

How To Eradicate Illiteracy Without Eradicating Illiterates?

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Introductory remarks

This paper is a personal testimony of part of my story with language, literacy, and knowledge. During the first half of my life (first 30 years), I – like most educated people – approached life/reality from a standpoint superior to that of the “elements” themselves (people, things, social relations, phenomena...). I started with official and professional texts, universal concepts and theories, standardized measures, and ready meanings – the approach followed by institutions in general and by the educational institution in particular. In the second 30 years of my life, I have been trying to listen to the elements in my surroundings, including my inner voice and the voice of Nature. In other words, I have been busy “healing” myself from the assumption that thinking is superior or higher than living and doing. Being attentive to my surroundings and faithful to my experiences and inner voice, and using words rather than be used by them, became the main guiding principles for me.

In those second 30 years of my life, I became increasingly aware and cautious of the role of universal thinking, solutions, claims and declarations, of dominant forms of knowledge, and of texts, in contributing to the disappearance of diversity, and to the dominance of one path for progress and development. To define people in negative terms is part of the problem with the dominant discourse. To define a person, for example, as “illiterate” (i.e. in terms of what s/he lacks instead of what the person has and what s/he does) is one striking example relevant to the discussion here. That illiterate person may have tremendous knowledge and wisdom, and may be able to express herself/ himself in beautiful ways; yet, all of that is ignored and what s/he lacks is stressed. It is a very effective way in using language to control what the mind sees and what it fails to see. If it were only about the term illiterate, I would not have mentioned it. I (along with my people) was

defined by negative terms throughout my whole life, and very rarely – if ever – by what we are and what we have. We were defined as “non-Jews,” even when we formed the majority in Palestine. It is like defining the French in France as “non-Algerians”! And at least since 1949, we (along with 80% of the population of the world) were defined as undeveloped or underdeveloped or developing! (In spite of this, I will use the term “illiterate” to point to its absurdity and to relate what I am saying in this paper to current discussions on the topic.)

A good part of the paper consists of comparing two “worlds”: the world of my illiterate mother and the world of my literate self. My fascination with this comparison has been a main inspiring element in my thinking and doing for the past 25 years at least. I am still fascinated by my mother’s world, her way of living, understanding, knowing, relating, and expressing. She continues to be an invincible treasure for me every time I find myself in a situation (such as this one concerning the “literacy crusade”) where I need to look at things in a way different from the norm, where I need to imagine a different way of perceiving. I find my imagination, in such situations, wandering back to her, because she was a true embodiment of a radically different worldview. That’s why when I hear a person, or read a statement, which implies that the illiterate is not a full human being, and that we need to save her/him, I shiver inside, and feel the urgency for a new vision touching the core of what is real. In addition to comparing the two worlds, I will describe some projects that I was involved in during the past 30 years, which embodied the approach, principles and convictions that I lived by and worked with concerning language, literacy and knowledge.

The first articulation of the comparison between my world and my mother’s world appeared in my article “Community Education is to Reclaim and Transform What Has Been Made Invisible,” in the Harvard

Education has transformed knowledge and learning into commodities, and students and teachers into consumers.

Educational Review Feb. 1990. My “discovery” of my illiterate mother’s math, and how my math and knowledge could neither detect nor comprehend her math and knowledge, mark the biggest turning point in my life, and has had the greatest impact on my perception of knowledge, language, and learning and their relationship to reality. Later, I realized that the invisibility of my mother’s math was not an isolated matter but a reflection of a wide phenomenon related to the dominant Western worldview. (See, for example, Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afro-Asiatic Roots of Classical Civilization, The Fabrication of Ancient Greece, 1785-1985*, Rutgers University Press, 1987. In this book, Bernal argues that Classical civilization has deep roots in Afro-asiatic cultures, which have been systematically ignored, denied or suppressed since the eighteenth century - chiefly for racist reasons. Development during the past 50 years has been a continuation of this ignoring, denial, and suppression of what peoples and cultures had throughout history, and still have.)

The first Palestinian Intifada, which started in December 1987, deepened and broadened many of the convictions, which started growing within me during the 1970s. It made me aware of cultural and social aspects that were also made invisible by dominant structures and terminology. During the first Intifada, I realized that what kept Palestinian society viable were people who were rooted in the soil of the culture and in daily lives, whether literate or not. It was the rooted traditions and social structures that kept the various communities in the West Bank and Gaza Strip functioning. In other words, the crucial factor in whether a person is “nurturing the community and nurtured by it” is not whether one is literate or not, but whether one is rooted in the cultural soil and in daily living or not. For me, the challenge facing communities everywhere is to reclaim and revalue the diverse ways of learning, studying, knowing, relating, doing and expressing. My first reaction to the Intifada (in relation to language) was to work with students from Birzeit University (we met “illegally”, because Birzeit, along with other Palestinian universities and schools, was closed by Israel for more than four years). I asked students to read the front pages of newspapers and write about them, comparing the titles with what was written below the titles and with what

was happening on the ground. However, the biggest project I was involved in as a result of the Intifada (and related to language and literacy) was launching the reading campaign in Palestinian society as a main project of Tamer Institute, which I established in Palestine in 1989. (For details, see my article “The Reading Campaign Experience within Palestinian Society: Innovative Strategies for Learning and Building Community”, *Harvard Educational Review*, Feb. 1995). Since 1997, I have been involved with two projects “The Arab Education Forum” and the “Qalb el-Umour Project”, both of which embody a different perception, conception, practice, and “myths” concerning learning and the use of language.

Before I end these preliminary remarks, I would like to make three comments concerning the 2-page statement, which was sent to us in regard to the round table, because of their relevance to issues I raise in this paper. My first comment is related to urging participants in the round table discussion to be open, honest, self-critical, and reflective. I promise that I will be exactly that. My second comment (which embodies the promise in my first comment) is related to the sentence: “the UN Literacy Decade was adopted unanimously by the nations of the world...”. For a delegate to speak on behalf of a nation, without discussing it with the nation (without even the nation knowing about it) is symptomatic of what is taking place in today’s world and part of the reason of an attitude, which seems to be spreading among peoples around the world: being indifferent spectators. Moreover, the unanimous approval of the Decade does not necessarily reflect the importance of the topic, but probably its non-seriousness and non-relevance to most governments (the approval does not carry with it any commitment in terms of actions). What I am sure of, however, is that I was not consulted, and it does not seem to have been discussed in the open within any nation. If I were consulted, I would have raised some of the issues I am raising in this paper. In this sense, the claim that the decade was “adopted unanimously by the nations of the world” in the absence of the nations of the world is a denial of a most basic right of any human being: the right to be asked about her/his opinion before speaking on her/his behalf. Decisions that are taken in the name of all nations do not stop at the level of literacy. More often than not, they

involve declaring wars on small nations, like what happened during the past 50 years. In addition, I belong to a nation that is not fully represented in the UN. (I was robbed of both my country and my nationhood by Britain, and the “civilized” countries sanctioned the robbery at the UN). A more humble and accurate statement would thus be “The Decade was adopted by the delegates of those countries that are represented in the general assembly.” This example reminds us of the importance of being accurate and intellectually honest as a fundamental principle in using languages.

My third comment is related to celebrating literacy. I have a big problem with celebrating a tool, especially in a world where tools (such as language) are used to control, suppress, and distort. Celebrating literacy is like celebrating cars. When we look at what cars have done to ancient and great cities like Cairo and Athens, we realize that we need to be more careful. In other words, we need to look not only at what literacy adds (in the way it is conceived and implemented) but also at what it subtracts or makes invisible.

In short, my bias in this paper is obvious: my concern is not about statistical measures (for example, how many learn the alphabet), but about our perception of the learner and what happens to her/him in the process of learning the alphabet. My concern is to make sure that the learner does not lose what s/he already has; that literacy does not replace other forms of learning, knowing, and expressing; that literacy is not considered superior to other forms; and that the learner uses the alphabet rather than be used by it. In other words, my concern is to make sure that in the process of eradicating illiteracy, we do not crush illiterates. In this paper, I stress aspects that are usually not stressed in discussions and programs on literacy. There is no need to repeat things that have been stressed before.

The story of my “illiterate” mother

In the 1970s, while I was working in schools and universities in the West Bank region (in Palestine) and trying to make sense out of math, science and knowledge, I “discovered” that what I was looking for has been next to me, in my own home: my mother’s math and knowledge. She was a seamstress. Women would bring to

her rectangular pieces of cloth in the morning; she would take few measures with colored chalk; by noon each rectangular piece is cut into 30 small pieces; and by the evening these scattered pieces are connected to form a new and beautiful whole. If this is not math, I don’t know what math is. The fact that I could not see it for 35 years made me realize the power of language in what we see and what we don’t. Her knowledge was embedded in life (like salt in food) in a way that made it invisible to me as an educated and literate person. I was trained to see things through official language and professional categories. In a very true sense, I discovered that my mother was illiterate in relation to my type of knowledge, but I was illiterate in terms of her type of understanding and knowledge. Thus, to describe her as illiterate and me as literate (in some absolute sense) reflects a narrow and distorted view of the real world and of reality. I am illiterate among the indigenous peoples in Ecuador; a Greek is illiterate in Pakistan; and so on. A division, which I find more significant than literate and illiterate, would be between people whose words are rooted in the cultural-social soil in which they live (like real flowers) and people who use words that may look bright and shiny but without roots (like plastic flowers). Put differently, a serious challenge, which we face in today’s world, is for each person (whether literate or illiterate) “to say what one means and mean what one says,” a principle that is alien to institutional logic and contrary to the interests of career-oriented professionals. (I really hope that one day the UN declares a decade where people say during that decade what they mean and mean what they say. That would, in my opinion, have a real and deep impact on reversing the disastrous logic, which currently runs the world.)

The realization of my mother’s knowledge challenged several assumptions, which are usually embedded in official discussions on literacy: that a literate person is better than an illiterate person; that an illiterate person is not a full human being; that s/he is ignorant; that by becoming literate, a person would be magically transformed and poverty and ignorance would be wiped out; that a literate person is freer than an illiterate person; and so on and so forth. The fact is that my illiterate mother was neither inferior in her knowledge nor was less human or less free. Giving literacy

magical powers and claims is simply a false promise.

My engagement with my mother was neither objective nor subjective, although it included elements of both. My engagement with her touched the depth of my intimate convictions and beliefs. The “dialogue” between her worldview and mine helped me remove many masks, which I acquired through my education. It was not easy for me to take them off. It took me several years before I was able to admit my new convictions publicly. I was simply risking my career, prestige and reputation.

At one point, I really thought that what was needed to make my mother understand math better, was to teach her how to read and write, to teach her some accepted terminology and ways of the dominant math. I thought if I only could teach her how to put what she knew in terms of the categories (which I studied and taught), then her knowledge would be much better.

I thought that if I can mix her math with mine, I might come up with something fantastic. Gradually, however, I realized that her knowledge and mine could not be mixed; it would be like mixing real flowers with plastic flowers (her knowledge being the real flowers). Her knowledge cannot be taught/transmitted by ways, methods, categories, and language, which I studied and was teaching. (I even became convinced that the worst way to learn is to be taught according to a curriculum, a syllabus, or a manual.) At the same time, I realized that my kind of knowledge could not be integrated into life the way hers was. I don't like the term empowerment, but if I allow myself to use it I would say that I was empowered by my mother rather than the other way round, (although current wisdom has it that my mother needed empowerment!). I realized that what I really could do was to articulate my realization of her knowledge and make it visible to the world of the literate, hoping that we learn how to be humble again and become aware of the diversity of ways of learning, knowing, living, perceiving, and expressing – and that such ways cannot be compared along linear measures.

I articulated my realization of her knowledge hoping that we stop making universal claims such as “literacy does wonders” without many

and severe qualifications, and also hoping that we realize again that diversity is in the nature of life and, thus, stop claiming that there is only one path for learning, knowing and for progress, namely education. My hope was, and still is, to end the monopoly of education over learning and regain diverse “spaces”, along with resources, where people learn. Put differently, education is one way to learn; those who are comfortable with it should be supported. Those who are comfortable with other ways of learning should also be supported by providing them with means and facilities (including resources) that help them learn. This implies an end to the era of “education for all” and, instead, providing diverse ways of learning where we do not produce useless people (including dropouts) and blame them for it. I think this is very relevant to the “literacy crusade” that is currently being launched.

Literacy As Freedom?

Since freedom is a main theme in the literacy decade, it merits some elaboration before I discuss its relation to literacy. For me, the most fundamental aspect of freedom is “making one's path in life by walking it”. Freedom is not choosing between path X and path Y although it can embody this aspect. And it is not following a predetermined path. It does not refer to freedom of choice and of decision, although it embodies both. “Making a path in life by walking it” implies being attentive to and acknowledging reality, and also being faithful to one's experiences of that reality and to one's convictions and principles. In this sense, we are all co-partners in understanding reality; each person is a source of understanding. We are all doers, observers, and constructors and authors of reality. Understanding reality does not have one author but many, as many as those who care to put an effort to independently investigate the meaning of life and words. No one has the right or authority to monopolize interpretations and meanings. Personal interpretation and independent investigation of meaning are, for me, most fundamental human rights (which, ironically, are not mentioned in the universal declaration of human rights!). In addition, personal interpretation and independent investigation of meaning are among the most fundamental characteristics of freedom.

They respond to free interaction and honest reflection between the world within the person and the world around the person. Personal interpretation and independent investigation of meaning, however, embody responsibility on our part and, thus, embody risk. This is where freedom, responsibility, commitment and readiness to pay a price converge. In this sense, freedom can neither start with models nor follow predetermined patterns nor be measured, but it can be inspired by the lives of others.

In the sense described above, I feel that my “illiterate” mother was much freer than me. She made her path in life “by walking it”, and not by being trained nor by fragmenting knowledge and teaching them to her separated from life. She learned rather than was taught. She learned by observing, doing, reflecting, relating, and producing. She created her own path and constructed her own understanding. One big difference between my mother and me is that if I needed to find the meaning of a word I would look it up in a dictionary, encyclopedia or some other book. In contrast, she would look for meanings through her experiences and life. My way was the lazy way. I would rarely bother to put any effort to explore the meaning by reflecting on my experience with the word; no independent investigation of meaning. She was authoring her understanding. She was a spectator, a doer, and an author of reality. In contrast, I was an imitator, solving problems, most of which have been solved for a trillion times, in boring repetition in schools around the world for the past 100 years at least. A typical question in my type of education was “what are the dimensions of the biggest box we can make out of a rectangular piece of board.” A typical challenge for my mother was, “how to make a beautiful dress out of a rectangular piece of cloth, that would fit a particular person.” In addition, she was free in the sense of not being bound to an institution to give her a job. Her knowledge sprang from life and was connected to life. She was needed everywhere she lived. She was her own boss. She was free from the fear of losing her job, or of being labeled by an arbitrary committee that she was not fit for the job. Freedom from fear is another fundamental aspect of freedom. She was free from the hegemony of institutions and professionals.

Unlike teachers, trainers, experts, and the like, her commitment was not to institutions and professionals; she did not need them to get legitimacy. Her commitment was to people whom she cared about, many of whom became her friends. In contrast, my knowledge originated in institutions and needed institutions to get work. Moreover, having a curriculum and constantly feeling fearful of failing or being accused of one thing or another, contradict freedom in the sense described above.

One objection that could be presented here is that knowing how to read and write can help people be free in terms of not depending on others in ‘moving around’ in the modern world. True, but my main point in this paper is exactly this: how to gain this kind of freedom without losing other kinds, which in my opinion are extremely crucial.

An Analogy

I will use cars to clarify what I want to say here. In imitation of the word “illiterate”, I will use the term “car-less” to define people who have no cars. Instead of talking about such people as those who walk, those who use what is abundant and healthy (legs), we stress what they don’t have. In some sense, a person who has a car is freer to go to more places, and to farther away places, but s/he is bound to drive on pre-paved roads. S/he may have several roads to choose from, but they are all predetermined, pre-constructed. It is much harder to make one’s own path using a car. “Car-less” people (just like “illiterate” people) probably cover less area, but are freer to move around and explore the surroundings. They “make their paths by walking.” Their feet are always on the ground. Seeing the landscape from the window of a car (or from a plane) gives the illusion that the person is “learning” about the landscape but it is totally different from walking on and feeling the soil, the plants, the fresh air, nature’s sounds, etc. Some may say why not have both? Fine, as long as using cars (or planes) is not considered superior, and more valuable, than walking, and as long as we do not lose the ability to reach places or to realize aspects of life where cars and language cannot reach. It is very hard to be wise if you travel all the time in cars or planes. In contrast, it is very hard for a farmer, a sailor, a true scientist, a true artist, or

a traveler on foot not to be wise. Wisdom is listening to and being attentive to nature and surroundings. It does not consider increasing the speed of life as a main goal or value. Gandhi, who is considered wise by many, once said, "There is more to life than increasing its speed." Considering reading and writing as a basic human need often robs people from what I consider to be more basic, which is the ability to express one's living in some form, which may not (for many) be language and literacy. If we can provide literacy to all without robbing them of what they have, that's fine. Since resources are limited and our ways are often exclusive, it only makes sense to provide various options for people to choose from. The expression of my mother's knowledge, for example, took the form of beautiful clothes. That of a farmer is what s/he grows, and so on. To claim that literacy is more important for my mother doesn't make sense. If one can acquire an expression without losing another, that is fine, but if for some reason one has to choose, then claiming that literacy is the only or the best choice for all cannot be justified. To put all our energies and resources in one form limits diversity and freedom.

The teachers I still remember fondly are not those who were trained well, and who possessed technical knowledge and advanced degrees, but those who were generous and hospitable. They were generous in their spirit, and with their time and with their ears (i.e. compassionate listeners). They were hospitable in their attitude and relationships, and with their hearts and minds. They accepted not only what was familiar but also what sounded strange (hospitality is true when it is extended to strangers and not only to those whom we know). They were open to strange ideas, never judgmental, and had big hearts. My mother was such a teacher. She was not a certified professional teacher; she was a profound human being. She was generous, hospitable, kind, caring and wise. In addition, she was doing something artistic and pleasing to her. She was not an educator or facilitator or liberator or conscientizer or any of those terms that are good in the world of control and consumption, where people are divided to "helpless" and "saviors". She was truthful, she did what she believed in, and I never heard her say anything she didn't mean (she would rather remain silent). Her way of living was compelling enough

that people were affected. She never preached; rather, she lived the principles she believed in, those that she wished for the community. There was no separation between her words and her actions; when she used the word "love", for example, her actions already preceded her word. I never felt she was competing with anyone. She was doing things out of personal convictions, out of inner calling. Through her way of living and relating, and through her perceptions, she helped me heal from a lot of the aspects of being literate. I am still literate, but I won't do what I did blindly before. For example, I abandoned many words that I used before healing, such as progress, success, failure, and measuring people. I suggest that we allot some time where we celebrate the knowledge and wisdom of my "illiterate" mother, and of all the "illiterate" people who have no interest in the dominant system of competition, control and winning. It is worth mentioning here that I am not talking about my mother as an exceptional and extraordinary person.

I believe deep inside that all those who are labeled illiterate have special and wonderful qualities about them. (I certainly encourage anyone who lives with an "illiterate" person to dig into the treasure inside that person and bring it out.)

Any attempt to uproot people like my mother from their cultural soil and put them in plastic frames or boxes, whether in the name of literacy, development, education or whatever, is an attempt that we should eye with caution. We have to look at what we lose in any process and not only at what we gain. The challenge is how a person like my mother can become literate, without losing the tremendous knowledge, self-confidence, and wisdom that s/he has.

Projects I Have Been Involved In

Many projects that I started and worked on during the past 25 years sprang from the realization of what my mother embodied, and after 1987, from the inspiration created by the first Palestinian Intifada. These projects included teaching math to illiterate workers at Birzeit University in the late 1970s, encouraging students to use their experiences in redefining terms in my classes, experimenting with community education (such as launching a reading campaign in Palestine) through Tamer

Institute, encouraging people to articulate what they do through the Arab Education Forum, and creating spaces for young people to express, exchange and discuss, as in the Qalb el-Umour project. I will touch briefly on these projects.

When Birzeit University was closed by Israel in the late 1970s, I decided to teach math to illiterate workers at the university. I didn't start "logically" by first teaching them the numbers and numerals etc., but by choosing tasks that they were doing more or less daily. I will choose two examples. Every day they came to the university from their homes. So I asked them to draw the road from their homes to the university. (Some of the drawings and discussion appeared in my article *Mathematics, Culture, and Authority in For the Learning of Mathematics*, Montreal, Canada, 1982.) The second example was about arranging chairs in big rooms and halls. Because the university was small at the time, many rooms and halls were used for multiple purposes.

My question was to find out how many chairs can fit a certain hall before they start moving the chairs. That required various dimensions related to math and language (such as drawing a "map" of the hall, showing the tiles, counting and writing the symbols of numbers, writing words, etc.) That question took several days of discussion and covered several aspects. In short, I used what they did daily in building knowledge of the alphabet and numerical literacy.

As for redefining terms and building one's own understanding, I devised a course for entering first year students at Birzeit University (in 1979), which I called "math in the other direction". (I wrote a book with the same title in Arabic.)

The Reading Campaign: When we (at the Tamer Institute) launched the reading campaign in Palestine in February 1992, its main objective was to make reading into a habit and reading books an enjoyable activity within the Palestinian community at large. (This recently was extended to Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon.) It did not attempt to deal with illiteracy in a literal sense, because we felt that literacy is not only the technical knowledge of how to read and write, but is rather having the ability and means to learn and produce. Thus,

the activities of the reading promotion campaign focused on helping people acquire these means to learn, mainly the ability to work within small groups, dialogue, and reflect on one's actions through writing and discussion. Regardless of whether one was "literate" or not, the atmosphere was such that everyone wanted to be involved in "reading" whether through the literal reading of books or listening to books being read or contributing to the writing and documentation of one's experiences. (It is worth mentioning here that, in cooperation with the UNESCO office in Amman and with the Ministry of Education in Jordan, we – as Arab Education Forum – organized a meeting on 07 September in Amman, to celebrate the International Literacy Day, that brought together various groups in the Arab world who publish books (especially for children and youth) and/or run reading and literacy promotion campaigns to exchange their experiences and talk about possibilities of cooperation. The purpose of the meeting was to look at such initiatives and see how efforts can be combined to produce better effects on the long run, on both the local and regional levels. Again, for details concerning the reading campaign in Palestine, please see my article referred to earlier.

The "essence" of the Arab Education Forum is inviting every person (or group) that is doing something which is inspired from within (as opposed to doing some repetitious meaningless job) to reflect on what s/he does and express and share it with others. Although we describe the initiatives as inspiring, yet we do not put ourselves as judges to exclude any one from such reflection, expression and sharing. (This includes both literate and illiterate people.) We consider every person as a source of understanding and every experience as having value which can be brought out and shared. The responsibility is totally at the personal/ local group level.

The Qalb el-Umour magazine: although it is not strictly teaching the alphabet, it is an example of how to use the alphabet rather than be used by it, which to me represents a crucial distinction in relation to literacy. Any group of friends – regardless of age, background, and geographical location – can get together, express aspects of their lives, and pull together some resources and produce an issue of the magazine. The idea is built on the fact that what

is needed to produce an issue is available to any group: their stories, expressions, will, and their collective decision to produce it. It is built on what is available, on what people have, on abundance.

No one approves, and no one edits. In other words, language in the magazine is considered a tool for freedom (i.e. in expressing what exists inside the person and the interaction of what is inside with one's surrounding), and not a tool which is used to evaluate children through words such as right and wrong. There is no professional editor to edit the writings, but we encourage people to share what they write with one another, and if, as a result of discussions, they feel they want to make changes, that's fine. But no one has the authority to correct another. They can use any language (or any tool of expression they are comfortable with, such as videos, drawings, etc. which they feel comfortable with) to express aspects of their lives that they would like to share with others. If the group does not have access to a typewriter or a computer, they are encouraged to write their pieces in their own handwriting (which actually happened in some places).

There is no monopoly in the magazine on who can write and who can't, and no exclusion of people who do not write "correctly." People who are engaged in producing an issue enjoy the blessing of their natural ability to work together, act, reflect, express, read, converse, study, communicate, learn from one another, and produce – in freedom, dignity, openness, and honesty. No fears, no judgments and no evaluations along "objective" or universal professional measures, and no story that is not valuable to be expressed. In two years, more than 20 issues were produced in several Arab countries; others were produced in Boston, Iran and Udaipur (India). The "essence" of Qalb el-Umour is for people, in small groups, to look at their lives as the subject of reflection, expression and action and to take responsibility in doing something about their lives and their surroundings, and to share that with others. In other words, listening to one's inner voice, building one's "inner world," stitching the social fabric of the community, being attentive to one's surrounding and feeling a sense of responsibility to do what needs to be done, and being honest in one's expression are guiding principles and convictions in the project.

Aliveness is a natural accompaniment of this process.

The Trouble with Literacy

The biggest problem with literacy is substituting words for life, and considering concepts more real than reality. Concepts and professional/scientific terms are often treated more real than reality. I participated recently in a symposium where 50 presidents, vice presidents, and rectors from various universities in Eastern and Western Europe and the US gathered to talk about how they manage their universities. Instead of starting by each one describing how s/he manages his/her university, participants had to start with the concept of autonomy. The concept became the "real" thing, more real than the diverse realities in how the universities that were represented are really managed. The concept became the reference, the measure, and the subject of discussion. What was taking place in the various universities had to be squeezed and measured according to this concept, mainly as developed in American, and to a lesser extent in West European, countries.

I mentioned earlier that one big difference between my mother and me is that if I needed to find the meaning of a word I would look it up in a dictionary or similar source. In contrast, she would look for meanings of words in her experiences and life. Literacy deepens the habit of learning about the world rather than from the world. My mother learned from the world; I learned about the world (often artificial and fabricated aspects of the world).

Learning how to read and write can help a person be free. However, I also believe that it often happens that there is a need for a literate person to free herself/ himself from the hegemony and tyranny of words. It is crucial to have a new look at literacy in a world which is marching fast towards catastrophes that are created mainly by literate people (such as polluting air, land and ocean; controlling minds; creating tools of total destruction...).

In one of UNESCO's publications, I read the following: "... the goal is to liberate 100s of millions of our fellow citizens by getting them to learn to read and then to keep on reading." What about people (a huge number of them)

who don't like to read and, instead, they like to do something else which to them is more pleasing and which nurtures them daily? Can we conclude that there is something wrong with them and they have to be forced to learn how to read and go on reading? This is my main point in this paper: if somebody doesn't like to read and write, we should not conclude that there is something wrong with him or her.

When we had our first child, my wife (she is American) bought several books on "teaching your baby how to go to the bathroom"! Babies throughout history did very well. Now, we find many books, some of which claim that they can train parents to teach their baby how to go to the bathroom in half a day. Literacy can become absurd. Let's treat it in a simple and natural way. Those who like this tool are fine, but those who like other tools are also fine.

With texts forming the main tool in education, our minds become what my friend Gustavo Esteva and his colleagues refer to as textual minds, rendering them uprooted and homeless. If we look seriously at the history of education since its conception 500 years ago, or the history of development since its declaration 53 years ago, or the history of human rights since its adoption, then we won't rush into advocating them blindly. It is urgent to rethink such tools, which we have been taking for granted. Stressing rights, for example, helped change many people from feeling responsible, and free to act, into people who constantly complain and demand. We need to be intellectually honest if the path towards catastrophes (which we witness in today's world) is going to be turned around; we need to re-think of any thing that claims to be universal. Universalism (more than anything else) has been a main cause in killing diversity, which, in my opinion, is the essence of life. This path towards catastrophes – as I mentioned earlier – is mainly the making of fully literate people, armed with science and technology. Nothing, for example, has done as much irreversible harm (in terms of polluting the human body, food and nature) as the science of chemistry during the past 100 years!

There are some strange beliefs that are held by literate people, such as most children don't like to learn unless forced (hence, compulsory education). It is like saying that fishes don't like to swim unless forced! John Holt put it nicely,

"Fish swim, birds fly, and people learn." Learning is a natural accompaniment of living. We talk about compulsory education because what is presented at school is not interesting, to say the least. And if some schools can make it interesting, with such facilities as swimming pools and gym halls, the tuition usually skyrockets! "People don't learn unless taught" may be true about technical skills.

Another example of how literate people can be blind. After 50 years of turning most societies into social-economic ruins, development still is looked at (mainly by literate people) as freedom and as a dream. Much of the disruption and destruction in many countries was due to development programs and policies. What happened in Argentina recently, and what happened in Brazil in the seventies, and what happened in many countries in Black Africa during the past 50 years, testify to this fact. Such outcomes can be invisible to the literate mind, because there are many publications and experts who still claim that development is good. In texts, we have many stories of success; it is easy to lie with words. On the ground, however, we hardly have any example where diversity was not killed, where ways of living were not crushed, where communities did not become fragmented and totally dependent on the mercy of the outside. Development in most countries has been like AIDS: it killed the natural immune systems in them and exposed them to all kinds of social and economic "ills".

We can only teach by doing and loving what we do; i.e. by embodying in our lives what we want to teach. We teach honesty by being honest; language, by using it creatively and meaningfully; science, by constantly observing, questioning and doing; and so on.

Controlling minds through what is usually referred to as the mother tongue is not a fantasy or fiction. It is history. It was dug out and told by Ivan Illich in his book *Shadow Work*. Very briefly, the story goes like this: at the same time Columbus went to Isabella and presented his plan to extend her rule and control over new lands, another man, with the name of Nabrija, went to Isabella and presented to her a plan to control her people within the boundaries of her country. He told the ambitious queen that the way to control her subjects' minds is by teaching them a common language, which later

was referred to as “mother tongue” and paying those who teach it and making sure that those who speak differently feel embarrassed or less. He had two books ready for the language he forged from various languages that were spoken at that time in Spain: a dictionary and a grammar book. (It is worth and instructive to mention here that Nabrija’s plan embodies the seed idea for both education and the nation-state.) To her credit, Isabella told him he must be out of his mind to try to force a whole nation to speak exactly the same language, with the same meanings. Nabrija’s ideas had to wait another 150 years, when the French picked them up to establish the French state. Britain, Sweden, and other European countries soon followed.

As a literate person, whenever I wanted to say something, I searched for the “right” words in my “mental dictionary”, my memory, for words and ideas that are stored there. My mother seemed to be much more spontaneous and honest in her expressions. As an illiterate person, she searched in her experiences to guide her to the words that best would say what she wanted to say. She looked for elements and referents in her surroundings and experiences, and chose the words that would express most honestly what she wanted to say.

The tool of the alphabet reduced me to a person who is able to work mainly through texts. My mind and my thinking, and the terms I used and their meanings, were confined mainly to textbooks, which I studied and taught.

Discovering my mother’s math and knowledge helped me discover how deeply my knowledge was anchored in textbooks, how much my mind was pulled away from life and shaped by words – first during my studies, then later during my teaching (often the same textbooks!). I realized how much the shape of the concept (the written word) has dominated my thinking and perception; how I often behaved as if the concept, the shape, and what they refer to, are the same; and how I unconsciously transmitted that to my students. (I would like to stress that I am not talking here about reading books, which brings in tremendous enjoyment and lets the mind and the imagination wander into all kinds of worlds; I am talking here about textbooks and taught language.)

I started realizing that, yes, there is oppression of all kinds around me: political, military, social,

and economic. However, becoming aware of my mother’s knowledge helped me realize the oppression caused by literacy, through being confined in my knowledge and learning to texts. In the 1970s, I used language as a tool of “freeing the minds” by seeing alternatives and breaking the hegemony of universal meanings. Soon, however, I realized that there were limits to this function of language. Language is limited in terms of understanding. The fact is that we experience much more than we can understand through the mind, and we understand much more than we can express through language.

Education has transformed knowledge and learning into commodities, and students and teachers into consumers. I feel that we need to make sure that we don’t repeat the same pattern in literacy programs – during the literacy decade and beyond.

What to do?

Just like any other tool, the impact of literacy depends on the values that govern the society in which it is launched. This is hardly ever mentioned, although it forms, in my opinion, the most important factor in how literacy affects people and to what ends it is employed. Since the main values that govern modern institutions and professionals are winning, control, and separation from life, it follows that literacy would mainly serve these values, which would mean, in practice, that it would help transform people into better consumers and competitors, and into becoming more individualistic and detached from real life.

From this it follows that the first and most important step, which any group (that wants to be involved in working on literacy, or to launch a literacy project) should take, is to discuss the values that they would like to be guided by in their community. Luckily, since the worlds of the illiterates are usually governed by values that are more human than winning, control, and individualism, there is a better chance to raise the issue of values in such communities.

The second step, which follows from the first, is for each group to decide for itself the meaning it wants to adopt for literacy and to embody in its work and its thought.

We cannot impose one meaning on all. Thirdly,

we need to abandon universal solutions that fit all, which legitimizes their imposition on people, usually in the name of progress, development and empowerment. It is inhuman and disruptive.

One strong conviction that grew within me over the years is that a need which is more basic than knowing how to read and write is to have at least one ability/ form in which the person is able to express himself/ herself. Some would choose reading and writing. Others, however, may choose other forms. To force one form on all is not only oppressive and disregarding, but also robs people of what they like to do and how they like to learn and express themselves. Forcing one form (literacy) leads to discriminate against those who do not like this form. It would lead to treating an illiterate person as less, not fully human.

We need to live with new “myths” and convictions. First and foremost, we need to realize that every person is a source of knowledge and understanding. One of the biggest resistances that I had in working with math teachers was for them to accept that there is no child who is not logical. That was the biggest challenge during my work with teachers during the 1970s. We also need to drop equating being illiterate with being ignorant. Believing that there are people who are ignorant or illogical is itself an ignorant and illogical belief.

Liberation and freedom are linked to diversity and pluralism. Thus, freedom from universals is crucial to any concept of freedom. We need a decade to celebrate the diversity which exists in learning, knowing and expressing; a decade that reminds us that learning happens through doing and interacting with as many elements as possible in one’s surroundings, including books. Freedom is connected to being honest and faithful to our experiences and inner voices. If literacy is going to be for freedom it cannot be taught, using dominant ways.

The decade for literacy (just like the call “education for all”) is a call for one treatment to all people. What are needed are spaces, opportunities, facilities, and resources for people to develop their expressions, i.e., to do (in terms of expression) what already they do but constantly better. To develop the means in

which they already express themselves or they would like to express themselves. This is a much more human and real need than literacy for all. If, for example, a person is a storyteller, her/his need is more for developing that ability. If a person were a dabke (Arab dance) dancer or a tableh (musical instrument) player, it would make more sense to develop that. Putting our (limited) resources in one form of expression and communication, and to impose it, cannot be viewed as totally innocent.

What is desperately needed is to regain a pluralist attitude, through which we again respect radically different and diverse ways of living, knowing, and expressing. What people need is to be provided with spaces and facilities (including resources) from which they can choose. I don’t think it is a good idea to repeat the practice of education where students are provided with one option. Universal solutions or declarations have been crushing diversity at a fast rate. We need to be careful not to extend this destruction further, and into new domains, such as literacy. We had enough destruction caused by education and development during the past few decades. We need to be careful and critical.

I can say that I have been lucky with three things in my life: I lived a good part of my life in the pre-development age; a main teacher in my life was an illiterate person; and I lived most of my life without a “national” government. The three provided me with a “worldview” that is not attainable through institutions and professionals. I feel lucky because I had to rethink constantly of the meanings of words, because I had to be responsible for most of what we needed in my community, and because often we had to live with what is available to all people: each other, nature, what the land produces, and the ability to feel, reflect, learn, and express. I feel lucky because I had living examples of people who embodied a different way of living, according to a different logic (different values and different assumptions and different convictions).

