

The national literacy crusade in Nicaragua - A sketch

Colin Lankshear

ABSTRACT

Within days of the overthrow of Somoza, responsibility was given to Father Fernando Cardenal for coordinating an imminent literacy campaign. The Nicaraguan people were officially informed inside one month that the campaign would proceed, and the actual Literacy Crusade was underway just eight months after the insurrection had triumphed. From the outset the Literacy Crusade was seen as but the first stage in the process of democratising education in Nicaragua and reconstructing it within the overall process of building a new society.

Within days of the overthrow of Somoza, responsibility was given to Father Fernando Cardenal for coordinating an imminent literacy campaign. The Nicaraguan people were officially informed inside one month that the campaign would proceed, and the actual Literacy Crusade was underway just eight months after the insurrection had triumphed.

The conditions for mounting a mass literacy campaign were hardly propitious. Nicaragua was bankrupt. Production and infrastructure were in tatters following the war, establishing priorities for urgent attention. There was no local expertise to draw on for undertaking literacy action on such a scale. Moreover, it was not even known what the extent of illiteracy was, who the illiterate population were, where they lived, and who among them would be interested in learning. On the teaching side, the only certainties were that the number of professional teachers available would nowhere near meet the need, and that buildings to house literacy activity within impoverished rural areas - where it was presumed that most illiterate adults would be found - were hopelessly scarce. Finally, the fact of a shattered and desperate economy meant that production would have to intensify and increase, immediately. Hence, if a literacy campaign was to take place it would have to go on amidst intensive production activity and within the established routines of economic life.

A census of literacy was made at once, in a manner characteristic of the Crusade as a whole. Encouraged by the Sandinista Youth Organisation, thousands of students volunteered to be census takers. Other mass organisations, particularly the Rural Workers Association and the Trade Union Federation, gave assistance in organising and conducting the census. After a brief and intensive training, the census takers literally tramped the length and breadth of the land. They recorded names, ages, occupations, educational levels, who would be interested in learning, when it would be convenient for them to learn, who would be prepared to teach, when and where. Census results were processed by hand. They revealed 722,000 illiterate Nicaraguans over 10 years of age, or 53% of that age population.¹

From the outset the Literacy Crusade was seen as but the first stage in the process of democratising education in Nicaragua and reconstructing it within the overall process of building a

new society. Making a literate population entails more than merely producing people who can read and write a little on the day of a national assessment. The point is to develop and sustain skills, by establishing opportunities and purpose for their regular and continued use, and for their progressive development and refinement. What, after all, is the point in making people literate unless these skills genuinely enhance their daily routines and their development as human beings? MacDonald cites the Egyptian literacy campaign, where it was claimed that illiteracy had been reduced from 79% to 22%. Yet ten years later it was found that the rate had increased again to 78%. This, says MacDonald, 'was not only a matter of lack of practice, it was a matter of lack of social reason to practise'.² For Egyptian peasants, becoming literate did not change their Relationship to society for the better. Peasants in the village who had become literate remained economically and socially oppressed. The fact that they could read 'changed not one iota their place in the social contract and did nothing to enhance their personal dignity'.³

The wider challenge acknowledged by the Nicaraguan leadership was to develop a social and educational milieu in which reading and writing were objectively relevant and functional for an enhanced life, and were seen as such by participants in the Crusade. In addition it would be necessary to evolve educational programmes and means to allow ongoing learning once the Crusade was over. Fernando Cardenal envisaged a process of institutional development whereby the initial Crusade would reduce illiteracy to 10-15%, a national system of adult education would be established, and primary schooling would be expanded. The Literacy Crusade itself would necessarily go beyond the mere transmission of mechanical skills. It would aim to promote rudimentary skills in the 3 Rs together with an introduction to analytical thinking, history and civics. It was clear to Cardenal and his team that the specific pursuit of literacy skills incorporated wider educational and social aims. These were

to encourage an integration and understanding among Nicaraguans of different classes and backgrounds; to increase political awareness and critical analysis of underdevelopment to nurture attitudes and skills related to creativity, production, cooperation, discipline and analytical thinking; to forge a sense of national consensus and of social responsibility; to strengthen channels of economic and political participation; to acquaint people with national development programmes; to record oral histories and recover popular forms of culture; and to conduct research in health and agriculture for future development planning.⁴

These wider goals explain the place of analytical thinking, history, and civics within the guiding conception of what it is to be literate. Only when people have a clear sense of national history, are able to analyse situations and problems, and share an attitude of collective commitment, can the reality and problems of the past be grasped accurately and a determination to build the future in a spirit of cooperation, integration, and equality be established. The social goals of Nicaragua-in-Revolution presupposed attitude, habits, and ways of thinking which many people lacked outright, or otherwise had in at best an embryonic way. Those wider qualities – beyond mechanical competence with rudimentary reading, writing, and mathematical skills – constitutive of being literate are precisely the things seen by Freire as essential for reading and writing the world, as distinct from reading and writing mere words.⁵

If the Literacy Crusade was to succeed two main resource needs would have to be met: a sufficient corps of effective teachers, and appropriate methods and materials for teaching-learning. The organisers envisaged an ideal teacher-learner ratio of 1:5. This would mean recruiting and training 140,000 teachers. Realising the unlikelihood of achieving this ratio the organisers were prepared to proceed with a smaller teaching corps. It is estimated that in the event approximately 100,000 literacy teachers were trained during the four months leading up to the Crusade. Some 60,000 of these operated in the rural areas. Who were they, and how was it all done?

The social group which could most easily spend 5 months in rural areas without upsetting the economic and social fabric beyond a minimum were, of course, literate adolescent students. They, however, would require supervision, support, and time off school. The most obvious source of effective supervision and support were the nation's teachers. The logical step was taken. The 10,000

Nicaraguan teachers were diverted - some would say drafted - to the Literacy Crusade. Schools were closed for the duration of the campaign, and students were invited to train and serve as literacy teachers, preferably in the countryside.

Students were given an incentive to participate. They were offered promotion to the next school grade if they proved successful literacy teachers. Any pupil/student of 12 years and over who gained parental consent would spend 5 months in a rural area living with a peasant (campesino) family. This is precisely what 50,000 Nicaraguan youth eventually did. Others who could not leave home taught in their local area. The teachers also joined in enthusiastically.

Training the popular literacy teachers proceeded on a multiplier effect within a workshop setting. In the first phase the seven national trainers taught 80 selected personnel: 40 teachers and 40 university students. Of these, 40 were selected in the next phase to train approximately 600 teachers and students.

They, in turn, prepared 12,000 more, mainly teachers, in late February. Then, in March the schools were closed, and these 12,000 conducted an 8-day intensive workshop course for the many thousands of volunteers. Pupil volunteers trained 11 hours a day during this course. Volunteers in the workforce - factory workers. Housewives, government employees, professionals, etc. were trained outside of work hours: 3 hours each evening, 6 hours on Saturday and 8 on Sunday.⁶

Teaching-learning materials for the campaign were kept to the minimum. They were simple and low-cost - the broad objective being maximum learning at minimum expense. For each learner there was a primer-workbook (Dawn of the people), and arithmetic workbook (maths and Economic Reconstruction: a single operation), and a pencil. For the teachers there was a manual to accompany the primer, plus chalk and a portable blackboard.

The primer was developed around the key pedagogical aim of involving the learners as much as possible as active participants in the learning process. And so each lesson began with a discussion by teachers and learners together of the designated theme for that lesson. In classic Freirean style, pupils were invited to construct words by combining syllables acquired as the lesson proceeded (these syllables being generated out of the topic sentences of the lessons).⁷ The lessons themselves were, of course, more than mere content which introduced the actual symbols of print. In addition they contained material intended to stimulate analytical thought, historical perspective, creative insight, cooperative attitudes, and a sense of social commitment in keeping with the overall task of the Revolution: namely, social, political, cultural, and economic reconstruction based on genuine popular empowerment. The 23 lessons in the primer were organised around three main themes:

- i. the history and development of the Revolution;
- ii. the social, economic, and cultural programmes of the revolutionary government;
- iii. civil defence.⁸

For each lesson there was a photograph and topic sentence, jointly establishing a clear theme for that lesson. The inherently political nature of each theme is self-evident: for example, "Sandino, guide of the Revolution". "The popular masses made the insurrection"; "Spend little, save resources and produce a lot - that is Revolution": "Our democracy is the power of the organised people", etc.

The entire pedagogy, in fact, was grounded in the reality of the Nicaraguan Revolution. The actual life experience of the learners was related as closely and as far as possible to the reality, goals and values of the Revolution as a dynamic on-going process. Learning was arranged in small groups consisting of a literacy teacher (brigadista) and several learners.⁹

Learners were given a crash course on using a pencil before the first lesson. Not surprisingly, controlling something as light as a pencil posed problems for peasant learners use to handling agricultural tools, machetes and the like. They practise printing their own name, the name 'Carlos' (after Carlos Fonseca, a martyred founder of the FSLN), and the Spanish alphabet. Lessons in the

primer subsequently allowed for guided practice in printing until learners became capable of printing unaided.

Lesson One emphasized vowels. (Its key word, 'la revolucion', includes all five vowels.) Thereafter, syllables became the basic unit of learning. The highly regular nature of Spanish allowed for a phonetic approach built around syllables extracted from key words, which were in turn extracted from the topic sentences.

Because Spanish is such a highly regular language phonetically - one letter, one sound - a method based on syllable recognition will eventually permit the student to read every work in the language.¹⁰

The phonetic approach has very important implications for learners being active within the learning process, as Freire (who assisted in developing the Nicaraguan programme) notes. Crucial to this active dimension is the principle of learners grasping the mechanisms of combining syllables to make words.

Once learners have grasped that this is the basis of written language they can do more than merely follow words in reading. They can also construct words and to that extent, create their own texts, messages, ideas-in-print.¹¹ They can approach written language as active creators of words, phrases and sentences, rather than as passive recipients of a vocabulary and ideas-in-print donated by others. Thus it was that the people who were illiterate a few months earlier could express to the Minister of Education, in writing, their willingness to act as coordinators in the adult education programme that followed the literacy campaign. The pedagogical secret, so far as the mechanics of reading and writing were concerned, was to get the principle of word construction out of syllables grasped as quickly as possible. Thereafter literacy becomes essentially a matter of memory.

Lessons followed a typical format. The photograph associated with the particular lesson was presented and the teacher initiated a group discussion around the situation depicted. This discussion went on for quarter to half an hour, during which time learners would ideally relate their own experience, understanding, and aspirations to the theme, and interpret the situation captured in the photo codification.¹² Part of the point of the dialogue was to secure an emotional commitment on the part of the learners to the lesson content. In addition, it offered a skilful teacher the chance to promote critical analysis by the learners of their own circumstances and, where appropriate, of their intuitive understanding of these circumstances. At the end of the discussion attention shifted to the topic sentence of the lesson - which teacher's endeavoured to draw out as a conclusion from the dialogue. Where this was achieved learners would sense a direct relationship between the words of the topic sentence - words from which they would learn to read and write and their own reality and conditions. (Naturally, many of the teachers were limited by their own inexperience, social origins, and unfamiliarity with critical thought and structural analysis, from exploiting the dialogue possibilities to the full. In many cases they had as much and more to learn from having the situations and experiences of illiterate Nicaraguans brought home to them in dialogue as had the learners themselves.¹³

Once attention was centred on the topic sentence, learning to read and write would begin. Lessons were broken into ten steps.

1. The teacher wrote the topic sentence on the blackboard and the students read it several times, e.g., 'Carlos Fonseca dijo, "Sandino vive"' (Carlos Fonseca said, "Sandino lives").
2. The teacher isolated the key word - vive - and write it on the board, reading it several times with the learners.
3. The teacher read the word slowly emphasising the syllables, broke the word into syllables and constructed a syllable family for study.
4. The learners read the syllable family.

5. The learners traced the syllable family over dotted (guide) lines in the workbook and then wrote it on the board.
6. The learners constructed words out of the syllables, writing them as they went along.
7. Variations on the syllable family were made – e.g., the inverse (vu-uv) and compound syllables (e.g., vas, vus).
8. The learners then read and wrote sentences containing the syllables just learned, together with others already known from earlier lessons.
9. There was a short dictation containing at least one sentence and several words.
10. Finally, a phrase or sentence was written very carefully for legibility.¹⁴

Each lesson contained at least two sections involving these steps, but using different words and syllables.¹⁵ Working on literacy for two or three hours a day after a full quote of normal labour – the teachers in rural areas worked with peasants by day – each group could take a week or more over a single lesson. Not surprisingly, progress was slow at first but became more rapid nearer the end of the campaign – particularly when a Final Offensive emergency plan was introduced in response to progress falling behind the schedule established for the Crusade.¹⁶ Very often learning took place under almost impossible physical and/or emotional conditions particularly in the countryside, as captured in graphic detail by Hirson.¹⁷ Nonetheless, impressive results ensued.

In strict numerical terms the Crusade succeeded to the extent of over 400,000 people passing the final five part examination, Relative to the very basic reading and writing skills tested, adult illiteracy in Nicaragua fell from over 50% to under 13% during the Crusade.¹⁸ Of course, in terms of the Nicaraguan Revolution the Literacy Crusade has significance well beyond the number of passes involved. For many people this was their initiation into the world of social and educational involvement. It pulled them from the periphery into the historical mainstream - a point consciously grasped by tens of thousands for whom history had hitherto appeared as closed. Many Nicaraguans wanted more: more involvement within the revolutionary process generally, and more educational experience specifically. Among those who sought more/further educational engagement were large numbers who had continued learning in the Crusade until the very end but had not passed the exam. Others again were folk who had not participated in the Crusade but had, come to wish that they had. They called for another chance. This situation posed a major practical challenge to the Nicaraguan Revolution: how could adult education be continued for literacy graduands and extended to others still illiterate when economic resources were stretched beyond breaking point and human resources were (still) objectively inadequate? This was the stage at which the achievement of the Crusade faced its real test. For the only possible solution would involve newly literate and otherwise under-educated people 'assuming the major responsibility for educating themselves thereafter. Whether or not they could do this would indicate how far they had been involved in pursuing and practising a liberating and empowering literacy during the previous months of the Crusade.

This 'test' would reveal the adequacy (or inadequacy) of programmes and initiatives offered to prepare ordinary Nicaraguan people for the devolution of power to participate in the Revolution as Subjects.¹⁹ It would reflect the spirit in which devolution was being undertaken. And it would provide an index of how effective the emerging political, economic, cultural social, and educational structures were for enabling folk to make history in accordance with their own interests.

Notes

1. For general background information on the early stages of the Crusade see S. Hirshon. *And Also Teach Them to Read*, Westport. Conn., Lawrence Hill and Co., 1983, and V. Miller. *Between Struggle and Hope: the Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade*, Boulder. Westview Press. 1985.
2. T. MacDonald, *Making a New People: education in revolutionary Cuba*, Vancouver. New Star Books. 1985, p. 87.

3. Ibid.
4. F. Cardenal and V. Miller. 'Nicaraguan 1980: the battle of the ABCs'. *Harvard Educational Review*, 51, 1, 1981, p. 6.
5. This is the title theme of Freire's latest work. See P. Freire and D. Macedo, *Literacy: reading the word and the world*, South Hadley, Mass., Bergin and Garvey, 1987.
6. Compare Miller (1985) OP. CIT. For a picture of city youth living and working with campesino (peasant) learners, see the film *Dawn of the People: Nicaragua's Literacy Crusade*, Burlington, Vermont, Green Valley Films.
7. See P. Freire, *Education: the practice of freedom*, London, Writers and Readers, 1974, pp. 41-84.
8. See V. Miller, 'The Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade', in T. Walker (ed.), *Nicaragua in Revolution*, New York, Praeger Press, 1982, p. 252.
9. Each group comprised a Sandinista Literacy Unit.
10. Hirshon, OP. CIT., p. 50.
11. In his own practice Freire accepted the construction of meaningless as well as meaningful words out of syllables until the principle of word construction was grasped firmly by learners.
12. On the nature of codifications and the process of 'decoding' them, see Freire (1974) OP. CIT.
13. Compare, for example, the film *Dawn of the people* (note 6 above). See also, E. Angus, 'The Awakening of a People: Nicaragua's Literacy Crusade', *Two Thirds*, 2, 3, p. 14: J. Flora, J. McFadden and R. Warner, 'The Growth of Class Struggle: the impact of the Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade on the political consciousness of young literacy workers'. *Latin American Perspectives*, 10, 1, 1983: and Hirshon, op. cit.
14. See Miller (1985), op. cit. p. 90.
15. See Nicaragua Ministry of Education. *The Sunrise of the People*, Managua, 1980, or C. Lankshear with M. Lawler, *Literacy, Schooling and Revolution*. London. Falmer Press. 1987. Appendix.
16. See Rosa maria Torres below.
17. Hirshon, op. cit.
18. Under the impact of detrimental conditions both internal and external to the ongoing programme of adult education. as well as Nicaragua's inability to maintain the growth of primary schooling. under a war economy. the illiteracy rate has subsequently risen toward 20%. See P. Ford. 'Nicaragua: total literacy deferred'. *Development Forum*. April 1986. p. 16.
19. See Freire on Subjecthood, in his (1974 and 1987) op. cit., and also in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Harmondsworth. Penguin, 1972, and *The Politics of Education*. London, MacMillan. 1985.