it can understand and can determine.

It is one in which we can accept the local as a force for sustainable human development, and not an inverted mirror of western identity.

The literacy to service such a manifesto will be explicit and fearless in specifying precisely how knowledge of the western alphabet should contribute to the renewal of a continent subjugated in part by the very discourses of literacy itself.

It is one that shall recognise that literacy involves ideological contest over meaning and power²; that it is definitely not an a-political, individual academic activity separate from community development and movements working towards human rights and justice.

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²Hautecoeur *ibid.*

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