

Women's literacy: Enhancing the dialogue between NGOs, practitioners and researchers

*Mary Sumner House, London
26th November 2015
10:30-16:00*

This meeting, organised and hosted by BALID (British Association for Literacy in Development) was the final event in the “Bridging the Gap” project, a capacity building and networking project funded by BAICE (British Association for International and Comparative Education) and led by the UEA Literacy and Development Group in collaboration with the UK Literacy Working Group. The meeting focused on the question: ***How can we increase the extent to which NGO activities, developments and documentation inform the academic research community?***

There have been observations about the limited collaboration between NGOs and academic researchers working in the field of women's literacy. This session provided NGOs with opportunities to share the kind of research they were involved in and the forms of project documentation they carry out. This event also aimed at determining various ways of accessing a range of research and drawing out the value that NGOs’ work could have for academic researchers.

Presentations and workshops

There were nine organisations represented in the meeting namely, the [Africa Educational Trust](#), the [British Association for Literacy in Development](#) (BALID), [FaithAction](#), [Feed the Minds](#), [Lifeline Network International](#), the [Mothers' Union](#), [Research and Practice in Adult Literacy](#) (RaPAL), [SIL International](#) and the [University of East Anglia Literacy and Development Group](#). In his opening remarks, Dr. Ian Cheffy



from SIL International and the Treasurer of BALID commented that the presence of these organisations in the event was in itself a form of bridging the gap among organisations who are working in the field of literacy and development. Other gaps that the session would try to address were those between research and practice, research and policy, and providers’ agenda and learners’ needs.

The opening remarks were followed



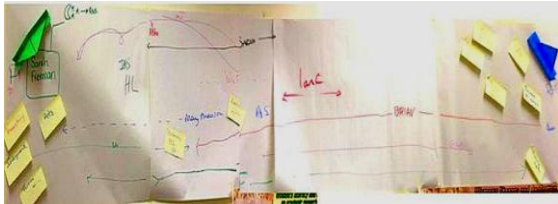
by an activity led by Dr. Katy Newell-Jones, the Chair of BALID. Katy invited the participants to position themselves on the continuum of researcher ... practitioner. In the activity, development

hats were used wherein a green hat represented practitioners while a blue hat was for researchers. This activity allowed the participants to introduce themselves and the range of researcher/practitioner activities they engaged in with regard to their position on the continuum. The majority represented themselves

as practitioners although many in fact had at some



point engaged with research and undertaken a higher degree. Very few were at the extreme ends of the continuum. Several concepts emerged from this activity such as the nature of roles they perform, the challenges they encounter in the field, the factors contributing to these challenges, and the actors they had to interact with.



Promoting effective and innovative practices in adult literacies teaching, learning and research, and support for adult literacies practitioners and researchers

One of the highlights of the morning session was the presentation by Ms. Tara



Furlong from RaPAL (<http://rapal.org.uk/events/bridging-the-gap/>).

Tara introduced the innovative practices and scaffolding activities of RaPAL which aimed to support researchers and practitioners in the field of adult literacy.

Some of the activities that RaPAL carries out to promote interaction and discussion are publishing digital journals, running conferences and training, contributing dialogue in the field, supporting ad hoc projects and publications, encouraging and involving members in the organisation's work, and utilising web interfaces as a dialogue medium and repository for resources.

One of the local conferences conducted by RaPAL was a multi-hub virtual colloquium across the UK on Reflections in Lifelong Lifewide Learner Journeys which

underpinned research and practice and centred on social practice approaches to literacy. Other events they have held were joint conferences in partnership with organisations such as NIACE, UCU and NRDC. A recent project that RaPAL was involved in is *Stories of Resilience*, a joint publication with the Australian Council for Adult Literacy (ACAL). This promotes adult literacy learners' stories of their experiences of learning English, maths and ICT and how their learning helps them improve their quality of life.

Tara's presentation was followed by a plenary discussion led by Dr. Mary



Anderson from BALID. Mary highlighted the scaffolding activities RaPAL provide for their members. Along this line, she stressed that RaPAL's utilisation of internet-based platforms was very

empowering. Mary then encouraged the participants to share three points from Tara's presentation that they found striking. Some participants commented that activities of RaPAL were affirming, encouraging and provoking as they have provided interactive platforms in various social media.

The final activity that closed the morning sessions was small group talks on putting the concepts that emerged from Tara's presentation into practice in grassroots literacies where the first language was not English. Several issues raised by some groups include: the challenge of



accessing information, incorporating literacy into skills and vocational training, and shaping the agenda as determined by donor factors. Other groups expressed the significant role of intermediaries in building a trusting relationship among academic researchers, donors and partners. They also mentioned some constraints such as the relevance of practice in the context of different communities and time restrictions. Before the morning session ended, Mary reiterated that it was of great value to consider how micro-representation of challenges and solutions contributed to international debates.

Challenges of embedding literacy into a vocational training project in Sierra Leone

Jamie Singleton and Harriet Labouchere from Lifeline Network International delivered the key presentation



for the afternoon session chaired by Dr. Juliet McCaffery, the Secretary of BALID. Jamie and Harriet shared the nature of projects led by Lifeline and talked through Lifeline's *Betteh Tumara* project funded

by Comic Relief and Big Lottery.

The *Betteh Tumara* project project was developed to address unemployment among young people in Freetown. It is a vocational programme that aims at equipping 16-25 year olds with vocational skills and empowering them to engage in income generating activities comprising various vocations such as construction, motor mechanics, hairdressing, plumbing, IT, hospitality and electrics.

As cited by Jamie and Harriet, one of the challenges of embedding literacy and

numeracy in this project was streaming different levels of abilities within a class. Another challenge was the lack of time to train vocational trainers to teach literacy and numeracy; as a result, the experienced literacy facilitators are sometimes taking on this role. This is part of the general lack of access to trainers with practical, theoretical and literacy and numeracy training skills. Apart from this, Jamie and Harriet highlighted the lack of knowledge as to how to find resources and information essential to upgrading and improving literacy and numeracy training.



In terms of students' literacy and numeracy skills, the project incorporated vocation-specific terminology. It was also mentioned that tailoring literacy lessons based on different vocations was both challenging and time consuming. With regard to numeracy, students' lack of skills in maths posed a challenge.

Other challenges include re-profiling of the budget for the project as funds were spent on Ebola Response. Another was that literacy and numeracy was just regarded as one element of the project because students' focus was on increasing their income and not improving their literacy and numeracy skills.

Jamie and Harriet stressed that the greatest influence on their literacy practice was the support and joint workshop with other organisations. To be specific, they met with Dr. Katy Newell-Jones in 2013 and Katy helped them design their own initial assessment. Another one was the workshop with Feed the Minds and [Craftshare](#) on curriculum implementation.

When asked about where and how they access information, they indicated that they basically gather information from practitioners with whom they have established a relationship. They also expressed their difficulties accessing reports from international organisations, NGOs and universities as reports produced by these organisations and institutions were often too specific and irrelevant in terms of applying to their own work. Moreover, they considered committing to this specialist knowledge and information too costly and time consuming.

With regard to their project reports, Lifeline usually shares them with their funders and with their colleagues who carry out similar work. Often, they are restricted by the cost of publishing in international journals and the availability of platforms that host reports and document sharing. Thus, they believe in the significance of building relationships with academics and developing an awareness of the value of sharing research findings and communicating them to communities.

NGO and practitioner documentation

After the presentation by Jamie and Harriet, the group was divided into four each of which four participants acted as inquisitors (Tara Furlong, Gina Lontoc, Burcu Evren, and Sussi (Shuhui) Liu) who posed questions to members of their respective groups whose practices dealt greatly with NGO work. Each group wrote some thoughts on coloured sheets which were referred to during the plenary discussion. The group work was facilitated by Katy who asked participants to answer the following questions:

- What kind of reports do NGOs produce?

- What types of information are included in their reports?

Discussions raised some issues concerning factors considered in producing reports such as the purpose, the content and target audience for their report. Among these, donors/funders, appeared to be the most influential in shaping the structure of project reports.



It was further suggested that academic researchers and practitioners had to be proactive in pursuing the available research and information and find ways on how they could do this. Since time barriers had been mentioned

repeatedly in the discussion and everyone agreed that it would be crucial to make some allowance for this in project proposals.

In addition, the notion of knowledge sharing moved beyond sharing inputs and best practices with other NGOs. Participants believed that partnership with higher education institutions (HEIs) would be of great value, particularly in securing project funding. Lastly, group talks pointed to the usefulness of both virtual and face-to-face events which provide space for collaboration among different NGOs and between NGOs and HEIs.



Plenary discussion and concluding reflections



Dr. Ian Cheffy facilitated the plenary discussion on potential ways forward to bridge gaps between NGOs, practitioners and researchers. He noted that key considerations in moving forward together were around relationships and collaboration. These key ingredients would create the synergy in spite of stakeholders' various focuses and would strengthen similarities among them. Ian also emphasised that it was the breaking down of barriers in different organisations that would produce long-term gains in the field of adult literacy learning.

Concluding reflections were offered by Professor Brian Street from King's College London, who is also the President of BALID. He underscored key things from the days' activities and discussions. He pointed out that **literacy** seemed to be a subset of the larger issues concerning communicative practices. He also stated that hidden themes, such as the connection of literacy to gender issues, had been unpacked. Referring to the metaphor of the arrows which participants had drawn on the researcher-practitioner continuum chart in the morning, Brian highlighted the role of education in designing and fulfilling literacy programmes. Finally, he reminded the group of key words in the discussions such as policy, scaffolding, gender and power



relations, stepwise learning, access, employment and communication skills.

The final event for the Bridging the Gap project was truly a success. As an insightful remark from Ian goes, it takes an effort to bridge the gap - in any of the dimensions discussed in the meeting. Like crossing over an arched bridge, it takes an effort to get up one side but, having made the effort, it's easy from then on to get to the other side.

Report written by

Dr. Gina Lontoc, *University of East Anglia Literacy and Development Group* with contributions from the presenters and facilitators

December 2015