

## **Using Authentic Texts to Accelerate Literacy Development**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Education has been identified as the key to achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) set by world leaders in 2000. The Commonwealth of Learning (COL), an agency of the Commonwealth Governments in one of its publications described knowledge as “key to individual freedom and to cultural, social and economic development” and stressed that achieving the MDGs would “require a massive expansion of human learning”. COL advocates the use of ODL in meeting this challenge noting that **“Traditional methods of education and training cannot address the scope and scale of the task”**.

Other international agencies such as UNESCO and many world governments also recognize ODL as the catalyst for delivering quality education needed to empower individuals and nations. The knowledge required to bring about social, cultural and economic transformations, necessitates that the citizens of every society or nation be literate in the language of communication, information and business. A critical concern therefore in meeting the knowledge challenge is how best to enable people acquire literacy skills so that they can access and use knowledge. This paper advocates the use of authentic texts, namely, newspapers as complements to traditional course materials and text books in accelerating the development of literacy skills. The paper provides a framework to be used by ODL institutions in setting up literacy development intervention programmes for learners enrolled in ODL institutions; out of school children and youth; adults needing literacy skills to improve their livelihoods and low cadre workforce in the industries.

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **LITERACY: KEY TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

Success in learning depends on the ability of the learner to access and use information and this ability requires that the learner is literate that is, s/he is able to read and write. Literacy is the sine qua non for any meaningful human capital development which in turn is the basis for meaningful social and economic development. How can a society or nation develop if its citizenry is illiterate? The need for literate citizenry is more than ever before critical because our world today is knowledge-driven.

The World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, 2000, recognized literacy as critical for human and social development and therefore set as its goal “to halve adult literacy by 2015” (The International Reading Association 2003 44). Literacy was seen as the means to achieve the global goal of Education For All as well as the basis for building a meaningful developmental agenda for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In 2003, the United Nations launched the Literacy Decade, with the theme, “Literacy as Freedom”. At the launch, Mr. Kofi Annan, the Secretary General of the United Nations, described literacy as the “key to unlocking the cage of human misery; the key to delivering the potential of every human being; the key to opening up a future of freedom and hope”. (The International Reading Association 2003 44) Five years earlier, the World Association of Newspapers, asserted that only with access to information “provided by education and literacy, can all men and women play their full role in society...” (1998 4)

At the occasion of the launch of the Literacy Decade by the UN, UNESCO Director General, Koichiro Matsuura, emphasized that priority should be given to the most disadvantaged groups such as women and girls, migrants and refugees, out-of-school children and youth. One of the lines of action proposed to reduce illiteracy globally was the development of literacy programmes to suit people’s different needs. This is in line with one of the instructional policies of ODL system, namely, making learning flexible by developing programmes that address the special needs of learners.

As mentioned in the introductory part of this paper, meaningful development could occur only when the citizenry of a society or nation could access and use information. Statistics by the international Reading Association in 2003 showed that more than 70 % of the world's illiterate adults were to be found in many parts of the world including the Sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa. This report was five years ago and there is no evidence to believe that the situation has changed. The importance of setting up literacy programmes to turn around the present trend cannot be overemphasized. The urgency for this is obvious and therefore requires urgent intervention. We must accelerate the rate of literacy development especially in parts of Africa with high cases of illiteracy.

Speedy acquisition of literacy skills is possible to the extent that meaningful resources are employed. Language text books, the traditional resources for teaching literacy are no longer sufficient for learning to read and write in the present information driven world. These text books are usually written around situations and topics that are geared towards teaching learners aspects of a language for example, tenses as well as skills for doing comprehension and summarizing tasks. Such texts no doubt do help learners to learn the language and ultimately use it to read and write. Too often, however, the learning activities in these text books are not about issues that learners care about and can readily connect to their daily lives' experiences. A major goal of learning is that what is learnt should readily be transferred to the learner's life outside the classroom. This is especially so for adult learners whose desire to be literate may be for immediate use of the skills acquired for instance in better performance of their jobs or their businesses or in improved skills in managing personal and family lives. Cornish (2004 18) notes that students are motivated to learn when the topics they study are interesting and relevant to their lives

This paper is advocating complementing traditional language text books with real life texts referred to in the literature as authentic texts for teaching literacy skills. Authentic texts are reading materials whose content is not contrived but consists of real life issues that students can relate with. Newspapers for instance are a good source of authentic materials for they usually contain topical issues that can motivate adult learners to read and write. Literacy skills thus acquired broaden a learner's horizon. As learners read and discuss issues that touch their lives in various areas of endeavors such as economics, politics, entertainment and sports, they acquire essential language skills as well as develop critical thinking skills which are readily transferable to other situations in their lives.

## **RATIONALE FOR USING AUTHENTIC TEXTS IN DEVELOPING LITERACY SKILLS**

Authentic texts are print materials used in ways that they would be used by learners outside of their adult education classes (Jacobson et. al. 2003 1 ). For texts to be considered authentic, they must not be contrived. They should be selected from live print materials such as the newspaper. Authentic materials have been found to richly complement traditional language classes by enlivening the classes and creating on the part of the learners a more positive attitude toward learning (Kelly et. al. 2002 1) Jacobson et. al. (2003 ix) carried out a five-year study of adult literacy education in the United States of America titled, "The Literacy Practices of Adult Learners Study", and found that students who participated in classes that included authentic materials and activities increased the amount of time spent engaging in literacy activities outside of school.

Auerbach, (1992) quoted in Jacobson et. al. (2003 vi) asserts that instruction which uses real life literacy materials and activities is best for adult learners. Using real life texts provides students with an education that is meaningful and responds better to their personal needs. One of the factors that contribute to learner attrition in adult literacy programmes according to Brod (1995) quoted in Weddel and Duzer (1997 1) is using instructional materials and approaches that are not relevant to learners' needs and lives. Weddel and Duzer (1997 1) corroborate this view stating that adult learners in literacy programmes frequently have very specific learning goals and needs such as being able to read to their children, get a job and when their needs are not met are likely to dropout of the programme.

Another important gain from using authentic texts is that they stimulate the integration of the four language skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking and many content areas or areas of interest such as the natural sciences, arts, economics, law, consumerism, current events, career exploration, civics, environmentalism, propaganda and advertising, entertainment, sports etc.

## **EXAMPLES OF AUTHENTIC TEXTS**

There is an abundance of sources for authentic texts that teachers could use to develop literacy skills. These include: Newspapers, magazines, catalogues, directories, phone books, travel brochures, flyers of product and service advertisements and election related matters, tourism pamphlets, greeting cards, invitation cards, the internet. Each of these sources could provide both long and short texts that could engage and challenge students to read discuss and write. For the purpose of this paper, however, the newspaper will be used.

## **NEWSPAPERS: VIABLE RESOURCE FOR TEACHING LITERACY SKILLS**

The newspaper is chosen out of the many authentic resources listed because of its wide coverage of topics and issues that affect people's lives. Newspaper articles are about situations and events relevant and meaningful to learners' daily lives, from local, national and international news to editorials, sports, entertainment. Secondly, newspapers are chosen because of the currency of the articles in them and because of their availability and affordability at national and local and even at international levels. The Internet, an excellent tool for accessing information is a rich source of getting newspaper articles from many countries of the world. Thirdly, newspaper articles offer learners opportunities of applying literacy and numeracy skills in understanding and analysing issues as well as appreciating the importance of current affairs. Newspapers offer context-embedded communication through photographs, graphs, charts, headlines, cartoons, tables, figures and other context clues that aid comprehension of text (Nixon-Ponder et. al., 1). Newspapers when properly used can efficiently promote learning, critical thinking, creativity and resourcefulness in learners of all ages (Lakin, 1998 5). Studies have shown that students who use newspapers in learning score higher in reading comprehension tests and develop stronger critical thinking skills as well as develop compassion and tolerance for other cultures (Cornish, 2004 18 See also, Lakin, 1998 5). A United Nations' publication, "Newspapers in adult education; A sourcebook" (1998) reports success stories of how adult educators in countries such as Argentina, Cameroon, Mali, Mexico, South Africa used newspapers to develop literacy skills in their adult citizens who became better informed about their livelihoods as well as about social and political issues in their countries. Newspapers indeed are excellent resources for aiding learning. ODL programmes that use newspapers to supplement prescribed course materials have much to offer their students in the areas of communication and cognitive skills.

## **A FRAMEWORK FOR USING NEWSPAPERS IN ODL PROGRAMMES**

Any programme in ODL can profitably use the newspapers to teach students the skills needed to understand and apply the knowledge in the particular field of study. Newspapers provide learners real life learning experiences to use communicative and cognitive skills such as comprehending, discussing, analysing, applying, interpreting, synthesizing and evaluating. These are life coping skills without which one cannot get on in life. Whatever the discipline, whether in the sciences, arts, management sciences, newspapers offer useful content for teaching and learning. Where newspapers of the general type cannot provide appropriate texts, for instance, in the natural sciences, there are special magazines and periodicals in these areas to consult.

The framework being proposed will present two types of literacy development interventions that ODL institutions could provide. The framework will describe how ODL institutions could use newspapers and magazines as the case may be to complement prescribed course materials.

## **Type 1**

### **Literacy Development Intervention within ODL Institutions**

The intervention here will be for addressing the literacy needs of students enrolled in ODL institutions. The intervention could be for students at 100 level degree programmes and certificate and diploma programmes. The intervention could also be for students at higher levels who are still not proficient in reading and writing. A lot of students in these programmes may have specific needs in using literacy skills. Evidence from undocumented reports from tutorial facilitators in NOUN for example, tell of students who experience problems reading and understanding course materials in general studies and their areas of study. This situation is not strange, considering that many of these students had been out of formal schooling for a very long time. Using newspaper articles on issues familiar to the students and related to their fields of study and prior experiences may help them develop study skills they could apply to their learning.

### **Incorporating newspapers in the regular ODL classroom**

As mentioned earlier, any programme in ODL can profitably employ newspapers as part of learning resources. This will require course tutors and facilitators to regularly read newspapers to identify articles and other publications of interest such as editorials, news items, charts, diagrams, tables, weather forecasts etc. They can also ask students to check out in the local and national newspapers, articles of interest and relevance to the topics they are working on in their prescribed course materials.

Activities to use to develop literacy skills should include devising questions that would lead students to:

- Develop skimming, scanning and indexing skills
- Answer factual questions on articles
- Evaluate the reliability of information contained in newspaper articles
- Read, analyze and interpret data embedded in charts, graphs and tables
- Search and locate information in articles that charts, graphs and tables reinforce

Note that all of the above activities are very suitable for students of various programmes such as – Economics, Statistics, Marketing, Arts and Social Sciences, Political Science etc.

### **Life examples of newspaper articles**

1. Articles in Nigerian newspapers in recent times on the non-passage of Freedom of Information Bill (FOI) by the National Assembly, and the legality of the appointment of the new Chairman of Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) are excellent learning resources for teaching critical thinking to students of Law, Journalism, Mass Communication and Political Science. Here are titles of some of these articles:

- EFCC: Gani says President breached Constitution.
- FOI Bill: N’Assembly can’t run away from law
- Stakeholders seek better information flow to aid productivity. (This article buttressed the need to pass FOI Bill)

2. Examples of newspaper articles on health that could serve as good resources for teaching health science students. Examples:

- Healthy Living: How much sleep do you really need?
- Infections cause 40 percent of premature deaths.

## Type 2

Type 2 Literacy Intervention here is for out of school children and youth wishing to be gainfully employed; self-employed adults who need literacy skills to increase their yield; women in purdah and prisoners who need to develop some livelihood skills.

ODL institutions in collaboration with their host communities could set up special intervention literacy programmes for livelihoods for the above groups. In order to make the literacy classes meaningful and relevant to these groups, the programme provider should do some analysis of the literacy needs of the anticipated client through an oral interview to obtain information on candidates'

- previous schooling experiences
- current level of literacy
- literacy contexts in which candidates live and work or do business
- work or business they hope to get into on the completion of programme.

The ODL institutions should take on intervention at this level as a community service and should not expect much financial gain from it. These special literacy classes should be set up at as many locations as possible depending on the size of the host community and the ODL institution's resources.

Another level of Type 2 literacy intervention is a situation where ODL institutions partner with industries such as Oil & Gas, Banks, Hotels and Tourism agencies to organize workplace Literacy programmes to educate their lower cadre workforce on necessary literacy skills to function effectively in these industries. Lower cadre workforce in the industries and businesses would include, drivers, technicians, messengers, waiters, and artisans. For effective participation in the literacy classes workers should be given work-release time to participate in these programmes.

Useful literacy activities at this level should include teaching them how

- ❖ to read and understand tools/equipment manuals, manuals on procedures for doing specific tasks, manuals on safety procedures, manuals on the dos and don'ts in the workplace.
- ❖ to access and use information to perform their work.

Expected benefits of workplace literacy programmes include:

- increased productivity
  - improved safety, precision and communication
  - reduced turnover of employees
  - retention and advancement of workers whose jobs might otherwise be in jeopardy.
- (Kortner,2001 3)

## CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the use of newspapers in accelerating literacy development using ODL. The paper argued that with the knowledge explosion in the world today and the urgent need to use this knowledge for development, programmes should be put in place to equip citizens of the world with the literacy skills to access and use information for personal realization and fulfillment and community development. Learning is meaningful and usable to the extent that learning materials are meaningful and relevant to the learners. Newspapers because they carry content that is not only current but touch on issues that may very likely affect learners' lives are useful learning resources for developing literacy and life coping skills.

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## **The Indispensability of Literacy: A case study**

It's never too late

George Dawson, a black American, was born the grandson of a slave, in a log cabin in 1898. He was eight when he took up his first job, that of feeding swine and cattle. At twelve he was hired out as a local farmer by his father.

George married in 1926 and became a father in 1927. He was widowed twice and remarried twice, siring seven children, all of whom went to school and learned to read and write. But Dawson had not learned to do that. For most of his life, he worked on the pasteurizing machines at a local dairy. He lost the only chance he had for a promotion because he was illiterate. He had to put just an "X" when his boss asked him to sign his name.

Dawson got by without reading for 98 years. Then in 1996 a young man, recruiting people for adult education classes invited him to join his class. Dawson enrolled. "I've been alone for ten years," the old man told him. "I'm tired of fishing. It's time to learn to read."

He learned the alphabets in a day and half. After two years he could read on a fourth-standard level. Now he reads the Bible during services in the Church. "I just figured, if everybody else can learn to read, I could too," he says.

Source: *If He and She Can ...* (2004)

By Rev Fr. C.P. Varkey, S.J.