

Open Classroom Workshop on Literacy..

1. Background

The Workshop, held on January 22 and 23, 2006 was the culmination of so many weeks of labor, meetings and publicity announcements. The idea of literacy is current because so many people want to learn how to read and write, and we have had many government campaigns and programs to stamp out illiteracy. What struck many people as novel is the idea that you need special training to teach literacy or to start up a literacy group. It is generally assumed that if one is literate, it is fairly easy to teach someone who is not. Many of the teachers in literacy programs have only a rudimentary knowledge of basic teaching principles, so from the onset their students will be limited in reach and scope. The difficult part may be to find the funding for a literacy group, to purchase appropriate materials and supplies, and to maintain the momentum.

Literacy is needed everywhere—the big cities, towns and rural areas. Many literacy programs are starved for funding and depend on the goodwill of volunteers. Many community leaders remain skeptical about the value of an education because they don't believe it has immediate, tangible worth. This means that the role of the literacy teacher must include advocacy.

2. Preparation for the Workshop

We began preparing for the workshop in January of 2005, believing that many organizations would wish to send their teachers or community leaders for training. The Open Classroom formed a "literacy workshop committee" to discuss the theme of the workshop and the topics to be covered. We wanted it to be practical, with an emphasis on problem solving, materials development, and positive interaction between teachers and learners.

The venue of the workshop was The Women's Multipurpose Center and the theme was "Literacy Training with a focus on the nomadic Fulani." The Open Classroom runs a literacy center for the Fulani in a rural setting near the international airport in Kaduna. We have known them for six years, and in 2004, they approached us and said that they wished to be educated in English. We were surprised and happy that they trusted us enough to make their wishes known. Since we are a school-based Non-Governmental Organization, we gladly took up the challenge.

We were fortunate to have several of our trustees and patrons on the high table. Alhaji Lawal Idris, our patron and friend, gave a message of encouragement to the Fulani and welcomed all of our guests. The wife of the governor of Kaduna State also sent a message through her representative. Our special guest of honor was Alhaji Ahmed Joda, the President of PARE, an international organization for nomadic pastoralists. He is a Fulani with so much experience in government and the international arena, but most of all he is a cattle rancher, and thus he identifies with the plight of the Fulani.

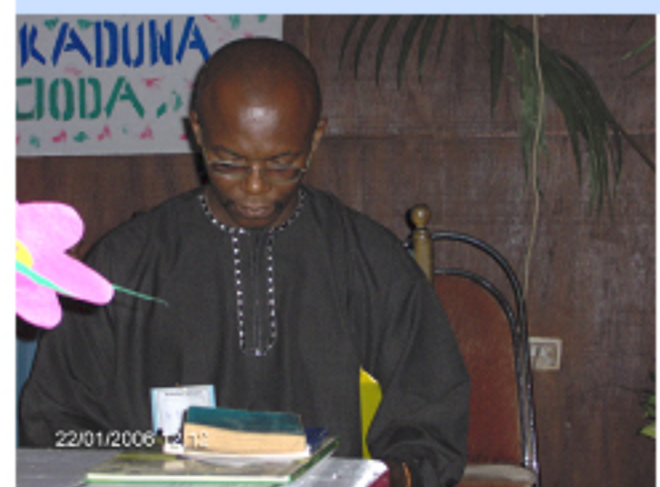
Another invited guest for the Workshop was Dr. Obiajulu, the president of The Reading Association of Nigeria, (RAN). He presented a speech in the form of an allegory about a clan from the eastern part of Nigeria who were really the first to reach the moon. Unfortunately because they were illiterate and unable to document their journey, they were given no credit, and their journey was even disputed by other clans.

Everyone seated at the high table was given an opportunity to speak. Then the high table was removed and placed on the same level with the participants.

3. Interpreting: We moved through the activities on the program fairly easily except when we were due to read through the booklets. It was apparent that so many of the participants (about one third) were not comfortable reading and discussing in English. In fact, during the course of several debates, we had to call upon a Hausa-speaking person to translate so that more participants could make an input.



(above) Alh. Ahmed Joda, Special Guest of Honor, and President of PARE



Dr. Obiajulu, President of The Reading Association of Nigeria (RAN). His speech illustrated how literacy is essential for preserving history.

... With a focus on the Nomadic Fulani

We reminded participants that they have to make the classroom an attractive place that reinforces basic knowledge. For beginning learners, having the alphabet and the numbers displayed in bright colors will stimulate the senses and make the children want to recite their ABCs and 123s. So we set about cutting out the numbers one through ten. Each participant was given a pair of scissors and a number template to trace. They worked in groups and shared the templates. At the close of this exercise every participant would have a number chart to take back to the class. Tracing and cutting proved challenging for many participants because they were unaccustomed to it. We spent about one and a half hours on this task.

4. Second Day of the Workshop

During the morning session we distributed student worksheets on basic skills and problem solving. Everyone got straight to work to prove that they could complete all the work and solve all the problems. Two of The Open Classroom teachers marked the worksheets completed by participants. The purpose of this activity was to expose participants to a large variety of classroom and homework practice sheets that they could design and use for their students. Most participants completed approximately ten worksheets.

It was really interesting to note that our Fulani students in attendance had quite a facility in completing worksheets, looking at the paper, reading the instructions and knowing what to do. They also knew how to help each other complete tasks.

Many of the participants had never seen nor worked a puzzle. Asking them to work in pairs, we had them assemble a 33 piece puzzle depicting a map of the world. This was a real challenge, and participants understood through experience that so many skills and qualities come into play when you are putting together a puzzle—these include hand and eye coordination, visual acuity, concentration, sequencing, patience, determination and several others.

In the afternoon we watched an educational film made by Mrs. Diane Ede, one of our members. In the Essence International school library with primary one and two students, she played educational games and read a story called "The New Baby Calf." It was interesting to observe her teaching techniques and her patience with the children as they asked and answered questions. We selected the story about a calf because the Fulani students who attended our workshop could easily identify with the theme.

While watching the film, participants also noted how beautifully the library was decorated with color posters and learning aids. They seemed to conclude that this classroom was not in Nigeria. We had to assure them that it was!

5. How Do We Learn?

Our very dynamic facilitator from the National Commission for Nomadic Education (NCNE) Ms. Janita Le Fèvre presented an activity that challenged us to decide how we learn. She explained that some people learn visually, others are kinesthetic learners, others learn through color and imagery, some are naturalists, some are musical. She got all of us in touch with the multiple ways we learn through an allegory about how the Fulani got their cattle. It was such an interesting story that captured everyone's attention, and got everyone to reflect on how we learn. We were challenged to work in groups and render the allegory drawing. Some participants danced, others made three dimensional designs.

6. Outcome of the Workshop

As a result of the workshop, many participants wanted to continue learning using the methods we adopted. We therefore arranged for a "Professional Teachers' Course" for Kaduna State Local Government Education Supervisors. This course closes in July, 2006, and all participants will take part in a graduation ceremony organized by The Open Classroom. One of the primary goals of the course was to remind the supervisors that so many people have never seen the inside of a classroom, and that these same people would like the opportunity to learn how to read and write. It is, therefore, not good enough that the supervisors should be better educated. They should be actively engaged in ensuring that the local government population has the same advantage.



how to retell the story in a different way. Then she challenged us to work in groups and render the allegory drawing. Some participants danced, others made three dimensional designs.

Janita Le Fèvre uses a chart to explain the different ways by which people learn.