

Story Primers – designed for adult literacy learners

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This paper was revised from an earlier paper written in 2010, *Introduction to the Story Primer*.

Theories and ideas about what is important for adult literacy learners who learn best in social settings were put to the test in the Solomon Islands (2008-2014) as part of a literacy consultancy. Working collaboratively with the Literacy Association of the Solomon Islands (LASI), SILA Literacy Consultants were able to develop a collection of stories and texts that were relevant to adult literacy learners in the rural areas of the Solomons. These texts were developed in Solomon's Pijin, and collected and published in a series of Primers – approximately nine of them. More may have been developed since we left. A number of language communities have also taken the Pijin primers and adapted them into their community language. Over the years this style of primers has become known as Story Primers.

Story Primers incorporate many of the strategies that vernacular literacy workers have developed and used in the past, thus building on past practices that have been proven to be successful. However we also included new ideas and broke with some past traditions in order to ensure that the primers not only conform to current theoretical understandings about literacy acquisition and development, but also exemplifies them. The following article discusses some of the key ideas and theories that underpin the Story Primers to explain why they are structured the way they are.

Literacy is more than decoding or alphabetization

Literacy is not just about people learning to sound out and 'name' the words in a piece of writing or text. In the past when literacy has been reduced to this definition or practice, it has been referred to as literacy as alphabetization. Literacy is more than this. It is participating in the message of the text – understanding it, analyzing it, appreciating it, critiquing its messages and the agendas of the writers, and using the text purposefully. Becoming literate is learning to do all these things while also decoding or encoding a text. Therefore, the focus with the Story Primers, has been to encourage the development of rich literacy learning materials that lend themselves to analysis, critique, and therefore contain some complexity while being highly relevant to the learner. The primers do give opportunities to integrate sound decoding and encoding practices into each lesson, but the key is quality relevant texts. While holding all these tensions in balance, we have attempted to appropriately pace the lessons so they are not too overwhelming for new learners.

Literacy is also more than just reading. Many years ago the focus of vernacular literacy programs was mainly on teaching people to read. Writing was often covered in a limited way. But today we know that reading and writing go together, should be taught together and that each helps the other to develop. In fact many educators agree with Chomsky that teaching writing is a good way to help learners come to know the sound-symbol connections. This is because the writer must construct her own words, letter by letter. When writing the attention of her eye and brain is focused on the elements of letters, on letter sequences and on spatial concepts. So as she writes a simple story she is caught up in a process of deciding which sounds go together to make words and sentences (Chomsky 1979, p124). This helps reading as much as writing.

Chomsky expected children to write from the start using invented spellings where needed. She expected children to try spelling themselves using their own judgment to figure out how the word sounds to them and to write it down that way.

- She provided a bucketful of wooden and plastic letters, a diary for each child and many reasons to write
- She spent a great deal of time reading to the class and discussing the sounds of words in stories
- The class did lots of work on rhyme, beginning sounds and end sounds
- She taught the idea of sequence – What comes first? Next? And so on, through the word.
- The children's names were used for this kind of game too. Names were clapped, changed and played with.
- The class were given reasons for writing.
- Children were free to use plastic letters – frees up those with handwriting problems to put their energy into the message
- The children were expected to write from the start – 'you see their mouths moving as they think their way through the words and you know they're on to it.'

Chomsky contended that 'children who write receive valuable practice in translating sound to print – a practice and experience with letters and sounds that will form an excellent basis for reading.' (Quoted in Clay, 1979, p66) We too, encourage writing to be a big part of all literacy lessons and throughout the Story Primers try to provide lots of suggestions of writing tasks, both modeled and actual, that are related to the themes of the lessons.

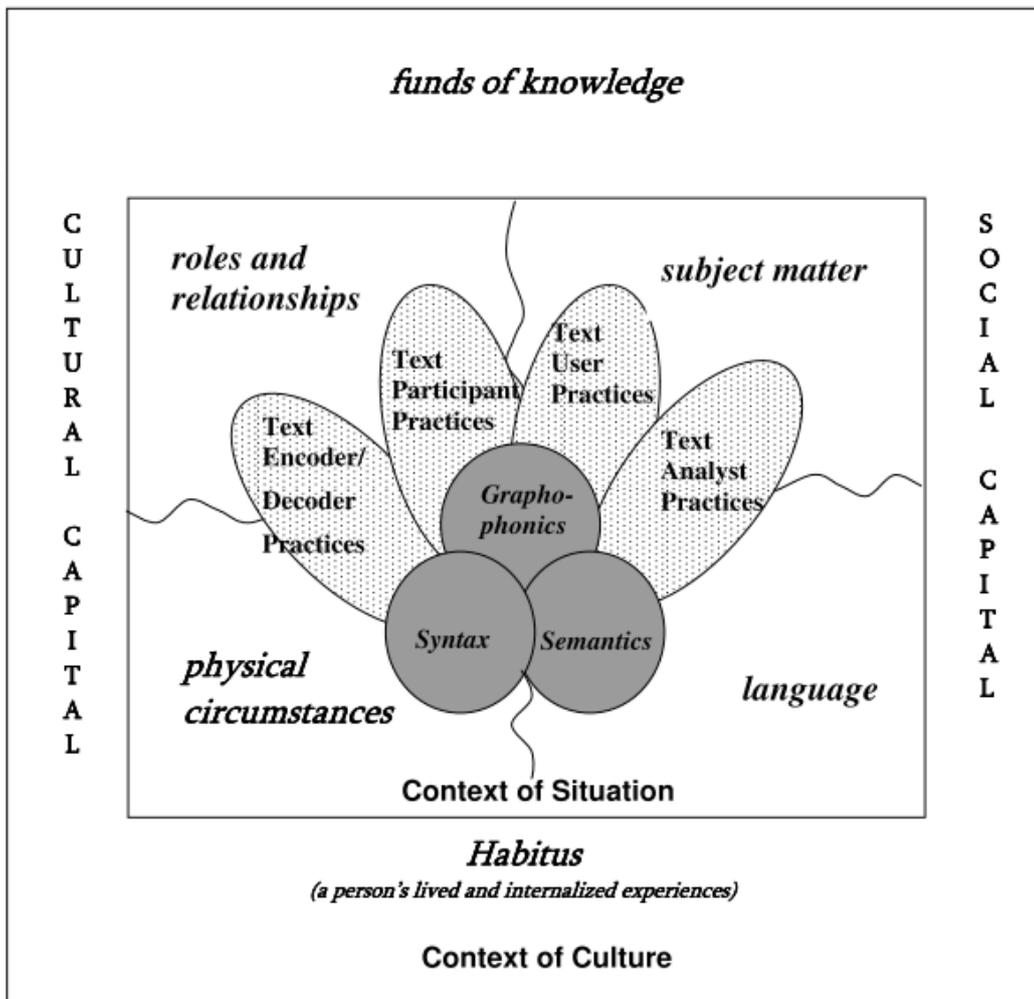
A socio-cultural model of literacy

The Story Primers are based on the Socio-cultural model of literacy practices. Diagram 1 attempts to capture the complex interactions that take place when a person is engaged in reading or writing ideas. It is adapted from the work of Harris, McKenzie and Turbill published in 2003.

This model is broader and more complex than previous models as it combines many well established theories about literacy learning. Literacy is a complex process which requires interaction between the learner, their existing knowledge of the language and knowledge of the topic of the texts. Strong development and use of the key cuing systems employed by readers and writers is important for growth in literacy acquisition. And literacy practices occur in social and cultural settings and is shaped by social and cultural understandings and practices. All these understandings about literacy acquisition are incorporated into the model.

At the heart of the socio-cultural model is the notion that meaning is central to literacy practices. Meanings are being made or conveyed through a literacy text or practice. These meanings are constructed by readers or writers as they draw on the funds of knowledge (Moll 1995, p275-276) that are available to them – knowledge of their world, their language and the written code. Literacy is all about communicating these meanings from one person to another via print. So gaining or making meaning is the central activity.

Diagram 1 A Socio-cultural model of literacy



When decoding or encoding print, we rely heavily on information gained from three cuing systems – the semantics system (knowledge of currently constructed meanings- with the meanings tell me what words might be next), the syntax system (knowledge of the grammar of the language – tells me what kind of word comes next) and the grapho-phonics system (knowledge of letter - sound correspondences important for this particular language – tells me what sounds the next word starts with). Information from these three knowledge systems work together to help a reader build meanings from print (Callow and Hertzberg 2006:42). For example, Marie Clay (1979:13) talks about reading being ‘a process by which the child can, on the run, extract a sequence of cues from printed texts and relate these, one to another, so that he understands the precise message of the text.’ Thus in the diagram above, these three cuing systems surround the central meaning core.

However reading and writing practices do not just depend on a person becoming skilled at decoding or encoding, by extracting information from the print code or putting information into a print code. To understand the meanings of a text the reader-writer is also required to understand the meanings being conveyed by words and phrases, concepts and sentences, ideas and paragraphs. The literate person is also expected to participate in the texts – respond correctly to what is being conveyed, laugh in the right places, feel the emotions that are being evoked and so forth. The literate person is also expected to be able to analyse texts, to

understand purposes and uses of texts and how others are using the texts. And the literate person must also be able to use different kinds of texts in the different situations of life. These complexities of literacy also need to be learned.

The socio-cultural model depicted above encapsulates these many text practices that literate people need to be able to perform as four kinds of literacy practices. These practices of the reader-writer are referred to as text breaker and maker, text participant, text analyst and text user. These practices were first described by Alan Luke and Peter Freebody. Their ideas have been used and developed by educators all over the world and still form the basis of literacy programs today. Luke and Freebody commented that their literacy model shifted the focus from trying to find 'a right' method of teaching people to become literate to a focus on how do we make sure teachers develop the range of literacy practices that are needed by literate people in today's global world in their teaching practice. (Luke and Freebody 1999,p6)

But all this reading and writing doesn't happen in an empty space. Reading and writing happens in a context - in different cultural spaces and places. The socio-cultural model proposes that the culture of the context and the learning situation itself are important aspects of learning and teaching literacy. The model also recognises the importance of the knowledge that learners bring to literacy learning. Learners are not blank pages or empty brains waiting to be filled—they actually have already built an amazing amount of knowledge before they come to learn to read and write. They have social knowledge, cultural knowledge, knowledge about their world and the things in it, knowledge of how to learn about things, knowledge about their language, and they can access even more knowledge through the knowledge of their families and friends. Louis Moll (1992,p275) talks about this the learners funds of knowledge and encourages teachers to use these funds in the teaching-learning process.

Because learners are not empty vessels and have a lot of knowledge already we need therefore to begin literacy teaching in a language that learners know well so that they can access the knowledge funds that they already have. If we start teaching in a language that learners don't know very well they can't use any of their existing knowledge funds and they may feel dumb and stupid. This is why educators and researchers say it is important and more effective for learners to have a solid literacy foundation in their own language first before helping them bridge their literacy abilities to languages of wider communication.

Literacy practices are reliant on interactive processes

In her writings Marie Clay talked about four sets of behaviours that are significant for reading progress in the early stages- attention to print, direction rules about position and movement, talking like a book and hearing the sounds in words. But she said these skills must be taught in an integrated way.

For success in reading all four types of behaviours must be related and focused in a way that allows for smooth sequential progression through the continuous message of the text. ...The teacher by what she says, by her directional movements, and by directing attention to visual cues, language and to sounds, ensures that the group integrates the four sets of behaviours correctly. (1979, p134-5)

If the reader is having difficulties with some or all of the four sets of behaviours, Clay suggests that it is consistent with current research that this should be approached through as many channels as possible so the stronger skills can support the weaker ones. The reader should not be held back in a 'developmental group' and drilled in behaviours in an isolated way but should be given more experiences and enriched experiences in the area of weakness but always in an integrated way. (1979, p149)

Likewise Luke and Freebody would argue that the four roles of the reader are 'mixed and orchestrated in proficient reading and writing. The key concept in their model is necessity and not sufficiency – each is necessary for literacy in new conditions, but in and of themselves, none of the four families of practice is sufficient for literate citizens' (Luke and Freebody, 1999, p7-8).

Since literacy practices are reliant on interactivity of many different aspects and strategies, the Story primer design promotes the use of materials and activities that encourage interactivity of the key processes.

Literacy is a family concern

For literacy to become part of a culture and not just a semi-important or unimportant add on to it, it needs to become something that families, churches and schools are so convinced about that they work together to support its growth and development. Cultures that see literacy as important do not leave literacy development to just one group of people in a person's life – it becomes something that everyone encourages. So in western cultures, where becoming literate is of high importance, families, Sunday schools and schools all encourage literacy development. Teaching and encouraging literacy is not seen as just the school teacher's work. In fact research has shown that if children come to school without having played with books and paper and pencils, without knowing how to handle books and pencils, without having shared lots of books and texts with brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers, they are very disadvantaged. If students only read books and write texts at school they are also very disadvantaged. And it is very hard for such students to catch up to where they need to be.

If we want to see literacy grow and develop and become part of community life, it is very important for literacy practices to be happening and supported in homes as well as schools or formal literacy classes. It is something that needs to become a family affair. If reading and writing only happen at school or in literacy classes, when students stop going to these classes, reading and writing often stops and people don't keep developing their literacy abilities. This means that books, paper and pencils need to be available in homes and people who can read and write need to be reading to others and helping others write.

The problem in many minority language communities is that there is a lack of books for people to read. But books and things to read don't always have to be fancy published volumes printed somewhere else. In fact these kinds of books are often too expensive for many families to buy. Even in wealthy countries hand made books are appreciated and loved by those they have been made for. Children love to get a story book from a friend or relative that has been especially made for them. Children love to help make story books themselves. Teens have a lot of fun making magazines for other teens – collecting and constructing texts about things that they have done together, things that people like and dislike, jokes and songs that are popular at the time. Everyone loves reading stories of the lives of the adults in their own families, or of stories that have been passed down from one generation to the next. Families can choose to write and

illustrate these kinds of texts and have them in their homes along with books that they are able to buy. This helps literacy to become part of what families do and helps people become good readers and writers. Opportunities to encourage families to be involved with the student are included throughout the Story Primer, using the *Work with family* icon, encouraging collaborative work with the student, or through the student sharing their knowledge with community groups (*performance icon*) or encouraging students to take knowledge learned home for discussion.

In conclusion

The design of the Story Primers and the types of activities that are incorporated into them, reflect the ideas discussed above and allows for the use of relevant, interesting, purposeful texts in adult and youth literacy programs developed for minority language contexts. The lessons include activities that encourage learners to become confident code makers and breakers, text participants, text users and text analysts. These primers have been used successfully in multiple languages in the Solomon Islands.

Several of the Solomon's set of Story Primers are available at www.vernacularliteracy.org should you wish to see some examples. Some of these could be translated or adapted for use in other community languages or they could provide ideas for developing similar materials. Story Primer templates are now available for download from the Bloom library at www.bloomlibrary.org and provide an easy way to construct the primers. Hopefully in the not too distant future, some of the better examples of the Story Primers will be translated into English and made available on the Bloom library.

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