

*Continuing Professional Education
Продължаващо професионално образование*

TRAINING TEACHERS FOR NON-FORMAL EDUCATION: THE LETTER PROGRAMME

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Abstract. This paper describes a case study of a training programme for teachers in non-formal literacy education programmes for adults using ethnographic approaches. It first sets the conceptual framework on which the programme was developed, both the definition of non-formal education used in this programme, and also the nature of informal learning which creates the need for an ethnographic approach to training. Secondly, it outlines the development and the implementation of the training programme in three settings (India, Ethiopia and Uganda). Finally, it discusses its usefulness and the elements of transferability in it to other forms of NFE.

Keywords: training programme, non-formal, informal, learning, ethnographic approach, transferability

At first sight, it may seem to some anomalous to talk about training teachers for non-formal education (NFE). For NFE is meant to be informal, and teachers in non-formal learning programmes (tutors, trainers, facilitators etc) too are or should be non-formal - taken often from the local community, given the maximum freedom to develop their own teaching programmes, with self-made teaching-learning materials and non-formal methods of the assessment of the learning achieved. Much work-based training, for example, uses other workers as the trainers rather than trained teachers. Should we train such NFE teachers, and if so, in what way? I shall argue that while much will depend on what we mean by NFE, however we approach NFE, such training to teach would need itself to be non-formal rather than formal.

I. The conceptual framework

The programme described in this paper was built on a strongly argued conceptual framework which comprised two main elements, a fully worked-out view of NFE and an understanding of informal learning. It will be necessary to outline these concepts in some detail.

1. Non-formal Education

The term 'non-formal education' is today used in a very wide range of senses, and it is important that when the term is used, we should try to assess which of

its many meanings is dominant in that context. There are two main groups of definitions in use among writers about NFE (Rogers 2004).

Non-formal settings: Many people see NFE as all education ‘outside of formal educational establishments’ (Coombs and Ahmed 1976; see, for example, EC 2001, “Non-formal learning is not provided by an education or training institution”). This is the most common (and oldest) definition of NFE, that it is the *context* rather than the education that is non-formal. Any learning programme not provided by a school or college or held in an educational establishment is seen as being non-formal. We can think of many examples - training programmes in a work place; scouts and guides meeting in ‘huts’, health training and pre-natal clinics held in clinics and other centres; religious study groups in churches, mosques, or private houses; etc.

But this has a number of problems. It does not tell us what ‘education’ is - it assumes all ‘education is education’, wherever it is held. It does not answer the question, can ‘education’ itself be formal and non-formal? While there are those who argue that any learning programme will be substantially influenced by the setting in which it is held, it is not clear if holding a learning programme outside of an educational establishment will always and essentially make it different. The experience of open and distance learning where the same learning programmes are provided in many different contexts suggests otherwise. While it may be possible to identify some of the ways in which the formal and non-formal settings may influence the learning, there are many instances of formal learning programmes being held off-campus remaining formal. And we all know of learning programmes which are non-formal although provided by and held in educational establishments out of hours - adult education classes in a school in the evenings, for example. We can even see non-formal education taking place among the school pupils on school premises (drama groups, debating societies, chess clubs, sports coaching etc). And some independent learning programmes outside of school and college are clearly formal - such as driving lessons or a First Aid certificate course etc.

Non-formal process: So that others feel that it is the ‘education’ that is non-formal rather than the context - i.e. it is flexible education, not formalised in terms of timing, content, teaching approaches, and/or methods of assessment and evaluation (Rogers 2004). Here group theory is helpful: *formal* groups, like the army or the police, do not change when someone joins or leaves, while *informal* groups, such as a drama society or a sports team, do change according to who belongs and who does not belong. Similarly, formal education is standardised, the same for all the learners in that programme irrespective of the setting, with a ‘one-size-fits-all’ curriculum and course content; non-formal education on the other hand is adapted more or less to the specific group of student-learners in the educational programme - it is to some degree tailor-made.

This view suggests that there are degrees of formality and non-formality (Colley et al., 2003), that formal and non-formal education shade imperceptibly from one

to the other. The difference lies in how far the learning programme is adapted to the individual aptitudes, aspirations and experiences of the particular group of learners involved (Campbell and Burnaby 2001). If there is a high level of adaptation, then there is a high level of non-formality. A university chemistry course is almost never adapted to each different group of learners, it is standardised, decontextualised. Private music lessons on the other hand are usually adapted to the abilities and wishes of the student-learner; they are very non-formal. Not completely, especially if the learner wishes to take some of the formal assessments and to achieve different levels of certification; but even here they are still largely non-formal.

Here then is the vital key to non-formal education - *adapting to what the student-learners bring with them to the learning programme*. It is a truism of adult education that adult student-learners bring with them to the learning programmes a wide range of experience and expectations, of aspirations and abilities, of learning styles and preferences (Cross 1981; Merriam and Cafarella 1999; Brookfield 1986 etc). But this is true of all learners, including children in school. In particular, it is widely recognised that all student-learners bring with them what have been called in different contexts;

- *pre-understanding* - some existing knowledge, some perceptions about the subject, what it is and what it is not - a pre-understanding which prejudices them towards or against some kinds of learning, which determines what they see and what they do not see. They often deny they have this but it is there all the same (Gadamer 1975; Turner 1975; Bleicher 1980; etc).

- some existing '*funds of knowledge*' and *banks of skills* which they have acquired through experience; this has been widely explored in the context of work-based learning (Marsick and Watkins 1990; Moll et al 1992, 2005; Hager 2004 etc), but in all other contexts, such funds of knowledge and banks of skills exist;

- some '*frames of reference*', some meaning schedules which determine what they see as being relevant to the new learning and what is not relevant (Cranton 1994; Mezirow 2000 etc). Much that they know and do is not defined as the subject matter of the NFE programme; for example, as we shall see below, many people do some writing and reading in their daily life activities but do not see these as 'literacy' which (to them) is something done in a classroom or with formal texts. Their meaning frame of 'literacy' is restricted to formal literacy practices.

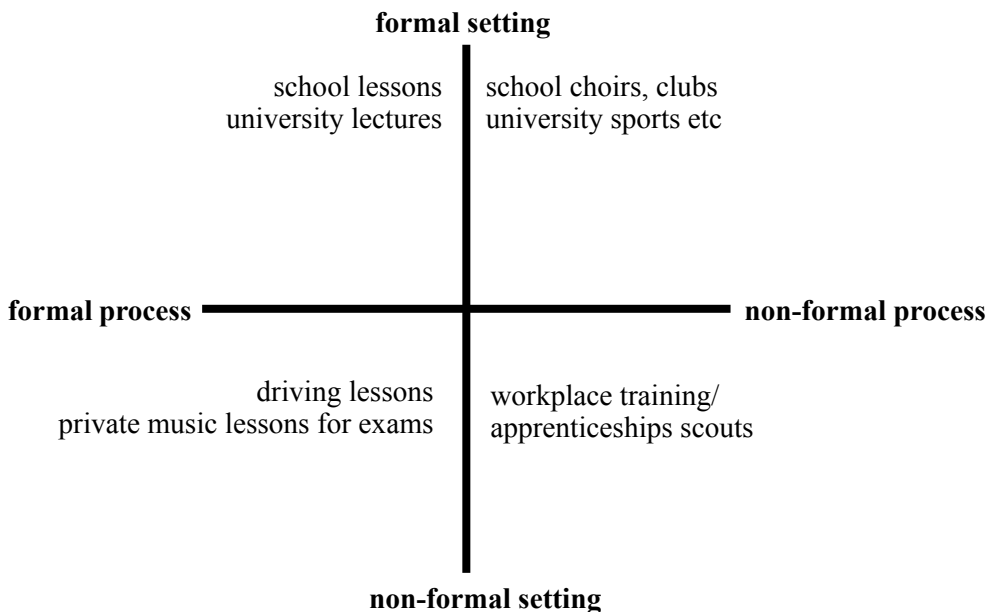
- some '*social imaginaries*', commonly held pictures of reality drawn from their local communities, and with these come the common Discourses, the language they use to express those 'social imaginaries' (Taylor 2004; Gee 1990, 2005).

(These are discussed in more detail in Rogers, forthcoming).

The level of non-formality in any educational programme, I would argue, depends on how far the learning programme is adapted to meet what the learners bring or how far it requires the learner to adapt to the learning programme.

Two criteria for NFE: We have then two different criteria for assessing the formality or non-formality of any learning programme. The context definition tends to see NFE and formal education as separate categories: any educational programme may be seen as *either* formal *or* non-formal. Whereas the process definition can be seen as a continuum - every educational programme will contain some formal and some non-formal elements. The difference between these two approaches results in some anomalies, some apparently contradictory statements; thus for instance, that one can speak of formal education in non-formal contexts or non-formal education inside formal educational establishments rather than that all education outside of schools and colleges is different from all education inside schools and colleges.

So much for educational theory. Studies of what actually happens on the ground suggest that both are in fact happening. There are formal and non-formal contexts which influence the kind of learning achievements in NFE (see e.g. Egetenmeyer 2011, 2012) - although non-formal contexts are so wide, comprising the whole of life outside school and college (work, leisure, home, community, religion etc) that one wonders if 'outside of educational institutions' is a category at all. Equally, there are educational programmes using formal and non-formal processes to varying



degrees. So that we can see all learning programmes, formal and non-formal, as lying within a matrix:

The important thing in NFE is to see what is going on, not to determine in advance what should go on.

2. Informal learning¹⁾

The second major ingredient to our programme was that of informal learning (Rogers 2014; Jeffs and Smith 1990; Carter 1997; Schugurensky 2000; Hager 2001; Livingston 2001, 2002; Smith 2002; Straka 2004; Werquin 2007; Hager and Halliday 2009).

The recognition of three kinds of learning, formal, non-formal and informal, is now widely acknowledged, for example by the Global Report on Learning (UNESCO 2009; EC 2001; see Colardyn and Bjornavold 2004; for overviews of learning, see Corte 2010; Belanger 2011). It has on several occasions been described as ‘the iceberg’ of learning (Coffield 2000; Livingston 2002 etc). Formal and non-formal learning (both planned programmes of learning) are the tip of the iceberg, above the water level. But the nature of the base of the iceberg, informal learning, is only now being explored (Rogers forthcoming). What is below the water level, unseen, is larger and more influential than that which is above. This kind of learning is everyday learning, not in learning programmes. It is universal - everyone learns. It is ubiquitous - it takes place everywhere, during the course of everyday interactions and activities, at work, in leisure, in social movements, in community activities (Rogoff and Lave 1984; Overwien 2005). It is unplanned - it takes place in a sequence which occurs ‘naturally’ rather than in any systematic way. It is continuous - unlike formal and non-formal learning programmes, it does not start or finish, it carries on for the whole life. It comes from life and it is for life (Richardson and Wolfe 2001; Erstad and Sefton-Green 2013) - it provides the knowledge, skills and understanding which enable us to manage our lives and work towards fulfilling our aspirations. Adults and children (I nearly said, ‘even children’ but I mean ‘especially children’) learn informally, though not unpurposefully - it is after all how all of us learned our first language, by listening, copying, experimenting, communicating, with our social environment.

It is informal learning that helps us to develop our attitudes, our values, our aspirations, the areas of our confidence and lack of it, our identities. While formal and non-formal learning contribute, they are very much less influential in these areas than informal learning. Our preferences are acquired informally from interaction with our peers, from the films we watch, from the activities we engage in within our social and cultural context. This is very deep emotional learning, tied in with our sense of who we are.

Much of this learning (like language) is socially desirable and necessary - i.e. socialisation. But a great deal can be socially undesirable. Racial prejudice, drugs, domestic violence and gangs are all learned informally, from our communities of street, playground or work place, and from the media etc.

But - and here is the key point - most of this learning is unconscious learning, unseen, below the water level. Our pre-understanding is based on assumptions, basic patterns of expected normality which we have learned from our experiences. Our funds of knowledge and banks of skills are 'tacit' - we do not know we know, although we use the knowledge and the skills we have learned informally as well as formally all the time in the course of our daily lives (for tacit knowledge, see Polanyi 1967/1983; Reber 1993; Berg 1994; Bjornavold 2000; Eraut 2000; Rose 2004; Evans and Kersh 2004). Our frames of reference are those definitions by which we judge whether something is what it says it is without us being conscious of it. And our social imaginaries as revealed by our conversation are what we believe are commonly held pictures - except that we rarely see them but simply talk about them as if everyone else shares our views. It never occurs to us to question them.

This is why student-learners often say they are ignorant of the subject being learned -and believe it - because they do not know what they know, or they do not see what they do know as being relevant to the topic. What they have been engaged in during the course of their lives is not seen by them as 'learning'; this is not their frame of meaning of 'learning'. Learning, they feel, is something that goes on in school or classes, during tuition; it is not everyday life experiences.

The dilemma of teachers in NFE

If then we take the view that Non-Formal Education is that education which is most adapted to take as full account as possible of what each of the learners brings with them to the learning programme; and if we accept the view that much of what they bring has been acquired through informal learning and that they don't know what they possess (both positively and negatively), we have the ingredients of a major dilemma for teachers in all forms of education, and with it the justification for a specific training programme for such teachers. Indeed, it can be argued that teachers in NFE need such a training programme even more than teachers in formal education. For the key question becomes: if I am to adapt my learning programme to what the specific group of learners bring, *how can I find out what they bring* - what pre-understanding, what funds of knowledge and banks of skills, what frames of reference, what social imaginaries they already possess?

This is not a matter of option for any teacher in NFE - or indeed in formal education. Nor is it just a matter that such prior learning can be helpful for our learning programme (Aarts et al 1999). Rather, it forms the foundation for all new learning; for all learning builds on prior learning, it never stands alone. But equally much of this informal learning can be a barrier to the new learning or can interfere with it, distort the new as it is adapted to the existing learning frameworks. What any student-learner brings to any learning programme, formal and non-formal, is vital for the success of the programme. But it is particularly necessary in the case of NFE, for, as we have suggested, the main aim of NFE is to adapt its programme to the learning group.

How then can any teacher in NFE find out what the student-learners bring with them? It will of course be very important to ask the student-learners, to engage with them in discussion, and (especially for social imaginaries) to listen to the language they use, including (as Mary Hamilton has recently pointed out, Hamilton 2012) to the metaphors they employ. This will be a vital element in any exploration of the contribution the learners can make to the learning programme.

But it will not be enough - for their responses will be limited to what they believe they know and what they think is relevant to the subject of the new learning. And since most of the pre-understanding, funds of knowledge and banks of skills, the frames of reference and the social imaginaries are tacit, basic assumptions, the student-learners cannot answer fully. Much that they know lies buried deep in their unconscious; and much that is known to them will not be defined as at all relevant to the learning programme. To give an example: one of the key findings of an ethnographic-style study conducted recently is that many people who are defined as 'illiterate' - and who define themselves as 'illiterate' - not having attended school or adult literacy classes, in fact use informal literacy practices in their daily life activities. But when asked about their own 'literacies' in this research project, some did not see these activities at all, while others saw them but did not define them as 'literacy'; as one such respondent put it, 'this is not *your* literacy' (Nabi et al 2009; see also Rogers and Street 2012). In other words, the frame of reference they were using for 'literacy' was limited to the kinds of reading and writing that went on in a classroom or with formal texts; it excluded the informal scrawls which some of them produced.

It was with this key question, exploring ways to help teachers in NFE unearth what their student-learners bring to the classes, in mind that the LETTER training programme for teachers in NFE was created and implemented.

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The continuation of the article you can read in the next issue of Journal “Pedagogy”