

At 72 years of age and beneath a thick white beard, Paulo Freire is as alert as ever. In October he was in London for the first time in twenty years, talking to several thousand people over two days at the Institute of Education.

Having spent the early 1990s as Secretary of Education in the city of Sao Paulo, in his home country of Brazil, Freire has now retired to dedicate himself to writing. He has recently completed three new books, mostly notably, "The Pedagogy of Hope" which started life as a new preface to "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" (tracing the origins and impact of this earlier book) but which rapidly evolved into a book in its own right.

Freire is a man of immense charisma and humility. For several hours he captivated the large audience, eloquently interweaving his complex theoretical discourse with personal anecdotes and humour.

After the two day seminar I managed to meet Paulo Freire for an evening in his hotel to share with him the work that ACTIONAID is undertaking in developing a new literacy methodology, incorporating techniques from Participatory Rural Appraisal. The methods arose from a critique of the Freirean approach which has, in my view, ironically become the "traditional" approach to literacy worldwide. Almost everyone uses Freirean rhetoric, describing their use of "generative words

and themes" and claiming to start the literacy classes with "dialogue" based on the study of pictures / photos (supposedly "codifications"). In practice this rarely happens

Sometimes the Freirean approach is deliberately abused (stripped of its political dimensions) but on many other occasions, even where the will is there, the approach still fails. Dialogue does not take place. This, I contend is the result of a flaw in the methodology that Freire developed. A picture and a word are an

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insufficient basis for inexperienced literacy teachers to generate dialogue. The teachers either lack confidence to promote dialogue and thus get straight on with what they see as the mechanics of teaching reading and writing - or in some other cases the teachers are highly politicised and lecture the learners about a theme, telling them how oppressed they are! The learners rarely get a chance to articulate their own experience and participate in a dialogue.

One of the prime intentions behind incorporating PRA techniques within literacy is to provide a structure and focus to dialogue. The aim is not to restrict the dialogue, but to provide mechanisms to ensure that dialogue takes place and is

rooted in the learners experience. The dialogue not only helps to motivate learners and raise collective awareness of problems, but also helps learners develop their linguistic skills and their awareness of language.

In this new approach the literacy primer is abolished and the learners develop their own curriculum materials out of visual images (or "symbol cards"), constructing maps, matrices, graphs, calendars and diagrams about various aspects of their local reality. The transition between the learners' own codes of representation (using sticks and stones etc to represent objects on early maps) and the visual images using pen and paper acts as a first step towards alphabetic literacy. Indeed the interpretation of visual images itself acts as a bridge towards literacy. The link between literacy and other elements of the development process is strong as learners are systematising and analysing their own knowledge of their own village and their own problems (rather than studying a generalised problem stated by someone else).

Much of the above builds on Freire's theoretical framework, but it seeks to provide a more effective methodology. As I explained the approach to Freire, going through the manual developed in Bundibugyo, Uganda, he became very animated and by the end was so enthused by the approach that he commented:

"This is exactly what I sought to do - but you give it more structure and stronger roots. The literacy process will





be based on people's own experience, their language and their reality - so that the transition from reading the world to reading the word will be organic and clearer. This is very exciting work."

Freire is very keen to maintain close contact with the pilot experiences of this approach in Uganda, Bangladesh and El Salvador. He is particularly excited about El Salvador where we are developing the approach with CIAZO (the Inter-agency Committee for Literacy), a national NGO specialising in literacy, whom Freire visited in 1992 and whose work is the subject of the concluding part of his new book, "Pedagogy of Hope". The morning after meeting Freire I flew to El Salvador and spent two weeks adapting the new methodology to ACTIONAID's second RDA (in Usulután), with the help of a team from CIAZO. The manual that we produced (in Spanish) is now available.

I will be writing to Freire regularly and hope to maintain a dialogue at a distance, receiving his comments and advice on the work as it progresses. He has also expressed interest in participating in the final seminar to evaluate the experiences in Uganda. Further support for this work has come from Robert Chambers of IDS in Sussex, a founding father of PRA (and recently appointed ACTIONAID trustee). On receiving the Uganda manual, he has written:

"I have read the manual with fascination and excitement. My own experiences with adult literacy programmes have been uniformly negative, and at last here is an approach which looks credible in terms of maintaining interest and commitment. I hope the ODA duly fund it."