

Listening to learners

Jane Mace reflects on the evaluator as listener and learner.

'I started classes last week. I was determined to come. I came to learn to read and write, and also to improve my crops.'

Built in to all good education is the idea that the teacher¹ not only teaches, but also evaluates, asking learners to share their experience of the course or project and using their responses to improve the teaching. Sometimes, however, the evaluator is an outsider (usually a consultant, commissioned for the purpose). Their advantage is that participants may feel freer to speak to them than they might to their teachers. Their challenge is to learn a lot very fast about the context in which the education is happening. This short article draws on two interviews with learners which I did as such an outsider. Aida, quoted above, was one of the learners who spoke to me.

After many years both as an evaluator of my own teaching and as a teacher of evaluation approaches to others, it became clear to me that, for evaluations to be of any use, we first need to be clear what makes for valuable education; and so I came up with a list of five values, which are what I look for.² As a first step, teachers must be open to learning from their learners, in the spirit of *inquiry*. Second, if the literacy teaching is to have value, it also takes account of the *context* in which learners – and the teachers – are living in. Next, good adult literacy education seeks to empower learners through a sense of *community*. This in turn creates the proper environment for them to gain a fuller sense of *equality*, being able to shed their sense of inferiority to other 'cleverer' people; so that, ultimately, they feel the possibility of fully achieving a sense of *authorship*.

As a way to illustrate how these principles of *context*, *inquiry*, *community*, *equality* and *authorship*, might also apply to evaluation, I have chosen to offer two examples of my own work, where I did not speak the language of those I was interviewing and, dependent on an interpreter to translate both my questions and the responses I was given, was truly an outsider. (Not least because in both cases I was also in a country I had never been to before.) What I had to offer was a proper interest in their experience, a pen in my hand and the know-how to use it. As they spoke, I listened and scribbled³ and afterwards produced a text of what people said which was verbatim to the translation I had been given.

1 I use the word 'teacher' throughout this article to refer to 'adult educator'. Although its use is usually confined to the school sector, the word has generic value. And it is shorter.

2 I elaborated on this more fully in Mace (1992)

3 An important technical tool for any evaluator working this way is the ability to write notes while at the same time maintaining eye contact with the person you are talking with. It takes practice, but it can be done.

My first example is a short exchange with a woman called Fathia in January 1999. We are sitting in her home, in a village in North Sudan. (The name 'Al Mira'a' in the first question is the Arabic word for 'mirror' which had been chosen as the name of the participatory literacy programme in which she had been a participant. It had been run by the Women's Literacy Education Programme in Gedaref since 1996.)

Looking back before you began with classes two years ago, could you say how much Al Mira'a fulfilled your hopes?

My main interest was in reading and writing and I have made steps towards that. I can now read newspapers and magazines. And I can write a letter. I have written one to my sister in Gezira. And I got one back. We have also started a cooperative society and I am the treasurer.

Have there been disappointments?

There is a frustration about food processing and sewing; and about finding a meeting place for the women's association.

Do you feel you have changed your ideas at all in the last two or three years?

I feel I am more self-pushing. And I feel I have a programme of work to do.

What would improve things, do you think?

The rakuba where the circle meets is too hot, not enough shade. And reading and writing is not the interest of all those in the group.

This exchange was part of the project's final evaluation. The conversation with Fathia was one of nine that I had during the week I was there with a team of four other people: two from Britain (of whom I was one) and three Sudanese. For each of my meetings Safaa El Agib, a consultant with the project, worked with me as my interpreter. There are two points to make about this and other interviews. First, as you can see, the questions I asked were open ones. I was anxious to avoid leading the interviewee into the answers I – or the project – might have wanted to hear. Second, the context of the meeting was (at our request and by her consent) in the woman's home, without the teacher who had introduced her to us. We wanted to enable her to feel as free as we could make her feel in any critical comment she might want to make. Before each interview Safaa explained this; after it, I

would read back what I had written, Safaa would interpret it and check if the woman wanted to add anything.

I had been asked to join the evaluation team in Sudan because what they wanted was the voices of learners. The evaluation report produced by the team in 1999 ran to 37 pages, of which the learner-interviews occupied eight; the rest set out the economic and political situation, the history of the programme and its aims, the method of the study, and its findings. These findings helped to support the grant application for a further programme, this time to train more teachers in a larger area in the same methods. The critical comments which Fathia made about the 'frustration' about the women's efforts to generate income and to have a decent place to meet were added to the list of improvements needed. Whether they have happened yet, I could not say. With Fathia's feeling that she had become more 'self-pushing', and her role as treasurer of the cooperative society, we can guess that, if they haven't, she will be asking why not.

The Sudan report also had another effect. Staff in another programme called Literacy and Basic Education in Uganda (LBE) read it, and asked if I could help them with the evaluation of their work in providing training in participatory literacy approaches, too. They wanted, they said, the vitality that interview material could give their report; they also wanted learner participation in the process of evaluation. My brief, then, was to 'collect learners' stories'. Over five days I met with some 30 individuals – literacy instructors, learners and others involved (community activists and literacy trainers) – in four different partner NGOs. Several of the instructors and many of the people in the community organisations could speak English, and that was the language of our interviews. But in the villages, where we visited classes and met learners, they spoke in either Lusoga or Luganda and a member of LBE staff, Stella Keihangwe, would sit with me and interpret. Here are the rest of the words I took down from Aida – full name, Aida Babireka – sitting in the shade of a brick village classroom in eastern Uganda – using the same process I had done with Safaa in Sudan:

I started classes last week. I was determined to come. I came to learn to read and write, and also to improve my crops. I only grow enough for eating, not enough for surplus.

I want reading and writing for when the kids fall sick and I have to go to hospital. I have eight children.

One of the first lessons we had, the teacher talked about family planning. I want to know more about that.

I want to compensate for the time I lost. I used to envy people who could read and write. Some women who can read and write seem to look so good and dress so nice. I used to envy them.

What Aida spoke of was her desire for change. She had just begun the classes; she was not ready to say whether she had found what she hoped for. A proper evaluation, for Aida, would entail her being asked six months after that interview: so how do you feel now? Once back in London, it was agreed to publish the report and ensure that copies would be returned to LBE, who undertook, in turn, to send them on to the villages where we had met people. My hope in doing this was that Aida and others whose pictures and words appear in the report might at least receive themselves back, see something of what published *authorship* might feel like – and in so doing, practice a little of what I preach about the value of this.

These experiences have reminded me in new ways of two old lessons in evaluation:

1. Interpreting what we learn is a key activity of research and evaluation. Clearly, when evaluator and evaluated share the same language, an interpreter for *the words spoken* is not needed. What Safaa or Stella both did was help me interpret the context (helping me practice what I preach, again) with which to gain a better understanding of what had not been said, as well as what had.
2. Fathia, after two years' participation in her programme, had things to say about achievement; she also had specific things to say about frustrations. Aida, who had only just decided to take part, had particular motives and aspirations in participating. For evaluation to guide and review a programme, we need evaluative comments at the start as well as later on and at its end.

References

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