

# ALEF's Empowerment Groups – the transforming power of self-expression as a method for adult literacy

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Adult literacy isn't about learning the mechanical skills of reading and writing. It's about changing people's behaviour, enabling people to improve their lives and live up to their full potential, using reading, writing and numeracy as skills to reach their goals.

I have worked most of my adult life endeavouring to assist people in changing their lives, mostly in adult literacy, but also in counselling and preaching. In the process, I have learnt several things.

One is, that if you tell people what they ought to do, they don't go and do it. They say yes, yes, thank you, thank you. But they often think: "*what does that person really know about me and my life situation*". And then they continue to do things like before. The best way to prompt people to change is to get them to verbalise before their peers how they themselves want to change their behaviour. If it comes out of their own mouths, it is much more likely to be implemented.

➤ **Self-expression leads to changed behaviour**

The second thing I have learnt is that there is a tremendous healing power in talking about one's experiences and telling one's story to others. It reduces shame, and helps people feel that they are not alone.

➤ **Self-expression is healing**

The third thing I learnt is that living in a particular situation doesn't automatically mean that you understand the underlying factors causing this situation. Living in poverty doesn't mean you understand what poverty is or where it comes from. Understanding one's life situation and understanding cause and effect chains, the underlying structural causes of poverty and oppression is something we need to learn. An effective way of learning this is to talk to others about our shared life challenges.

➤ **Self-expression leads to deeper understanding**

These three insights constitute the rationale for the three questions used in the discussion part in ALEF's Empowerment Group method. I will come back to these three questions later.

Having worked for 30 years in adult literacy, I have also learnt some things about learning to read and write.

I learnt that a mother of seven living in extreme poverty doesn't necessarily understand or like syllable drills. When confronted with something like this:

ba bi be bo bu  
fa fi fe fo fu  
ma mi me mo mu

She may say: "This is not my language, it sounds like baby talk. I have no time for stupid and meaningless baby games"; and so she drops out of the literacy course.

➤ **Syllable drills discourage adult learners because they lack meaning and relevance**

I have also learnt that adapted texts, using only words and syllables already learnt in the course, produce more or less the same effect in learners as syllable drills. "Yes, these are words from my language, but what is the message? This is not the way we talk, it must be written by a foreigner. This is not relevant to me. »

➤ **Adapted texts lack relevance and are therefore hard to read and understand**

The worst example of an adapted text I have seen was in a Spanish primer. It went like this: "Papa kills the goose. Mama kills the goose. Pablo kills the goose. Ana kills the goose. Everybody kills the goose." Unfortunately there was no illustration.

So what kind of texts do people like reading? In my experience the texts people like best are those which they have created themselves. Texts expressing their own concerns and their own ideas about their everyday lives.

➤ **People like reading their own thoughts put in writing**

All these things need to be considered when attempting to create a method for adult literacy which is relevant and interesting, and which leads to people actually changing their behaviour.

There is yet another very important aspect of adult literacy which needs to be addressed: Illiteracy is not an individual problem, and literacy is not an individual activity. Literacy is communication. It takes place in a community. If we want adult literacy programmes to have a lasting effect, they have to be large scale; they need to affect thousands of people in the communities where they take place. We want to create literate communities, not literate individuals.

➤ **Literacy is about communication in a community**

This means that a sufficient number of people in a given community need to be literate before literacy practices can be established and of benefit to the community as a whole. So a good method for adult literacy needs to be scalable and easy to use. It has to be possible to easily and at a low cost train hundreds of group leaders and set up hundreds of groups in many neighbourhoods in large geographical areas.

➤ **A good literacy method should be scalable and easy to use**

All of these considerations are the rationale behind ALEF's Empowerment Group approach for adult mother tongue literacy. ALEF has been using this method with our partner organisations in Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo for 5 years, and have seen remarkable results both in terms of how many complete the course, how well literacy skills are acquired, and above all in terms of how the learners start changing their behaviour, taking control of their lives and their economy.

## **ALEF's Empowerment Group method**

All lesson plans in ALEF's Empowerment Group courses are built on a number of identical steps. This makes it easy for the group leader to apply the method. Group leaders get a two week initial training.

The main technology used in the groups is a blackboard and chalk, reinforced by illustrated booklets for all participants. The group leader has a manual with lesson plans.

There are three levels of courses, each course taking 6 to 8 months with participants meeting twice or three times weekly. In the **first level**, reading and writing in the mother tongue is learnt. In the **second level**, the focus is on learning to use numeracy for every day purposes, while continuing mother tongue reading and writing, and also starting to learn a little bit of a second language. In **level three**, learners read longer texts in the mother tongue, and they write texts which are printed and published on village notice boards. They also start reading and writing in a second language. In this level, subjects treated depend on the specific situation of the target group, but usually involves learning how to set up and run some type of civil society organisation.

Below we describe the steps of a lesson in the first level, basic literacy.

### **Step 1: The theme text.**

At the beginning of each group session, the group leader writes a short text on the blackboard, while the learners watch him writing. The text presents a life situation common to the learners, without telling what is right or wrong or how people should act. The text is like a very short story, one or two sentences long.

For each specific program, a project group familiar with the learners' life situation creates theme texts specifically written to reflect the life challenges of that particular target group. The themes could also be chosen to treat a specific life domain which is the focus of a project, like health, human rights, agriculture och psycho-social development. There should be immediate recognition when the learners hear the text being read to them, a feeling that "this is about us".

Examples of theme texts:

- ✓ **Abra's baby had diarrhoea for four days. Then he died.**
- ✓ **Mr Kisembo gave away his 14 year old daughter in marriage in order to get a new bicycle.**
- ✓ **The heavy April rains washed away all the soil from Murhula's field.**
- ✓ **When the police had released the same thief four times without sentencing him, the people in the village killed the thief.**
- ✓ **Tamale's wedding may not take place, because his fiancée wants him to take an HIV test.**

The group leader reads the text to the learners, who then repeat the words as he points to them. Seeing the group leader write, ties in with a learning method which is common in many Sub-Saharan societies: learning by watching. As learners increase their repertoire of graphemes learnt, they can recognize them as they see them being noted on the blackboard, and they start to guess at what the words are. Soon they recognize entire words, and quickly they begin to guess at the meaning. They also see how each letter is formed, thereby learning the correct way of writing each letter by watching it being done.

The text is meaningful and the subject is well understood. It describes a life situation which could have happened to any of the learners in the group. There is no need to explain the text.

### **Step 2. Learning a new letter/grapheme:**

When the learners have read/said the text several times, the group leader rewrites one word from the text below it. She asks the learners to find the word in the text above. Who remembers what it says?

The group leader then isolates a letter/grapheme from the word, sounds it out and asks the participants to find it everywhere it occurs in the text, making the sound of the letter/grapheme as they underline it.

They then proceed to underline all letters/graphemes learnt in previous lessons. After less than ten lessons, some words have all letters underlined. This is because care is taken to introduce the graphemes in order of frequency.

When the group leader notices that all letters are underlined in some words, she draws the learners' attention to this, and asks them to read the whole word. About half-way through the course, so many letters are underlined that most of the learners are able to read the whole text, including the graphemes not yet learnt.

### **Step 3. The discussion:**

The group rereads the text one last time. The group leader then leads a discussion around three questions given in the course manual.

1. **The first question concerns the experience of the learners:** Tell about your own experiences of similar situations. What happened?
2. **The second question encourages analysis and reflection:** Why are things like this? What are the reasons behind?
3. **The third question is an encouragement to take action:** What can we do to change things, to deal with this challenge?

It is important that the group leader does not dominate the discussion. She is supposed to act as a moderator, not as a lecturer or teacher. Any contribution to the group is a good contribution. If somebody says something which is clearly untrue or unwise, the group leader turns to the rest of the group and says: Do you agree with this? Usually, common sense prevails, and the group is able to make sensible conclusions. The discussion takes 15 to 20 minutes.

### **Step 4. Writing practice:**

In this step participants practise writing the new letter/grapheme learnt. After a dozen lessons they practise combining letters into new words, and later on they are encouraged to write whole sentences in small groups or on their own.

### **Step 5. Creating a text together**

In this step, the learners dictate a text expressing what they have discussed. The group leader writes it on the blackboard and reads it back to the participants. For persons who have never been to school, and who may feel that nobody ever has cared much about their opinion, the effect of seeing their own words written down and hearing them read them back is electrifying. The learner may have had a

theoretical understanding of what writing is about, but never stopped to reflect that her words can be put in writing and read by others. This is the moment when writers are born.

It is also a practical exercise in democracy. What if the group did not agree during the discussion? What should the text convey? The opinion of the majority, a compromise, or several alternative viewpoints? Again, it is important that the group leader takes the role of a secretary and not of an editor in chief, allowing the group to dictate sentences which are both incomplete and illogical. As they are read back, they may discover themselves that there is a need for improvement.

### **Step 6. Underlining learnt letters and practise reading**

When the text is completed on the blackboard, participants are asked to come to the blackboard and underline all letters/graphemes learnt. After a few lessons they start looking for words where all letters are underlined, and read them. They then practise reading the text together.

After two months, most learners have cracked the reading code. After three months, many can read the whole text which they have created together. At the end of 7 months, up to 80% of the learners can read an unknown text in the mother tongue with understanding.

### **A three year program**

A complete Empowerment Group program runs for three years, with three consecutive courses of 6-8 months as described above.

When a person has completed a three year Empowerment Group program, they have learnt how to read and write and do basic maths in their mother tongue. They have started learning the basics of a second language. They have gained new self-esteem and a new understanding of their life situation. They have trained their minds to ask the question “what can I do about this?” They have practised expressing their thoughts, their experiences and their ideas before a group both orally and in writing. And they have taken several specific decisions about how to improve their lives, decisions which they have expressed before their peers, who can hold them accountable and ask how they are doing.

ALEF has set up two programs using the Empowerment Group method, one in Uganda in the Luganda language, one in DR Congo in the Mashi language spoken in the South Kivu province. We have seen positive results in terms of life change as well as in learning literacy and numeracy skills. Several thousand persons have taken at least one level course in the program.

#### ***Note about ALEF:***

*ALEF is looking for strategic partnerships to apply the Empowerment Group method to mother tongues in communities with high adult illiteracy rates, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa. In October - November 2018 we are planning to visit several Sub-Saharan countries to offer a two or three day course in the method to stake holders who may be interested in applying the method in cooperation with ALEF. ALEF's role would be that of trainer and facilitator to a local implementing agency, assisting in creating materials in a series of workshops. We are happy to answer any enquiries at [info@alef.org](mailto:info@alef.org) or [helene@alef.org](mailto:helene@alef.org).*