

Julie Clague response to Eduardo Dullo's

Refashioning the future: testimonies as a practice of transformation in Brazil

Julie.Clague@glasgow.ac.uk

Edwardo, thank you for an extremely stimulating paper.

In his paper discussing an educational programme run by a Catholic Social Centre situated between two favelas in Brazil, Edwardo speaks of "The dispossession and deprivation of those who lived there". Yet despite the many challenges they faced, the teenagers came through the educational programme with new skill-sets and newly-found self-belief. As Edwardo states:

the whole aim of the social inclusion program...was...how can one make the teenagers believe in themselves and attempt to build a better life out of poverty and criminality?

The success of the empowerment programme was due to it implementing the learning methods of Paulo Freire. Freire sought to eradicate the dis-empowerment and docile passivity produced by political and educational systems based on radical inequalities of power and privilege between the teacher and the learner, the ruler and the ruled. Applying Cardijn's see-judge-act methodology, Freire sought to raise the consciousness of the people, so they could identify and transform the injustices of the social situation of which they were a part. Through his pedagogical methods, Freire restored his students' dignity so they could begin to take control over their lives and become agents of their own destiny.

The programme at the social centre was inclusive and non-hierarchical, and promoted the voices and validated the experiences of the participants. It was a site of communal co-learning from one another's experience. The successful graduates of the programme gave accounts of themselves and testified to the change that had been brought about in their lives through the programme. With dignity restored and hope rekindled, these graduates of the programme inspired the next generation of teenagers, convincing them that they too can make something of their lives.

Freire drew on personal experience to illuminate his message. This use of personal testimony, which was a central component in his pedagogical approach to educational empowerment, is one exploited to good effect by the Freire-inspired Marist brothers that Eduardo describes.

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What do we learn from Eduardo's ethnographic fieldwork? If I may, I would like to think about Eduardo's research through the lens of **literacy**.

Eduardo's study captures literacy practices in a local community. It is a study of literacy learning in its social context. For literacy is not, or not only, a stand-alone skill (involving reading and writing for instance) but a socially embedded process ('literacy practices').

Multiple literacies exist in the locale of this study: the literacies of the favela, of the bank, perhaps even of the social centre, despite its non-proselytising agenda. Different domains have different literacy practices, requiring different types of knowledge-sets, skills, and facilities which connect to and in some ways reflect the value systems, beliefs, ideologies of each particular social group or the *cognoscenti* within that domain.

The kids who enter the programme are probably extremely literate in the ways and practices, the rules of the game and unspoken codes of behaviour from the favelas where they live. The educational processes in the social centre enable the teenagers to gain entry to and successfully navigate a wider world, helping them to master the ways, practices, expected behaviours and unwritten rules of the world of work, for instance.

Amongst its other activities, the social centre was acting as a space for literacy activities: a literacy space. Some of the learning carried out there may have been explicit and content-based, some may have been more osmotic: acquired through social interaction, through immersion in a set of social practices and by embracing certain cultural norms and expectations.

Eduardo describes how the new recruits begin to see, act, belong in the same way that the older kids see, act and belong. They learn new skills. They also become proficient in a new set of social practices. It is clear from Eduardo's account that the programme is personally empowering for the kids involved, with transformative effects on them and therefore on the world around them.

The educational programme culminates in what students of literacy term a 'literacy event', a social occasion that is at the same time a learning opportunity, where the personal testimony of the older students inspires and empowers the next generation of learners, who are initiated into a new community of practice.

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I want to think about the transformative effects of literacy practices such as those described by Eduardo in the wider context of faith and development – in the context of faith literacy and development literacy.

We all have our own sense of what faith literacy (religious literacy) may involve, and what it means to speak of development literacy. We are all familiar with the types of religious and development literacy resources produced by large secular or religious NGOs to educate their employees in the field, or by governments preparing first responders for disaster relief work and such like. These types of resources are many and varied, but often involve content-heavy training courses and manuals, aimed at helping outsiders to better understand religious norms and contexts and to avoid any cultural *faux pas*.¹ This is all well and good.

But religious literacy practices are everywhere. Wherever there are faith communities there are faith literacies: faith actors practicing, and being ever more drawn into, the ways of their communities, then either overtly or imperceptibly passing on this learning – this wisdom about being and doing - to the next generation. It is enriching to reflect on the countless number of small-scale faith-based literacy practices being enacted in local communities across the globe.

Religious literacy activities are everywhere, and there are many different types. Here are a few examples that come to mind (and you will be able to think of many more)...

1. The religious educational programmes of a Muslim madrasa or Christian Sunday school.

¹ For example: National Disaster Interfaiths Network and University of Southern California Center for Religion and Civic Culture, (2014) Religious Literacy Primer for Crises, Disasters, and Public Health Emergencies: A Field Guide Companion for Religious Literacy and Competency <https://crcc.usc.edu/report/the-religious-literacy-primer-for-crises-disasters-and-public-health-emergencies/>

2. The religious and development messaging carried out by religious leaders in homilies, or the training of religious leaders to deliver such messaging within their communities (for example, messages involving cultural norms: reducing stigma, or GBV, child marriage etc.)
3. In south Africa I met a group of women living with HIV who met weekly to do contextual bible study. They would read and discuss specific biblical passages in order to reflect on the meaning of the stories, and to relate that meaning to their own lives. [See <https://www.urbanleaders.org/ma/MATULCommission/Kampala2013/Gerald%20West%20Manualpdf.pdf>]
4. Musawah <https://www.musawah.org/> promotes gender justice by educating Muslims about their religious scriptures and Islamic family law. Musawah uses education to promote positive rather than harmful readings of religious texts and religious law.
5. SCIAF (Caritas Scotland) webpages contain educational resources that seek to educate young Catholics in Scotland about faith and development through the lens of Catholic social teaching: <https://www.sciaf.org.uk/resources?filters%5B%5D=Schools>
6. At the level of inter-religious dialogue, members of the Abrahamic faiths belong to small 'scriptural reasoning' groups, where they read one another's religious texts to learn more about their commonalities and differences: <http://www.scripturalreasoning.org/>
7. Communities of practice, such as JLI, carry out academic research, evidence gathering, and knowledge brokering about religion and development: <https://jliflc.com/>

In the faith and development sphere, literacy practices, large and small are everywhere and a typology of these is long overdue.