

1990 Year of Literacy

Author: Elizabeth Murphy

Year: 1990

Another "Year of ?". This time it is Literacy. Youth have had their year, and Shelter also had a recent twelve month round of conferences and special publications. Women had a whole decade. Now it is the turn of Literacy to be a hot and trendy item. We have all been exposed to the 'rah! rah! literacy hype of the past several months, with grand statements about the need for literacy programs by the same leaders and politicians who are gutting anti-poverty and social programs in both Canada and the Third World. They love the literacy/education paradigm because it assumes that individuals are responsible for their ignorance and poverty and talking about literacy gives the illusion of commitment to helping people improve their lives. I began to 'do' literacy and adult education in 1966 and have been involved directly or peripherally ever since. I would like to offer some perspectives from this experience which try to put literacy in a more critical frame of reference. First, some observations about literacy itself.

Literacy is not language. Speaking and listening are language. Literacy is not reading and writing. Reading and writing are tools: they are merely on technology of language and one tool of the literate.

Literacy is essentially private. It is a private link to the social/public world. The tools of literacy are psycho-social tools. They are devices of the interior.

Literacy allows the individual to interiorize over space and time, the socialized experience of others; and to socialize, over space and time one's own interior experiences. Literacy is the link between inner space and outer space.

Literacy allows the individual to transcend space and time altogether.

Literacy cannot be given or taken, taught nor learned. It is not a skill, it is a quality of being. If a person is marginalized, offering literacy will not diminish this marginalization; if a person does not read and write, teaching reading and writing will not allow them to read and write.

The essence of literacy is not language but participation. Language is a medium of participation and a medium of experience. A person without participation is a person without literacy ? her experience is solitary and

asocial. Everyone participates in the world to some extent; to that extent they are literate. All persons have some literacy. There are no illiterates.

Literacy is participation. Only participation can develop a person's literacy. Social literacy develops with social participation. Political literacy develops with political participation. Economic literacy develops with economic participation. Cultural literacy develops with cultural participation. Job literacy develops through meaningful and dignified work. Education literacy develops with positive learning experiences and Civil literacy develops with humane and responsible interaction with authority. And so on?.

The quality of participation determines the quality of literacy. And literacy is merely a quality of social existence: where the interior being meets the world, where the private and the public embrace?

Literacy is not the product of a process, nor a means to an end.

To enhance literacy is to enhance the quality of social existence, to enhance that is the degree and quality of social participation.

To enhance Literacy, is to engage with the marginalized: socially, politically, economically, culturally. It is to accompany the marginal, participate with them in their bruised and shy prodigal tug at the hem of a neglectful society.

What is not needed is more education.

What is not needed is more literacy programs.

What is not needed is more literacy specialists.

What is not needed is millions of dollars to promote literacy.

What is not needed are programs which seek to change the victims of society, but which leave society as it is.

What is not needed are programs which exploit people through more violation and failure: we in Canada live in a society premised on the existence of a large moveable underclass of approximately 1.5 million adults whose economic participation is at best sporadic and temporary. Not only can literacy programs not reduce this number; if literacy programs could reduce this number they would not be allowed. And this is at least as true in the Third World as it is in Canada.

To advertise literacy programs to the disadvantaged on the promise that this is a way out of the maze of social and economic isolation is a lie and a malicious fraud. The poor are offered a second chance at the illusive brass

ring, then consumed as raw material by the education industry, a spewed back onto the streets to be recycled once again.

Today in Canada about 20% of the adult population and their children, are poor as defined by economic statistics. Also about 20% of the adult population is classed as illiterate, as defined by educational statistics. These are not necessarily the same people. Most of the people classed as illiterate, are merely undereducated, and most are in fact quite active participants in the world which surround them; indeed quite literate. Most of the people classed as poor really are poor and are also illiterate; non-participants, without the means and medium of participation, no matter what their formal educational status.

Twenty years from now, 20% of Canadians will still be poor, and illiterate no matter how much attention we place on literacy programs.

If we want to address illiteracy - that is, if we want to create a more literate society - we will have to make a commitment not to literacy programs, but

- to social and economic justice
- to redistribution of wealth through taxes, guaranteed income and progressive social programs,
- to extensive participatory anti-poverty programs
- to creative family support programs day care and early childhood education; and
- to adequate community services, social networks and productive interaction for the socially and emotionally disabled.

In fact, we will have to make a commitment to a humane society. This is not radical, just common sense. But advertising literacy programs is cheaper, and does not threaten the status quo. And the poor do not vote.