Chapter V

5.0 Readings in the Language Classroom

5.1 Acts of Reading: Reading Thresholds

This chapter will deal very broadly with acts of reading in the language classroom. The first half will focus on the issues involved in reading the language classroom. The latter half will stay with specific reading experiences both in the undergraduate General English classroom and Adult Education situations.

My rear reflectors have logged in two powerful images. They riveted me especially at a time when the world of the teacher seemed to be crashing in on all sides. Well, sharing them is what we have to cash on. Interestingly, both appeared in the same paper and on the same day.

Trading Images: Bothering Texts/ Texting Borders


Teach other schools a lesson

‘If YOU can’t join ‘em, beat ‘em could be the motto of the Loreto School, Sealdah, in Kolkata. In the rat race of obtaining top marks in examinations, there are students who, for various reasons, fall behind their more successful colleagues. The result of such jostling arena of ‘super-success’ is
that most 'elite' schools battle against each other to maintain in academic excellence. Unfortunately, somewhere down the line, the real purpose of schools—to educate children so that they can be prepared for a life outside—is thrown out of the window.

To buck this trend, for the last three years, Loreto School had opened its doors to those girl students who, unable to meet the spiraling demands of excellence, found themselves hauled out of 'elite' schools. But this was not a patronizing experiment in pity. Far from it. What the school authorities did was to admit those who weren't making the stratospheric grade that their original schools insisted on and allow them to carry on their journey along the learning curve. And the results show for themselves. Instead of being a cesspool of 'bad' students, 20 girls 'brought in' from other schools have secured first division marks in the board examinations. This had many a cynic sit up.

Now, the school has made it a policy to welcome such students and has even created a special programme for this purpose. It has also turned the prevalent theory rampant in most schools in this country on its head by stating that if a student is a slow learner, then it's not the student's fault but that of the school. It is the responsibility of the teaching system to see to it that she is a good student—and above all, to make the system understand that it isn't about keeping up with 'averages' that is a school's job, but to teach.
UGC-CU Row

Marks scaling miffs UGC

The University Grants Commission (UGC) has once again trained its guns on the Calcutta University (CU). This time, it is over the CU's persistent refusal to treat degrees awarded by many universities at par with its own.

The UGC has asked the CU to explain why it routinely scales down degrees awarded by some universities, including the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU).

The letter comes after many IGNOU graduates were denied admission to post-graduate courses run by the CU.

They complained to the UGC authorities, which have now asked the CU to explain its stand.

The CU has a designated cell to go through the degrees of all applicants for the admission and slashes the percentages of applicants who've received degrees from universities whose academic standards are not very high.

"This has been the standard practice. Students of some universities that are rated very poorly score high marks. But we cannot put them at par with our own students or those from renowned universities in case of admission.

That would be doing injustice to our students. So we have to slash the marks of the students from such universities. And it is not only then Calcutta
University that does this; many other also do the same. I don't think there'd be any problem at all," said senior official of the CU.

"This is a controversial practice and there are two sides to it. On the face of it, it may be unfair to put a student from a good university like the Calcutta University who has score 75% marks with a student from some other university that is not rated highly.

But then again, a student who has scored the 75% marks from that university may just be a very good student and it would not be fair to discriminate against him," said a UGC official.

The answer, said the official was getting all universities in the country rated.

"The National Assessment & Accreditation Council has already started the process, but it's not over yet. Moreover the rating structure has been changed midstream by the NAAC. A just and fair system can be evolved only after the NAAC completes its task," he added.

In the meantime, the UGC wants the CU to spell out the precise formula it adopts for slashing marks of students from other universities.

"We have simply asked the CU to tell us what formula and criterion is adopted to bring about parity in marks of applicants from different universities. Our purpose is simply to ensure that no injustice is done to anyone," said the UGC officer.¹
Shot through these thresholds rush a term-end dilemma for college teachers. At one level, the problem posed what it is to be or not to be in English classrooms. Student, teacher and all. At a broader level we were aghast at the dimension of damage. And also keenly aware of the intertexting of discourses of power related to the overall question of whose curriculum. What bridges would we require? Why were these criteria being made to nose around so much? Why and how had they come to regulate our lives, our very being at the cost of education, of becoming?

Following this, in the staff study, frequently passing and re-passing, a very knotted scenario, we were plagued with the question what would be the ‘right’ or ‘correct’ evaluation criteria. We thought the dilemma pointed to amending our evaluation criteria. Many of us felt comfortable in the fact that changes were becoming more visible therefore, feasible. But on a closer look found the fiction of these facts and the stakes were much more sinewy. For myself, I thought, what a treacherous way of arriving at wholesome acts of learning. It is a well-established learning principle that acknowledges all learners will succeed given the chance to operate in their zones of proximal development. This, however, does not seem to be the working principle of present education. And as I utter it the idealism becomes apparent. If fighting for first division/class is all that the intervention is about then it is definitely belying. But it also points to the possibility of how the goals of education can be waylaid and a certain kind of dilution effected. At a surface level reading,
these testimonies of 'success' prove nothing more than the efficacy of these 'value neutral' tests and therefore, confirm the reliability and validity of the knowledge produced. Yet, a critique tells us how these criteria and the procedures adopted depend on the existing practices of reading and writing is not wholly value free. Even the processes by which they are learnt are subject to the role education has been made to play in the general stratification of society. Education that segregates society into those who have or do not have social and culture capital.

**Teacher-reader/learning-reader**

This insight into very paradoxical situation offers a reading position in the intersection of several texts – the dominant reading position that a text desires to hold. A unique instance where the teacher-reader, the leaning-reader as a researcher-reader all get implicated in a project of critical reading.

In trying to read a particular educational site/setting, I have had to resort to a print text. So for the moment I am a reading subject, learner-reader also in a very critical sense. As I read worlds intercept and transact imperceptibly. Different texts are being mediated and exist relationally in the different subjectivities I have and the reading positions I am familiar with. So in a sense I am subject and subjected to meanings all at once. The transactional spaces I occupy, as a reader is in many senses spaces I probably share with
my student readers in the classroom. The danger of this knowledge is that it has all the chances of getting imposed in my zeal of engaging in critical reading. But the fact that I am keenly aware of these transgressions may prevent overt 'authoritarianism'.

My reading is subject to who I am, where I am and the purpose of reading. My comments can be semi-proposals of the possible meanings that can emerge as I take the help of textual devices to construct meaning. In the above news text a popular American slogan, almost a war cry, serves as an entry point and directs the course of attention. Literally and rhetorically I get housed in the narrative. Through a volley of innuendos and highlighted terms I am drawn to a series of overtly binary images—elite/rural, good/bad, success/failure— as the battle lines get drawn. The silences of the text also seem to be claiming meaning of what is happening in most other institutions. These subliminal transactions between the different selves in the act of reading need to be crafted into the writing classroom as the translated self writes. These writings are then to be positioned in the larger geo-political contexts.

5.2 Representations of Education

What the two news items evoke is the way that a particular reality is being represented and how language conspires in that representation. First, education is represented in combative terms, the overall tug-of-war/
'competition' metaphor to describe the field and the second, which grids on the first, how a single intervention has problematized participation for us. In trying to understand these crossroads, we realize how the terms of participation have ossified.

Availing a tug-of-war metaphor presupposes that such oppositional systems have inserted into thought processes themselves vulnerable/prone to contradiction/ at war which can only conjure war-like representations. The rhetorical devices point to structures of thought that gained currency in curriculum of the 80s in their march for excellence. But what is lost sight of is that 'excellence' itself is an artifact, a category in the dominant discourse of education.

In September, 1959, Woods Hole on Cape Cod, America, where 35 scientists mathematicians, and linguists met to take stock of the situation. The 10-day meeting had been called by the National Academy of Science to discuss how education in the science might be improved in our primary and secondary schools. The meeting pronounced 'back to the educational basics' call. 'Due to national embarrassment over Sputnik I, it was important for the United States to compete technologically with and stay ahead of the Soviet Union. Therefore, for the sake of national security and in the name of patriotism, public education had to be upgraded. But making everyone proficient in reading, writing, and arithmetic was not going to save the nation.
Schools had to be made more academic. What students had an opportunity to learn could be academically advanced and reflect the structure of the disciplines?' (Cleo Cherryholmes: 1988).

**Participation/Learning/ Social Relevance**

The current interventions of liberal zones within 'elite' educational spaces do provide insights into the notions of participation being traded. Baldly put, it throws light on what The UGC Curriculum Development Centre, 1989 proposes to do with education in its pursuance of social relevance. It does not spell out in clear terms what social relevance signifies. But the way it has been formulated it seems to say that it is a fairly known what this category is and uniformly available for reading and interpretation. But in so doing, it outlines its contorted and contradictory route but an *a priori* ideal reader.

I want to take over from the last word of the first news item to look at what is being suggested in the 'but to teach...' The Report of the Curriculum Development Centre, 1989, emphasizes *learning to teaching*. Was it foreshadowing the training programmes that were to become mandatory for teachers right through the 90s? The important fact about this directive takes a more realistic picture of the teacher in relation to a fast changing world. And talks about *social relevance*. But social relevance in 2000 is quite different from the 1980s.
Down the line, have there been hurdles to participation? If I have already accepted the terms of the participation as given then we have to look at the tokens of the currency.

What kind of 'literary competence' is being presupposed? And what kind of a reader is probably being addressed?

The integrated approach to English as being proposed in the Curriculum Development Centre, 1989 recommendations seem to identify social relevance as a key theme. Social relevance has special salience given the radically changed scenario of the 21st century. Moreover, its implications for critical consciousness are also more loaded. 'Literary competence' and 'communicative competence' can be conflated to include a more expansive concept of communication – participatory communication (Shirley White & S. Nair & Joseph Ascroft, 1994) as the editor's elaborate; participation communication is based on a changed organizational ethic and method of organization. Critical pedagogy is almost non-existent in classroom praxis in the present English Language Teaching scenario.

In the new participatory communication proposal, the colonial arrangement remnant in the 'knowledge-transmission pedagogy' and the 'behaviorist pedagogy' are reversed to change and energize indigenous knowledge systems and the necessary communication system to make them operate.
The concept of 'dialogic action' so intimate to Freire share a similar understanding. Not only the transformation of the Vygotskyian model of 'scaffolded learning' by mentor teacher but also in the process of 'mutual transformation' – 'dialogic' of a collective to understand and transform reality. Critical consciousness would be central to its practice.

5.3 Debates and Issues Relevant for the Reading Classroom

5.3.1 Dual world order

The angst captured some of the constraints of the present curriculum and also the paradox of living in a dual world order. Application of structuralism in Education best shows this binary opposition at work. Way back in the 1960s, Bruner's influential book, Process of Education, academic scholars in America, set the academic agenda. It assumed the existence of a cumulative, hierarchical body of knowledge. Assumption about disciplinary structure generated a welter of oppositional categories. Concept/fact, theory/practice, cognitive/ affective, subject-centered/learner-centered. And yet educational practioners know that concepts and facts are mutually constitutive. But most of us have had to survive in pedagogies where acting is separated from thinking, education from community, the world of work and learning.
Alienation

The concept of 'alienation' arising from this dichotomous thinking, Marxist literary criticism conceptualized the reading processes as forms of consciousness arising out of the general social relations of production. Thus society was separated from men and women's actions, which were limited to responding to injustices with piecemeal adaptations. This apathy to community action is termed 'lack of civil rationality' in the colonial discourse in education. Within this discourse can be recognized 'a moral superior teacher and a society whose character was in need of reform'. 'Ideas such as practice within ones milieu; and the application to solve daily problem were alien'. This is what Gramsci (1971) calls invisibilizing the 'indigenous intellectual'.

So even in practice today both the pedagogue and the andragogue have to be assumed as tabula rasa before learning can begin. It is embarrassing how well we teachers act this out. The concept of 'knowledge sharing' was only with experts, even for knowledge to be considered valid and credible.

What do reforms say?

Reforms as articulated in the CDC calls for teachers to provide opportunities for students to engage in a discourse of social relevance. It seems to 'integrate' text analysis and social practice. Moving toward a more soluble
space-acts of reading in acts of doing-language performativity in a 'no-language-land'/terrain.

The reforms seem to suggest that educators need to assist students in developing the skills needed to describe, explain, predict social phenomenon. This becomes a disputed terrain. In particular restructuring the English classroom suggest that in order to build a conceptual understanding, students must construct meaning by using theories and evidence and by using language appropriate for such purposes.

What is a Reader/Learner?

To contextualize the social constructionist proponents at the outset, Marxian principle stresses the relational nature of human learning. Education is the social organization of human learning; this learning itself, a reflexive process involves the individual psyche in relationship with surrounding natural and social world. No teaching learning can take place in a vacuum.

5.3.2 Marxian Critique

What are the terms of a Marxian critique?

(1) Bourgeois society is the most developed and the most complex historic organization of production.
(2) The intimation of higher development among the subordinate animal species, however, can be understood only after the higher development is already known.

(3) Commodity is commodity not because it is produced but because it is produced and exchanged—exchange which mediates every form of socio-cultural relationship and interaction.

Marxist critiques provide very important tools for analyzing the present scenario and also examining the arguments in the present debates.

5.3.3 Process/Product Debate

The marks crises seem to capture many of the false analogies within the process/product debate. It also helps to focus on the crises of dualistic modes of thought and the problem it creates for education/educational practice.

(1) Quantification of Education as product. Its growth was often referred to in terms of wealth or capital.

(2) The processes of education were co-terminus with quasi-biological growth features. It identified the roots of the educational process in natural processes is reducing education even if and even when socially organized into an essentially animal activity. Such gross simplifications have provided unwarranted configurations in education.
Such mechanistic and inert viewpoints put the learner in a very precarious predicament.

5.3.4 Genetic Code Thesis

Genetic code theorists have generally added to these problems. They argue that ‘critical learning period is a neurological concept’. ‘According to neurology, specialized learning periods like the language acquisition phase are matched on the physical front by actual changes in brain physiology, all related to a phased closing off of options.

In other words, ‘growing up’ coincides with a sharp, if not total, decline in an ability to learn a genetically ordained skill must now amount to a case of individual achievement— the ‘species-specific’ character of the learning is forever gone. For anything on a mass scale it is now too late.

There is an interesting model in evolutionary sociolinguistics of how major, ‘or quantum’, change comes to a community... To be specific, this model envisages a major environmental change that acts as the catalyst for learning/change: there has to be a reason for why rapid and dramatic change is called for...Adult adaptation to this new situation is sporadic, incomplete, unsystematic: it has no guidance from genetic logic. (What is genetic logic?)...Adults are to be given treatment, and kept comfortable, as the terminal phase of an old system: they cannot, en bloc be 'cured' (bold
mine). (The 'disease' metaphor/image). By these arguments, physical growth/age is conflated with maturity. Does schooling automatically account for political maturity?

Genetic logic becomes a suspicious category. The product of learning is therefore treated as a product of psyche. Within such conceptualizations reading therefore will favor those autonomously endowed (with culture & social capital).

The way processes and product of reading have been understood pose problems in what we consider the reader and the reading literate. In trying to understand the model of literary competence/communicative competence being proposed as the twin goals of the reading writing classroom discourse, it is important to examine the existing understanding on reader and reading.

The reader and reading theorized in literary criticism can be traced to the influential work of Roland Barthe's (1977, 32-51), 'Death of the Author' and directly related to Foucault's query, 'What is an author?' were major moves to decenter the author from his work and indent the romantic, humanistic idea of creativity with the author as the sole creator or genius. This of course does not mean the disappearance of the person author but shifting the focus to the numerous discourse practices that are at play in the production of a work. The meaning of author as singular presence was now
being dismantled to look at the author and the work as subject to the processes or conditions of production. Subsequently, individual innocent reading was no longer possible as individual reader as source of meaning was becoming suspect. 'If the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author', the power of the 'self conscious' narrative can no longer be related to conventions and techniques, or literary or rhetorical devices alone. History and other processes seen through and by an individual cannot simply be explained as being 'out there'. Critical reading was focusing attention on the demands of the text. The relationship of the reader to the reading so far was considered a fairly unproblematic matter.

Critical Literacy with its long-term commitments to change and justice does identify the importance of reading for such purposes.

More recently, the Curriculum Development Report, 1989 with its integrated approach has renewed its call for 'literary competence /communicative competence' within the 'new' integrated approach to the teaching of English. There is also a 'soft' call to 'learning' and 'social relevance' is mainly to tide a 'heterogeneity' crises. Perhaps this has crystallized best in the 'reading' criteria. But all along reading had been understood as a simple task that could be easily surmounted with the help of the teacher facilitator/manager. Despite these hurdles and the persisting heterogeneity, facilitator teacher was quite proven, provided it did not have to take to task the culturally
different student. This was often ruled as genetic dysfunctional which could be remedied in time with proper doses of correct English. The 'good' readers distinguished themselves as being 'sensitive' readers. This generally passed off as teaching.

5.3.5 The Active Reader

Birth of the Reader

The decentering of the author in Roland Barthes (1977) influential essay, 'Death of the Author' gave birth to the reader. The two prominent theoretical models that located reader dispositions were the Reader Reception theory (Holub: 1984) and the Reader Response theory (Tomkins: 1980). In both models the reader is theorized as individual source of meaning evolving into independent interpreters. Reader Response identified a learned and interpersonal activity within which the concept of multiple readings and multiple voices emerged. In these versions, an automated interpretation was made possible. So notionally the concept of ‘the reader’ came to be housed outside the frames of narrative address.

But Jonathan Culler (1975) talks about a community of reading where the self-presence of the reader is no longer possible. To the autonomous construction of texts the Marxist literary criticism emphasized the material processes of reading brought the subjectivities into play. In any production of knowledge is a complex mediating process where the reader has an active and central role to play, particularly in educational setups.
5.3.6 Relevant Issues

Reader Response/Reader Reception Theory

If we are to read the Reader Response (Tomkins: 1980) and the Reader Reception (Holub: 1984) as meta texts of the classroom which pose problem for critical pedagogy then it alerts us to the issues that are rarely taken into account in the classroom. The providential reader with exceptional powers of creativity and self-discovery would be potential readers. These providential readers would be quickly normed, setting the trend for most dominant reading in the classroom. The shared knowledge would rest in the shared cultural codes common to culturally similar readers. Ideology mobilizes who is to be a good or better reader. So the genetic theory of being providentially predisposed is problematic. Genes do not determine who is providentially disposed but what meanings power the curriculum or institutional expectations. So whether we are conscious or not we are already housed in discourse practices that are going to be very crucial for identity formation. Reading is intertexting of reading texts of reader texts materially produced by specific, social, political arrangements within a frame of intelligibility.

As readers we are ruled by a discourse and in Foucault's (1966) terms become 'anonymous speakers'. Foucault's view of the subject is that persons make statements and say that statements make persons. Read in other words as Jonathan Culler (1975) says, '...the question of reading is not what actual readers do but what an ideal reader must know implicitly in
order to read and interpret works in ways we consider acceptable in accordance with the institution of literature.’

5.4 Transactions in the Reading Classroom

5.4.1 Textual Encounters: Reading the World in the Word

*We learn from each other more than we know*

FIR: Rethinking Participation

Reading the world: Adulthood/Adult spaces. *Are there Reading Rights in the classroom?*

Premises: *We speak before we write.* Freire

Reforms and Syllabus objectives assume the need of and for change.

And by the same logic it assumes that what is being changed is for the better.

The underlying rationale for pedagogy is that meaningful instruction will provide growth and change.

Common assumptions:

1. Language and communicative competence are critical for the development of higher cognitive abilities
2. Development is possible if participating in culturally meaningful activities

The two key concepts, 'comprehensible input' and 'zone of proximal development' dominant in language discourses of different denominations like Second Language Acquisition, English as Second Language, English for Special Purposes, and more recently, Functional English and Bilingualism seemed to capture the problems facing instructional practice by the emerging 'heterogeneity' of school demography, by and large global features.

Comprehensible input alerted the resource input of the school, teacher, textbook, instruction and what is the significance of all these in relation to the learner. However whatever attention was drawn to the learner, the learner was conceived in the gaze of the expert teacher, as the child in need of attention in pedagogy. 'Scaffolded' teaching as it is understood in even contemporary contexts in the mainstream empowerment discourse emerged - a closely conducted tour, mitigated for every other purpose, but hopelessly out of tune in adult and adult like situations. Adult notions of space were conveniently glossed over for lack of understanding and how to implement them in adult perspectives.
Even today, most of the problems that were being treated in schools for the disadvantaged learner, were generally theorized as linguistic problems only. That is how schools had dealt with the subject so long. And it is in this representation of language in 'schooling' that a distinct understanding about 'language' emerged. Immersion programs, with a largely applied linguistics bias, met with partial success for some parts of the world leaving other problems untouched. It is for these very reasons that the problems got accentuated. Language and culture were being referred to as separate entities. Bilingual education in not having problematized language as culture and not, language and culture, continues to follow very different track routes in language education. What is more relevant for our study is that pedagogy with its theoretical bias to child education did not have a proper analytical tool for studying other than child oriented language environments. All these analytical problems half a century old still continue guide secondary, postsecondary, undergraduate, and literacy programs.

Most of these approaches and methods guide second language classrooms:

Total Physical Response

The Natural Approach

The Functional Approach
Classroom Realities:

So where is this real class? Observations

I will take the General English class for observing the broad phenomenon of reading. How does intertextuality determine students understanding of language, reading, and text? What happens to identity? These observations covered a two, one-class-per-week (Saturdays which were generally overtaken by college co-curricular activities, eventuating into a 'null' class) semesters – 1 and II BSc, Sept.2001- Dec.2002.

Upkeep of English

Simultaneous and parallel repertoires: English as a Medium of Instruction has survived as a practice in a more political sense. The upkeep of which has had to assume a wide range of subterranean texts and languages in classrooms which have been either considered to interfere with the learning of the Queens English or primarily nonstandard. This intertextuality constantly inflicts a grammar of its own. In the in-between spaces of understanding a new text in the making is very provisional? Otherwise how do we generally deal with the language of poetry? And teach it?

Currency of classroom exchanges

To elaborate, in the equation of power that a certain text or a teaching method or interpretation mobilizes in the classroom there is a possibility of equal and almost counter power/interpretation being created to cope with the
given situation. But this is relevant for any other classroom simply because at any given point of teaching the ratio of teacher student being 1: many, a gap in communication is most likely to occur always filled up immediately by horizontal gap-filling. So notionally there can be as many teachers as students. This breaks the centrist location of teaching and teaching as space. Can we safely assume that reading is happening all the time?

The matter of how we view language texts is already placed in other texts. It can be cartoons, images, inscriptions. And the college desktops are ample proof of this. The college is known to spend considerable amount of time and energy leveling these inscriptions. It is found in the ways students resist the dominant text or dominant teaching or what is being moralized from mainstream point of view or vice versa quickly translated/appropriated into their lingo/codes and modes. Another level of communication is simultaneous with what is either being said or done in the dominant classroom. So there is never really one language or one class there are several simultaneities. In earlier teaching jingo this would be termed 'noise' or even 'indiscipline'. But this subterranean English is not being bilingual or multilingual in the strict English Language Teaching jargon. It is a curriculum we have generally undermined. More so because these are young adults alive to the power games going on to make or unmake the very substance of their college lives as elsewhere in larger society. And a college day is not too
short! This is just an observation, which I have not studied consistently but a potential that needs to be looked at a little more seriously.

What gleanings can we draw from this?

- Language is not a linguistic langue- it is culture.
- Oral/Speaking transactional space as adult space/more congruent/more readily available/more 'real'.
- We speak before we write. As adults do we speak to rewrite? Is this a dialogic feature?

What are the implications for the teacher?

1. Teachers are by definition engaged in work that requires political awareness as well as technical competence.
2. Teachers by profession have to engage in critical literacy, how English is being used and understood by students.

Leavenings: IIBSc, 2001-2002 Compulsory English Class. As we moved on...

1. **Seema** (IIBSc): ‘You treat us as adults. The others in college don't treat us like that!’
2. Commenting on what she finds problematic about poetry? And why is the English class different from the science class.
Anju: 'There can be so many interpretations to a poem!' (Distressed)

I asked (ongoing): How many meanings can there be? Are they all possible and 'real'?

Encounter with texts – Living Text – Mohammed

Decoding the General English Syllabus 2002 (Appendix)

General English Course: 2001 (Extract of the Course given below)

Full marks 50 (Seen 30 and unseen 20 marks)

Unseen (20)

1a. Letter: (5)

1. Application for a job
2. Letter to the Newspaper ventilating grievances
3. Lodging an FIR
4. Seeking an appointment with an Official
5. Application for a loan

Number three was the teaching item for the II BSc Compulsory English Class.

What is an FIR? Filing a diary/First Information Report at the police station – which is some sort of complaint. It generally follows the letter format.
Apparently assumed first encounter with civic and legal bodies. But when practicing the form, we chunk learning, accommodating uncomplicated utterances within the structure. By so doing the assumed contradictions would be automatically removed/ minimized. The methods we employ replicate liberal measures to be adopted.

The English Class as Transactional Space: Texts/Contexts/ Acts of Meaning

Specific notions about an introductory class and who should occupy what space was disturbed. His adulthood was apparent in his claims. The fact he composed the letter himself was important for his identity as citizen-student (perhaps not apparent to him in such clear terms) until he got to speak about it. And the information that did not come in a strict textbook format with a better student plausibility. Mohammed emerged as text -a metalanguage as it were of the class, interpreter to and of other texts. Contextualization is something that has to be built in to tasks that are available as personal experience. The potential of spoken English with all the paralinguistic devices available to the speaker, in the form of intonation, gesture, facial expression is physically more powerful a communication. Mohammed was a living text for that class. The intertextuality of his specific FIR brought into play other discourses without which his own would have been impossible. It briefly introduced his life story his location in time and history and his present position in the subject. It had a touch of freshness and novelty to start an I BSc Introductory class.
Levels of texts: levels of meaning

1. To notify the loss of a certain text/way-bill FIR a public token of exchange

2. The information provided composed another text

3. The description, definition and context of FIR communicated to an audience for academic purposes

4. Oral communication: Verbal modes adopted to explain how different texts are created in social exchanges

Power of the Spoken

Playing adult roles: appropriating adult spaces

Who is Mohammed? First year introduction profile diary.

For any reader who has a particular history inhabits more than one discourse, and has therefore more than one way of being and knowing. Given these multiple subjectivities, any reader response is ambivalent open to transformation. The transformation of consciousness that takes place in the intersection of three agencies--the teacher, the learner and the knowledge they together produce. Hence my focus here is on the transforming processes by which teacher and learner produce the knowledge - knowledge which also produces them...no single metalanguage to describe, that is, interpret, what is already interpreted.... and given that
there is no transcendent conceptual framework, to interpret the classroom language, those theories and methods are necessarily partial-interested as well as incomplete.

Class I: Exercising knowledge rights in exchanging them in public space called the classroom as a political consent of society. Perhaps Mohammed was unconscious of it. But having decided to dialogue he had exercised his right consciously and also exploited what was readily available in the classroom.

Reading the syllabus item 'hailed' him as it were into officially granted political spaces that framed the syllabus objectives. His competency rested in the fact that he was not fully free of the urban middle class milieu, education that he was part of. To that extent without realizing he responded as citizen/reader/literate. Interpellation or stimulus/response? Education is not neutral and classrooms are not neutered either.

As an introduction class it was heartening to see the competent young male in public discourse. But it would be incomplete if we treated the transaction simplistically and simply celebrated the talk. I also made it clear whom it would disqualify as speaker in English medium 'elite' spaces. The contradiction was apparent. He was speaking but the fact he was speaking he was speaking, another tongue.
As a Teacher: Comments

A very perfunctory response had provided a better way of looking at students as young adults. If provided an opportunity to transact at a very academic level the knowledge systems that go to make their worlds/identities they will speak. He changed the notation for a conventional and more importantly an English classroom. The University had done part of the task in including FIR as a legitimate and perhaps useful for the functioning of a young adult in society.

Several important things happened:

- The implicit knowledge of being housed in several texts
- A useful strategy to see how texts work
- The various ways in which texts relate to one another
- The cultural factors that affect the possible meanings of a text

The material that Mohammed used to explicate the act of engaging with the FIR. Collage of texts was brought into the class to understand the scope of the FIR. He demonstrated in class what could be the subject matter of FIR Collage of texts: Newspaper cuttings were brought to class modeling contemporary letter text.


3. Keep the Peace – Communal harmony in West Bengal

4. Starvation a Social Evil – letter to the editor. 8 September, 2001

5. Bordello Politics – letter to the editor. 2 sept. 2001


The Writing task of General English; Letter: FIR

Mostly stressing on the letter format and highlighting the information provided – indirectly focusing on the scope of the letter.

It was a categorical selection, which had his own imprint through which he expressed his own adulthood. All the selected pieces pointed to how he read the world. And spoke it with conviction.

Redefining a classroom. His dealing with controversial issues dealt with how language is housed.

What English is: what language is

Distinct opening to identity

We are interpretative beings. No language is neutral. Trying hard to remain neutral has its own political overtones. I could sense genuine discomfort in many students. Others must have been quite alarmed at the upper hand
given to a particular student. But many were genuinely interested and quite alert in the way he presented his material. Without allowing these technical questions to cloud our reading. Mohammed did other things that upset the traditional storyline of student identity. Unknown to me then he had redefined the notion of participation making us rethink about how we are to look at the class, what it means to them, and most importantly what we can make it mean for all of us.

Mohammed was only one of the several actors who challenged some of the prevailing notion about adulthood and class space.

English assumed volatile spaces more apparent in the being and the becoming. Hanging on to each other’s words as it were, by which they express their sense of community, their strength that cannot be simply labeled as plain borrowing cheating in the standard discourse. Perhaps that is the basic nature of languages and languaging. These were some of the other issues that came alive.

Apart from treating the FIR as a generic form of the letter writing, transactional non-narrative text, this genre is studied against texts and textual issues in other parts of the General English syllabus.
A prose text: M K Gandhi: How a Client was Saved (prose), and The play: The Rising of the Moon: Lady Gregory.

- How and what they identified in certain texts.
- What was language doing in the general makeup of certain characters? What was the purpose served in mapping identity in certain ways?
- The relation of texts in the theme of identity.

W.H.Auden: The Unknown Citizen. The students understanding of the poetic form. What was being observed in order to understand their positions. Did they identify themselves? How would they construct a character certificate based on what they have been able to understand in the poem? What did they select as marker for framing a formatted character certificate. Transfer of genres. The focus of these readings would be on genre transfers.

The poem satirizes the project of making all of us 'unknown citizens' in the format of the epitaph addresses the modern condition of man in the closing questions: 'Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd.' In the early section of the poem there is a deliberate parody of the word 'saint' in relation to this citizen and in the context of the last two questions. It is a study of the middle class ideology perpetrated by the state.

The students confronted two problems, their notions about what poetry is, and about regular verse, about the function of punctuation in the creation of
meaning and whether or not to conform to the 'intended' meaning in the text. The different meanings that were emerging put them into problematic situations whether or not to belong to the textual experience, what to make of it, how to talk about this very disparate situation, and most of all how language played havoc with meanings. The different readings possible were also dependent on what they were reading. Singular readings were just not possible. Safe positions were being pricked. Simply because someone in class said their was no fun in being a saint! This suddenly heightened contrary viewpoints, charged it with other possible meanings. It alerted them to the general power of language, about what texts do and how words mean different to different people.

'When there was peace, he was for peace; when there was war, he went.' Cast them into interesting polarities. Those who went by the word of the line began to feel safe just when some others butted in by saying, 'What a buddhoo' ('Buddhoo' in Hindi means 'Stupid')! 'A conformist?' Which also went on to form the alternative title for the poem. (Would 'Buddhoo' as a title be permitted?) They never risked this. But 'He was found by the Bureau of Statistics...' a number. They identified this numbering. The irony and the penalty of being in modern classroom-where roll calls took up about 15 mins but at the end of which we did not know each other. This, they identified with completely.
This play of contrary states, contradiction was at play all the time as they groped for words for what they were experiencing about language and how language represents the world. The systemic, structural, and rational notion of meaning as located 'in' the text to a provisional, shifting, engaging, ideologically 'encoded' one, made more sense to them.

This was especially useful when doing Project Work where they had a slogan composing competition for all the project areas. But the task had been slightly altered as they could also use their mother tongues. Nepali and Hindi got tossed around in reckless abandon. These were moments when they were at their best as comprehensible inputs and comprehension blurred autobiographical and the context, which deals with the boundaries of legality.

M K Gandhi: How a Client Was Saved posed two problems. This is a text, which is autobiographical and the context deals with the boundaries of legality, transforms texts or part of texts from one genre to another.

The persona of Gandhi draws the reader into a very persuasive ideology. The text pitched them to a controversial area of the true and the false both in juridical and lay terms. Gandhi wields considerable attention as a set reading text and obstructs as at the same time as presence.

**Procedure of the task**

The theme of smuggling in the above prose piece was taken up as a writing task for FIR. This is also part of the whole reading writing endeavor that aims
to enable students to understand more about the constructedness of texts and their openness to reconstruction. Such tasks require students to engage with specific writing tasks spread over a term

Aim: To test comprehension and reading.

Term End Exam Question: "Considering the status of the person in question, mention some of the problems likely to arise as a result of this FIR".

Through their reading of existing reality they were able to give a range of problems likely to occur - range of apprehensions - assault, kidnapping, molestation, physical threat, bribe, and pressure tactics. Alternative to FIR they could think of was writing to the newspaper or flashing on TV. Nobody mentioned mobilizing community support. This was an interesting opening because it made very clear the constraints of one being in a very literate middle class situation but unable to intervene socially.

Term End Exam Question: Texts: 'You have wronged not me but the government.'
'I don't think this case should be taken to court at all.'
'Imprisonment you should regard as penance.'
'This case will be tried by a jury, and a Natal jury will be the last to acquit an Indian.'
'The case against Parsi Rustomji was settled by a compromise.'
I am sure you have had several encounters with Gandhi outside the classroom. But for your classroom encounter with him is very specific. Highlighted for you are several statements from this ‘specific’ encounter.

The first three statements seem to be providing different commentaries on the existing legal system. In not more than 50 words give your reading/estimate of this system as captured in these statements.

From the first two statements what were Gandhi’s views about (a) government (b) prisons. Do you agree with him/ If not, can you clarify your position briefly.

The agenda of disagreement within the given agenda of reading texts was most noteworthy Particularly, in the larger context of the government having lowered the voting age to 18yrs. In reading these texts they are indirectly excercising their notions about who they are in their society, They are being called to function in adult civic spaces. Reading and interpreting becomes almost a basic skill.

The theme of ‘compromise’ within the legal proceedings of this text. The question of how the proceedings are subject to who is asking for legal help, his status in society and his relationship to the lawyer in question. Here more significant because the person is not just anybody but Gandhi.
The primary question is, could they disagree with Gandhi who is such an iconic figure? Who does Gandhi address in the text, in his overall attitude to the notions of 'truth' and 'honesty', 'salvation' and 'penance'?

Interesting also was the fact that this was a term end exam. So the questions subjected them to several unforeseen pressures. It was a compulsory paper. Their student identity was at stake. Would writing differently invite risks? But they wrote all the same. At another level this questioned the general taken for granted issue of 'comprehension', the set manner in which it is practised made easier copying but paying scant attention to his or her own adult knowledge of things. The set patterns are adducing 'reality' to it. So that a dialogue is closed even before it can begin.

Student Readings: Multiple Voices

Multiple readings were seen more clearly in the second question where they were asked to comment on Gandhi's views of legal justice and prisons. Several oppositional readings were justified simply but powerfully. Excerpts from the written task where the written idiom of the texts have been retained.

'I entirely disagree with Gandhi's view on government and prisons. The way Gandhi thought showed his greatness but we are ordinary people and hence
our definition of these two things is very different. We should be sincere and loyal to our government only when the government in its turn fulfills its responsibility. But we have a government which is corrupt and incompetent, hence there is no point in being loyal to such governments.'

'Gandhiji's idea of prisons is very idealistic and far away from reality. Rarely does a man coming out of a prison is changed for the better. In most of the cases, a man coming out of jail is changed but for the worst. The way they are tormented inside the jails and the way they are looked at once they are out of it makes them feel bad. Due to which they behave badly and are seldom able to live a normal life. Hence they cannot treat imprisonment as a penance but a form of torture.'

Some almost spoke on behalf of Gandhi revealing their reader/citizen position and identification with Gandhian stand.

Prisons: 'This was a place, according to Gandhi, where one had to go in order to learn salvation or penance. One should not go there with a negative attitude considering it to be a punishment cell, but more with an intention to improve oneself'.

'...Nowadays, cases like Rustomji probably come in a more complex manner and no amount of confessing would work...' Seema.
‘...I will not rule out the possibility of Rustomji hiring professional goondas to threaten me or even causing me physical harm...In spite of all this a person has to have courage to fight against the evils of society.’ Swikar.

‘So we can say that the legal system is existing in different ways. One can settle the case by a compromise and hide it from the court... The system of giving and taking bribes was going on.’ Sabita.

‘I do not agree with Gandhi’s view because unlike the way he thinks I think that when the government officials themselves are involved in crimes then there is no question of the government being offended by crimes that take place in society.’ Shivani.

‘A person who reports such shady deals, has to be prepared to bear all sorts of mental and physical torture. The people in question are not ordinary people; they are criminals who commit crime in cognizance with the people who are supposed to maintain the law. The person reporting such cases has to face a lot of problems, which may be big or small. The problem may be like receiving threats to getting beaten up and in some cases even getting killed.’

‘Some other means of tackling this problem are reporting the incidents in newspapers and also by the formation of a forum which is politically alert and
which is capable of standing for the right cause against the mightiest...the peoples column should be given more teeth'. Mohammed.

'It seems quite hard to lodge an FIR against a famous personality'. Sandhya.

'Law is like a spider's web, only the weaker and smaller insects get caught in the web'.

'He seemed to consider the government as a just, efficient and an honest institution while he considered prisons as a place of penance for your sins.' Swikar.

'The first three statements show that the then existing legal system was a very ideal one which is far from true. These lines show that wronging the government was a grave sin and imprisonment gave a man the chance to change himself for the better. It also shows that negotiations were a better option than arguments'. Mohammed.

The Rising of the Moon: post-11 September reading. The ruse of 'disguise' in a theme dealing with uprising and the overthrow of political power. The theme of who is who becomes even more difficult to understand at the level of language. They are set a task of reframing a handbill mentioned in the play to catch the escaped convict. They realized the irony of the situation and the betrayal of language to make it more authentic. The disguise
complicates the theme of search for the convict - the identity of who is the real and who is the false gets subverted as secrets are discovered against the rising of the moon.

5.4.2 Literacy: Identity: The Question of Difference

'Try another Subtraction sum.

Take a bone from a dog: what remains?'

Alice considered. "The bone wouldn't remain, of course, if I took it – and the dog wouldn't remain: it would come to bite me...and I'm sure I shouldn't remain!"

"I think that's the answer."

"Wrong, as usual," said the Red Queen: "the dog's temper would remain."

"But I don't see how ..."

"Why, look here!" the Red Queen cried. "The dog would lose its temper, wouldn't it?

"Perhaps it would." Alice replied cautiously.

"Then if the dog went away, its temper would remain!" the Queen replied triumphantly.

"She can't do sums a bit!" the Queens said together, with great emphasis.

(From: Through the Looking Glass by Lewis Carroll)

Domesticating adult spaces/Feminization of education.

They read their worlds & Spoke it too!
The Who of Who of 'she'.

What is a literate? In modern times, one single factor, responsible for the discovery of the 'she', on a grand scale, is education/literacy drives. 'Illiteracy' and 'she' have become interchangeable terms, consistently discovered in the logbooks of the 'dropouts'. What has been overlooked is that the drop out concept is peculiarly unproblematised. The history of education can safely be called the history of gender where the concept of gender has never been thought to be important enough to be included in the curriculum. And hence follows a fairly muddied and muddled history as well.

The large-scale inflation in the dropout accounts literature seems to assume and endorse the efficacy of the literacy programs. However, closer home, applying the same argument and the same logic for mainstream schooling is refused. The drop out in terms of unemployment and failures would by far exceed the figures of studies done on dropout rates on literacy. Yet these issues are never addressed in conceptualizing the literate. The drop out factor continues as major indices for reading the literate.

Targeting a certain section of the population as in need of literacy seems to say that it is known what the need is. So large sections of the population have to be made ignorant before education can be done on and to them. But what was simultaneously downplayed is the low social demand for literacy. Interestingly, the targeted group is always the poor: those who
would not be heard in a powered discourse. They resist in the way readily available to them and they know how; and drop out. Their argument has to assume the ignorance of the poor by virtue of being poor- a genetic defect. Nothing more. The dominant discourse is so clouded that it is not capable of reading what they see. Poverty is quickly conflated with ignorance. Recent reconceptualizations however emphasize that the 'lived curriculum' of these learners provide an epistemological turning point. 'Ignorance' is an effect of particular knowledge systems not absence of knowledge. The living everyday crossovers and transactions in the inter/intra spaces of language and culture remain largely unaddressed. This intertextuality stands largely invisible, not problematized in the doxic landscape of 'schooling'. As a result the basic adult identity of the literate as 'living text' is jeopardised.

What understanding guides the literacy programmes?

Categories of the 'infantile' and 'invisible' are fairly modern inventions in education. It is for us to scrutinize what purpose they serve.

Three teaching principles generally observed in adult education:

Housekeeping duties of literacy


3. The progress to be observed on a linear, lockstep process.
Freire's word-based approach exploded the existing myths of language learning for adults focusing on situated pedagogies and the need of theoretical overhauling.

Profitable in some locations and therefore, by this logic, well meaning however fails to problematize identity of the adult in its contingent polygenic sense. As the notion of literacy as a neutral, universal, 'autonomous', technical skill is being made readily available; the ideological thrust gets enormously inflected. Whose literacy is this?

The conceptual shifts within New Literacy Studies (NLS) interrogates what is called the 'autonomous' model of literacy (Street: 1984,1995) which works from the 'assumption that literacy in itself-autonomously-will have effects on other social and cognitive practices'. Modernization and development by this logic would be automatic. This is the general argument that is very much in force in all brands of literacy interventions here even today. So an ideological model of intervention is in force.

For these procedures to materialize the adult has generally to be sought as a tabula rasa. This almost dictates the methodology for the teacher. Henceforth, the adult learner will be regularly put under duress, a strict alphabetization diet along which reading and writing will proceed. The word based approach so conducive to adult situations and central to Freirian practice is not well understood in most situations. This is the general perception about literacy practice. The campaign model with its reach was able to institutionalize and induce truth-value to the 'autonomous' model of literacy. Conveniently the role of the teacher was simplified to lend force to these models of learning. Anything goes motto could now justify the need for large-scale teachers if the campaign model was to be a success.

Three, apparently simple incidents provoked us to rethink the literacy myths that generally do their rounds in most educational discussions.

**Voice: Adult Participation**

Uniformity of practice breaks down in the daily rub of the upcoming environments confronted.

'Literacy education for adults becomes an introduction to the effort to systematize the knowledge that rural and urban workers gain in the course of their daily activity. The knowledge of earlier knowledge then opens to them the possibility to new knowledge.' (Freire: 1978).
In our anxiety to continue open access for the mothers, we had minimized the importance of the teacher role in the literacy classes. Transactions that is so crucial.

Frontline snapshots of the literacy classes.⁴

Theme sentence. The larger theme of who is who in their endeavors to literacy.

Kalpana: Bahira hero, gharma zero! (Outside a hero, at home zero!)

Commenting on the share of responsibilities at home. And her inability to find time for the classes. (Kalpana is one of the working mothers attending the classes. She works as a domestic help)

Captures the adult spaces defining women…. Their contingent histories… It would be more worthwhile not to simply call this a classic example of bilingualism and move on? But the language of being and becoming gendered. Just as education invented the illiterate, work identified the ‘she’.

What was society saying about her and education?

The gendered angst of adult spaces. Authoring of these spaces come willy-nilly from elsewhere. Who is who in these spaces they were aware of but the meaning of which remained significantly invisible. The notions of the public and private of their beings seemingly blurred were only clearly identifiable in
the sharing of roles and responsibilities where social conventions had a big say.


For a week the mothers attending the literacy classes were absent. It didn't strike us what had happened when the teacher herself reported the incident. We were not alarmed because the mothers are known to keep their own schedules and notify when they want a change'. Accordingly classes are arranged. Throughout 2000 and 2001 we had enormous problems getting a suitable person for the classes. What was then available on a purely voluntary basis came in the form of one of the members of the organization who decided to meet the teacher crises. With numerous other organizational problems we had belittled the teacher role.

Then the story came in a trickle. Five working mothers attending the classes had decided to boycott the classes. With great hesitancy they told the story. They had to break their own notion about what or who is a teacher and the respect that goes with it. The regular policing in the classroom had become intolerable. In order to diffuse the tension I attended the class the next day as some of the classes were done on rotation. The highhanded attitude of the teacher had kept away a mother for a long period of time simply because she used to feel humiliated and stifled in the classroom. I learnt from them
that it was a repetitive drilling that was practiced, as a result of which numerous indispositions were maintained. This boycott I read as a unique instance of literacy participation-how they read their world. What education means to them. They spoke their voices. And by so doing claimed adult spaces in their agenda of learning. And that was an important statement.

At the same time a dialogue with the concerned teacher would be necessary to educate ourselves. But I was just beginning to think whether they should be given the liberty to exercise their right to the kind of teacher they want. So a certain kind of transparency in what is going to be taught is also necessary.

**Ideology of doing literacy as social work**

A certain amount of the teacher behavior can be accounted for in the common perception about literacy in the popular mind. The particular upkeep of literacy as 'social work' follows the humanistic education paradigm where education is carefully severed from contiguous civic space and how learners are to work within a community. There is nothing sacroscant about doing education and there is no fixed law as to what education cannot do. Cooperation and confrontation *both* are educational principles/ preoccupations. Within this understanding, intervention is concerned with both academic and political interpretations. Language performativity straddles dichotomized spaces. That we don't do this but continue to live like endangered species
exposes the political agenda of education. We must be cautious about striking moral and ethical postures. And the rift between private and public identities is meddled with by society holding individuals solely responsible for the mess. (Rajeshwari Sundar Rajan: 1997)

'Seeing literacy as not just a single unitary phenomenon attached to formal education institutions but as a variety of social practices.' (Street:1996)

What purpose would it serve if I profiled them? Contrast against the writing exercises of the general English classroom? Would it be comprehension profiles? How are the two comprehensions different? Are these divisions set up by educational discourses and the tokens by which we are made to understand them in very formal settings?

Lived Curriculum

It is in these spaces that Sabita (chronic TB9 Tuberculosis, fifth pregnancy where the babies did not live more than two to three months and the struggle was on...finally the one that survived had to be brought up in a creche and never lived with the mother...Most of the time Sabita stays in the TB Hospital...), Gita (single parent household), Rampiyari, Dhanmaya had scrapped to save some money and open an account in the bank...It required courage and strength... It took years for Moti to actually talk about the kind of harassment faced at home from her husband. She picked up enough
courage to go to the Kutcherry and pick up the necessary forms to get her marriage registered so that she would not be deprived of her property rights and in the case of any untoward happening claim compensation... she apprehended separation... How, Rampiyari & Gita to dodge the typhoid and diphtheria vaccine for their children because they were so costly, did not stay at home for days together... How Municipal authorities were hounding unnotified residents, particularly those from Nepal and without ration cards, they had no legal papers to justify their stay.... Migrant identities were made to be problematic... touts went on a moneymaking spree... those without ration cards were being threatened to pay huge sums to middlemen so that they were not notified... How those who had occupied Railway property for over twenty years were suddenly threatened eviction, which implicated Dhanmaya and her family of five. There was a confrontal discourse between what was legal and what their lives told them. Speaking between these spaces/ animated discussions took place within our classrooms as the state of threat continued for a good while. And most of us got to understand how entangled these issues are.

Reading the World: Rasta Roko

5 Sept.2002. Lakhsmi was part of a local roadblock protesting its immediate repair. The road where she lives is part of Highway 55. It forms one of the arms of a bifurcation that covers less than a quarter kilometer stretch between the main bazaar and the one-way before the Railway Station.
Strangely this arm is under PWD (Public Works Department) jurisdiction. The other arm of the road is under the Municipality and has been repaired. Obviously, the Municipality stood to benefit vote leverage. Most of us got a better hang of the social logic hidden behind all this. The incident also became a standing lesson in the literacy class with valuable implications for adult education. It provided a unique study of the interlocking issues within a contradictory civic space known as administrative practice.

*Lakshmi* attends our literacy classes. When I heard about the roadblock, which held up traffic in town for a full day was also what we were talking about in class. It was a complete eye opener. This coincided with IIBSc project work. Ironically, those doing the project work on Roads had been through a series of transactions with several authorities where they had framed the most perfect of letters airing their concern. It had been of no avail. Most of them seemed to be aware of this road block/protest and realized the several dimensions to the problem. I mentioned how some of the mothers literally lay down on the road to call attention. And it was done! PWD authorities drove in immediately from Siliguri to discuss the whole problem and give deadlines. Is this participation? Would we evaluate this as literacy participation? And what if democratic space looks more and more undemocratic? Is education doomed?
Roads they learnt

The funds of information that this protest aroused/generates made students in college realize how contradictory realities are. And who is who in education! This was also another kind of learning. For all of us, spaces transacted were astounding! The II BScs told me how the roadblock had changed their reading or perception of public spaces. Roads in urban areas could easily be read as potential public fora eroding a single use and function of roads. Learning texts and texts of learning hovered around. Adult spaces of participation are becoming more and more difficult to find.

What is membership?

The major flaw in the way we had conceptualized membership within the society was being questioned. The Society that started as a democratic forum also in many ways merged into literacy classes. Membership to the Society had been decided by members, all of whom were employed. Subscribing but otherwise passive membership formed the main bulk. This was generally seen by most members as unproblematic until some of the mothers attending wanted to become members and also take part actively in the running of the Society. This was how some members of the society, mostly subscribing members otherwise inactive in every other respect, interpreted membership. This also divided the society into two distinct groups. Those who could pay and those who couldn't which had peculiar inflections, creating problems in the general running of the Society. This
created an opportunity to rethink membership and thereby, participation. By making the membership nominal we were able to increase the reach of democratic space and respond more specifically to local situations.

Most of the members consolidated the common perception of such work as welfare service meeting the goals of progressive education. So when some of the members volunteered to do the literacy classes they saw themselves mostly as doing great service and some kind of favor. Praiseworthiness was being flaunted presenting ideological and strategical problems in the classes. So the 'good intention' was assumed in not only of what they were teaching but also how they were teaching it. This assumed neutrality, white washed the problems.

However, we were not completely free of inner dramas. They did cause a lot of tension but also provided lever. For instance, of who was an 'insider' and who was an 'outsider' in the classes gathered tempo. Those occupying urban spaces felt threatened, as migrants became more visible and attended classes in a fairly big way. Those with longer urban identities and with a slightly better access power seemed to want to push those from Nepal into fairly subordinated positions as far as such issues as membership and framing the 'what-is-to-be-taught' was discussed. The tug of private/public, insider/outsider always hovered and leavened teaching. Why should we want to escape it?
This obviously predates to the late 1980s. It was in a situation of social turmoil and unrest that the mothers found time and came to their own. It is then that the first literacy classes were held. The history of what made these classes possible are the spaces they claimed and shaped for themselves. The identities they were able to frame within these classes. None of which could be reversed. And none of which I think they were willing to forego. These undeclared forums of participation were being made invisible by certain technologies of teaching/learning. This touched them to the quick...

Any intervention is contingent space and the process of education involves interaction on a daily basis. The mix of this is always what begins to be relevant in the day-to-day practices. Many a time it is messy. Many textured. The theory of education as some inviolate space that we must religiously preserve is becoming more difficult to accept. The jostle is always on. ‘Revolt, activism, analysis and conscience’ all in a tumble as literacy goes on. Bricks in the wall we have erected for ourselves we will have to dismantle as we go along.

Empowerment in women’s education follows a very controversial career. Academically we have to engage with the welfare ideology. What would we require to reevaluate participation? Would education have anything to do with the making of ‘civil communities’? Education has to be relieved of a good bit of humbugging. Loose canons have always badgered around! So what are we up to anyway?
Notes

1 The National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) is an advisory and administrative body functioning under the supervision of the University Grants Committee. It functions primarily as a quality controlling body. In its supervising capacity it intervenes in probing accountability at the institutional level.

2 Both the observation and the task relates to the General English Course under the Undergraduate Degree Syllabus of North Bengal University. The General English course under the changed language policy of the West Bengal Government now treats it as a compulsory course. The Left Front Government followed a policy for English as medium of instruction for democratizing access, particularly the rural areas of Bengal. General English has become a compulsory subject for successfully completing the course of study.

3 The letter-writing task in the General English Course has been selected for purposes of scrutinizing the prevailing criteria for evaluating language learning events. Mohammed has been a random selection of a student in the second year BSc General English class, St. Joseph's College, Darjeeling.

4 A Voluntary woman's organization, Hemlata Memorial Society, operating in the hill district of Darjeeling, North Bengal, is involved in a literacy project with a small group of women, mostly mothers working in the non-formal sector. Most of the women who attend the literacy class are load carriers, some working as domestic help, others as daily wagers and petty traders, encounter diverse problems as they bring these experiences to their classes. Some of the more prominent incidents have been highlighted for the purposes of looking at the contradictions within the dominant system of education.