

Choosing Texts for Teachers

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Introduction

Many of us struggle with the task of helping children learn how to read and write, and become proficient readers who enjoy reading. That many teachers are also not proficient readers and do not enjoy reading as much as they 'should' is not very surprising for those of us who work closely with them.

Capacity building of teachers is a prominent area of work at Vidya Bhawan Education Resource Centre (VBERC) Udaipur. An important facet of this has been generating self-learning materials for teachers in various areas like pedagogy, child psychology, disciplinary concepts, etc. Over time we have realized that we also need material which helps teachers engage with their own reading and writing ability.

An effort in this direction was made by us when we designed a certification course for teachers of alternative schools of rural areas in Udaipur district; the jaded reading and writing abilities of these teachers stood in the way of their becoming both independent learners as well as better teachers.

Teachers of alternative schools

The teachers of alternative schools belonged to the communities in which they were teaching. Most had not been able to complete their school education and their qualifications varied from 8th to 12th grade. Moreover, their day-to-day activities gave them little opportunity to read and write on a regular basis and in any substantial manner; reading activities being restricted to

reading infrequently the local newspaper. Their mother tongues were either Mewari or Vagri, however all spoke and understood Hindi. Hindi was also the medium of education in the schools in which they taught.

Simply put, we wanted to help teachers read with understanding, insight and discrimination. This involved helping teachers examine and understand not only the chain of events, the information and ideas that were explicitly mentioned in the text but also the ideas and emotions that were implicit in the writing. It also

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involved helping the reader attach her perspectives/opinions to what she was reading. It was also clear to us that improvement in reading ability requires reading more and more and so while the course should be able to generate interest in reading and help teachers read more regularly, any substantial improvement in reading would occur only if teachers were able to continue this process.

Thus, while an important part of our job was to help the teachers engage with their reading ability, the flip side to it was generating interest in reading itself. Choosing texts which could do both for the course was thus an area of concern

for us. In this article I focus on the things we kept in mind when we were choosing these texts.

Selecting texts

The selection was centred on four major issues: The basic issue was ‘What kind of texts would help improve reading ability?’ The other three involved much more time, effort and discussion and they were: ‘What would be interesting for teachers to read?’, ‘What ‘should’ be of interest to teachers?’ and ‘What picture of society and human endeavor should the texts engage with and what should be the tone of this engagement?’ The last was perhaps the most significant realization for us: Every time you select a text and use it for public transaction, you are making a moral choice.

We understood that the answer to the first question involved giving texts which challenged the current reading abilities of the teachers (borrowing from Krashen’s concept of Comprehensible Input) and that the degree of challenge should go up as ability increases. The length of the text was one clear indicator of the amount of challenge that a text can present and most of the texts ranged between 1500-4000 words. We also found that in many cases average words per sentence in the shorter texts were fewer than those in longer texts. Another facet of challenge was the variety of genre we introduced. These included stories, poems, plays, essays, letters, posters, advertisements etc. Yet another was being comfortable with not only narrative but also descriptive, expository and argumentative styles of writing, and these no doubt also depended on the variety of genre. Another way in which we answered this question was by introducing readers to writing styles of various distinguished authors - Premchand, Rabindranath Tagore, Amrita Pritam, Mahasweta Devi, Bhishma Sahni, Rajendra Yadav, Phanishwarnath ‘Renu’ etc.; each with their individual styles of narration and

description presented their readers with a unique challenge and also held their interest. We had been told that texts with higher ‘idea level density’ (ratio between number of ideas and number of words in a text) would be more challenging. Though we never calculated the density for texts we found that texts which were written by authors like those mentioned above as well as those which can be categorized as academic writing were more challenging for teachers to read. Simultaneously, we started thinking about what kind of texts would interest the teachers.

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We had heard many a time that reader interest is dependent on whether the text is placed in her context. Initially, we understood the teachers’ context to include their physical environment - the geography, flora and fauna and their ways of life (occupations, marriages, relationships, customs etc). While we felt that texts which are sensitive to this context might aid comprehension, we also started realizing that their ‘context’, does not define their boundaries of interest. For all of us can think of things that we find interesting to read even though they are not within our context and inversely might find some texts un-engaging even though they are. For instance, our teachers might find it interesting to read about communities with practices and mores different from theirs and find reading about various farming practices un-interesting. Thus, we realized that it is not difficult to construct a context for what is interesting for us; our ability to use what we know about the world and abstract about what we do not know, aids this process.

The issue of context

We also soon realized that we were using an incomplete definition of context. Integral to the meaning of context are also the emotions and values we experience as human beings in our lives. These in fact create a context which is universal and not bound by geographies; the love of a parent for her child, the romance between two human beings, the intrinsic human need for freedom, etc are some examples of these. We found that literature speaks of such universal contexts and whether the text is placed in a rural context or not is of little consequence. And texts which engage with life - its joys, sorrows, victories and defeats - would always hold appeal and would interest our teachers too.

The texts we thus chose sometimes took the readers to faraway places, sometimes into the distant past and sometimes to people whose lives were similar to their own. They were both a mirror in which readers could see their reflections, and also a window through which they could explore the world around them.

We encountered some other questions while trying to choose texts which catered to the interest of our readers. Most of our teachers were young, adult males who enjoyed a certain amount of 'action'. Many of them would quote their favorite movies to be action packed ones, of Mithun Chakraborty and Govinda and a certain set of expletives which would be considered 'uncultured' were a part of their register. What kind of space could the course give to such experiences? Would not our readers also find themes like 'romance' engaging?

We felt that it was important for the texts to give space to the ideas, interests and experiences of a young adult population and again decided to use literature to walk the thin line. *Munari* and *Godhan's* romance in Phanishwarnath Renu's *Panchlight*, the superstition and ritual around the apparent killing of *kabri billi* in Bhagwati Charan Verma's *Prayashchit* and the

political drama in Harishankar Parsai's *Viklang Rajneeti* all gave space to the emotions, aspirations and also register of this age group.

Another matter which is noteworthy while talking about reader interest is that while we gave space to a variety of genre, we did use stories more, partly because we found the teachers engaging much more actively with them and partly because so many of them are available.

Lastly, the texts were chosen keeping in mind that the 'Hindi' being used in them was close to the one spoken by the teachers in their day-day life.

The third question we engaged with was whether there are certain types of texts that we 'should' give teachers to read. Since the course was meant for teachers who are also development workers in their communities, should we not introduce teachers to academic writing in education, social change and development? Also, should not texts give a special place to children's views, experiences and feelings?

We also felt that as teachers the readers must engage with the texts with children as their protagonists. The texts we chose to do this depict the childhood of a cross section of children with inherent respect for their struggles and thoughts. Also, the innocence of childhood does not stand in the way of depicting children as thinking individuals. Mahashweta Devi's *Kyon-Kyon Chhori*, Bhishma Sahni's *Gulelbaaz Larka*, Jaishankar Prasad's *Chhota Jadugar*, Rajendra Yadav's *Bhay* were a part of the course. We also felt that as teachers we must introduce the readers to academic writing in education, but since a separate paper on the 'learning processes of children' was being planned, we did not include such texts. However, to complement their role as development workers we did try to introduce the readers to thoughts of some prominent thinkers like Jawaharlal Nehru, Mahatma Gandhi on development.

However, we were not successful in this direction and very few such texts were a part of the course.

The fourth and last question essentially asked us to give a moral framework to our work. We came to the consensus that the picture of society envisaged by the Indian Constitution should guide the framework to our work. The central tenets of the Constitution - freedom, equality and justice - are the lens we have used to look at society. At the same time we were also clear that the texts we chose would explore social realities, understand homes, communities and the world and not preach the right way to live. So some texts we have chosen depict exploitation and struggle in various unequal power relationships like-employer-employee, man-woman, adult-child, rich man-poor man, upper castes-lower castes etc. Some others celebrate human endeavor and human struggle against wrongs. The texts depict both men and women as capable of being right and wrong and also explore the relationship between human beings and their environment. Ultimately there has been an attempt made to give readers the space to explore various ideas and develop their own leanings.

Conclusion

While this entire engagement was about choosing texts for adults, we felt that there was a lot to be learnt about choosing texts for even children from this entire process. In fact there might be things that we can add to this list when it comes to children, but might find it very difficult to remove any.

References

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