

Reconnaissance and Reflection: Foundations for Collaborative International Research with Canada and Ethiopia

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In this paper, we describe the process of an often experienced, but rarely documented, process of shaping a new research focus. Specifically, we report our initial work in planning a collaborative research initiative between educational institutions and libraries in Canada and Ethiopia. Using multiple qualitative methods for collecting a variety of information from different sources, and employing hermeneutic perspectives to begin to understand the context and challenges of literacy education and libraries in Ethiopia, we conclude with a framework for research questions centered on expanding basic literacy to digital literacy and the role of libraries in that endeavour.

Collaboration, research process, international research

Introduction

How do you begin research when you are a stranger in a strange land? As academics in the library and literacy fields, we faced this challenge when opportunities for research in Ethiopia opened up for us. Like many African countries, Ethiopia is immersed in dramatic changes to their education and library systems as crucial means of moving into the global society. All types of resources are needed to achieve this goal including not only funding, infrastructure development, and professional training but also research collaborators to build a local research culture and develop ways that education and library systems can work together in an emerging 'new' Ethiopia. This paper reports our initial work in planning a collaborative research program with educational institutions and libraries in Canada and Ethiopia and uses the reflections on our experiences in Ethiopia as the background for exploring the complexities and challenges of starting research collaborations in contexts where very little research has happened previously.

Reconnaissance as a first step

We approached this new research by adopting “an exploratory stance, where an understanding of a problem is developed” first (Gabel, 1995, ¶ 5)) before any research questions and formal methodologies are identified. This calls for a systematic study of a problem or situation and is often referred to as the “reconnaissance” stage in establishing new research initiatives. Reconnaissance involves analysis and reflection of the situation, rather than merely fact-finding and it became the metaphor for the stance from which we approached our emerging work in Ethiopia. From this initial stance, we used a set of qualitative research tools to collect data and conduct an examination of the state of libraries in Ethiopia and how they are supporting literacy, all the while exploring the situation “as a whole”. For such a research stance, Gabel (1995) suggests the use of four interpretative methods to collect data: 1) participation in a group activity; 2) individual and group interviewing (or conversations); 3) observations; and 4) document and cultural artefact analysis. In addition, we did extensive searches of current professional literature on literacy in Ethiopia (and Africa in general), we visited a variety of libraries and cultural institutions in Ethiopia, and we developed video productions which wove together music, video and photos into four montages of our experiences (The Land, The People, The Children, and The Learning Environment).

For three weeks in November 2008, we joined a team of 10 Canadians on tour of the ‘reading rooms’ of Ethiopia sponsored by CODE, a Canadian non-profit organization that establishes reading rooms (community libraries) in developing countries. From the start, we viewed this experience not simply as a cultural tour but as groundwork for possible future research. We read as much as we could find about Ethiopian libraries and literacy initiatives, but we recognized that establishing relationships with potential key partners and extending our “book knowledge” through actual field work was essential to any future research collaborations. We planned our time in Ethiopia to include experiences in a variety of library and educational institutions in urban and rural settings; at the elementary, secondary and post secondary levels; and in private and public schools. We arranged conversations with people from these places—school, public and academic librarians; teachers; university faculty; students of all ages; and local leaders including business owners, town mayors and city council members. We also had many spontaneous conversations with people we met along the way. Our observations and conversations focused on learning about the education system, the relationship of libraries to education generally and literacy particularly, and the state of library development in the country.

Ethiopia: The land of the ‘burnt people’

Originally known as Abyssinia, it was the Greeks who called it Ethiopia which means ‘land of the burnt people’. Amongst African countries, Ethiopia’s history is uniquely free of colonialism (except for a brief period of Portuguese control) meaning education, literacy and libraries have a distinctive history in Ethiopia (Poluha, 2004; Rasaninghe, 2007). Literacy was a tool used by feudal kings and emperors through thousands of years of conflict. The literate classes expanded as Ethiopia developed; however, reading remained a tool for education and work with little focus on reading for enjoyment. Historically, literacy has served the state rather than the individual. In 1974, the Derg military junta came to power and began a national literacy campaign, built new schools, and established “reading rooms” throughout the country. Those attending the schools were required to take the national literacy exam and although over 12 million people passed this exam, those who did not attend

suffered severe consequences. Another major issue with this literacy campaign was the lack of follow up in continued training and accessible reading material thus cancelling out the gains in literacy rates. Reading rooms established by the Derg became associated with the repressive political movement and this has been an additional factor to deal with in current initiatives with reading rooms as a means of supporting national literacy goals.

Expansion of education opportunities is sweeping the country. The current government has set 2015 for achieving universal primary enrolment and improving the overall quality of education at both primary and secondary levels. In the largest region (Amhara), enrolment has reached nearly 90% but across the country enrolment is closer to 60%. Post-secondary education is also a current priority. Since 2005, 22 new or expanded universities have been established. UNICEF data (2000–2006) show the youth literacy rate at 42% and a gap between rates of males (62%) and females (38%). English proficiency, taught from grade two, is greatly valued and is a source of pride. Secondary schools and universities use English as do most businesses and government agencies. Amharic and English are the two official languages.

The swift rate of change in educational opportunities is supported by increasing the number of teachers, the number of children per class, using the local language for instruction in the primary grades and producing books in local languages. The Teacher Education System Overhaul was begun in 2003 to improve teacher education but has had mixed outcomes (Mekonnen, 2008). The government also instituted the plasma teacher phenomena in secondary schools as one way of reducing urban/rural divide (Assefa & Rogers, n.d.). Lessons are broadcast nationally at the same time on plasma screens and “teachers” introduce and summarize the lessons. Shortages of schools, qualified teachers, teacher training programs, and learning materials severely impede progress. Children go to school in shifts (two per day) but most children are busy working for their families during the non-school part of their day and are unable to attend to school work. In the countryside, boys help with the family animals while girls stay at home to help with domestic chores.

Religion and the state remain powerful forces of cultural reproduction in Ethiopia and the ministry-run education system serves this same purpose (Poluha, 2004). In contrast to notions of knowledge in Western countries as inquiry-based and actively constructed by learners, and the role of the teacher as facilitator, much more traditional notions of learning and teaching prevail in Ethiopian schools. Knowledge consists of a finite collection of facts that you acquire through rote and copying. Teachers fill passive learners with knowledge, a model used both in face-to-face and in the plasma teacher system (Tessema, 2006, 2007). Poluha (2004) found that students “were not taught to use information to revise or question what they already knew or to ask new questions. The thought that there could be information or knowledge not yet discovered but waiting to be developed and understood did not seem to be part of the children’s conception of it” (p. 193).

Librarianship. Education and training for librarianship has had a short and rocky history in Ethiopia (Mammo, 2007; Tsigemelak, 2006). In the face of desperate need for such essentials as food, clean water, and medicine, Ethiopian librarians claim that information had been a relatively low priority for government. The oldest library in Ethiopia, at Addis Ababa University, was founded in 1950. The first professional program in librarianship was offered in 1959 and since that time programs have included degrees at the diploma, bachelor, and master levels. Training has focused on classification, cataloguing and reference, all in print formats. Professional associations of librarianship have been subject to disbandment by the government; however, the Ethiopian Library Association is currently being revived.

ICT in education. Now, government recognition of the critical importance of access to information in reshaping Ethiopia is leapfrogging the country into the digital age. A number of initiatives are positioning Ethiopia “to become a model ICT user on the continent” (Harre, 2007, p.2). Government policies and action plans target development of an ICT infrastructure and a national e-education program at all levels. In the library sector, university libraries are benefitting first by the prioritizing of Internet access to these institutions. The government is the sole Internet provider in Ethiopia. In 2007 (IFLA/FAIFE, 2007), Internet access for academic libraries in Ethiopia had increased to 81–100%, a 60% increase since 2005. In contrast, Internet access for school libraries was less than 20% and 41–60% for government funded and public libraries. The majority of these libraries are in the few large urban areas (accounting for only 15% of the population), once again contributing to the urban/rural divide. At the secondary school level, only about 40% have Internet access, again those school libraries are in urban areas. An initiative called SchoolNet Ethiopia helped nearly 200 schools across the country get computers with Internet access. At the time of this writing, all links on this site were inactive. At all levels of schooling, limited connectivity disallows teachers/lecturers from integrating the Internet into lessons and lectures. ICTs are used in distance education but this is rarely an e-learning situation.

Data collection during the reconnaissance

Our background knowledge about contexts of literacy, schooling and libraries in Ethiopia became the lens through which we pursued more focused inquiries. During our time “on the ground” we focused our observations and conversations around these questions: 1) How does education work in Ethiopia? (structure; roles of teachers, learners and texts; curriculum) 2) What are the roles of libraries in literacy education in Ethiopia? 3) How are digital technologies used in libraries in Ethiopia? 4) What is the relationship of libraries to the local communities in Ethiopia? 5) What are the situations for library collections, staffing and facilities in Ethiopia? and 6) How are librarians trained in Ethiopia?

Our sites and informants consisted of: 1) six reading rooms (part of a network of 62 reading rooms developed by CODE Ethiopia in rural areas of the country); 2) a large urban children’s library (the Shola Children’s Library developed by Ethiopia Reads); 3) four school libraries (two government schools and two international schools); 4) five schools (government and international); 5) book distribution centres; 6) teacher educators and librarians at two major universities; 7) and the acting Director General of the National Archives and Library of Ethiopia. In addition, we met local teachers, teacher-librarians, academic librarians, elementary and secondary students, authors/ illustrators and policy makers as well as community leaders such as town mayors, library committee chairs and business leaders. We toured other facilities, including churches, galleries and museums, observed library collections and activities, but most importantly, we conversed with Ethiopians about learning, libraries and the challenges they face daily and the hopes and goals they have for the future.

Building from Gabel’s four suggested interpretive methods, we used multiple methods for collecting a variety of information from different sources and used hermeneutic perspectives (Berri & Griffith, 2006) to begin to understand the context and challenges of literacy education and libraries in Ethiopia:

- Observations: Library designs, book collections, circulation, staffing, programming, activities/events in the library.

- Informal interviews/conversations: Librarians, children, teachers, community leaders, project directors and their staffs.
- Collection of artefacts: Library brochures, circulation management, local publications of children's books
- Photographs and videos

Observations of library operations were recorded in field journals by both researchers. Interviews were loosely structured and responsive to the particular situations and contexts. They were not recorded by audio or video tape as we were sensitive to people's comfort levels in discussing challenging topics with outsiders they had never met before. Instead, we asked permission at the beginning of a meeting/conversation if we may take notes in our journals and take photographs. Our notes consisted of key words of the ideas and topics discussed. Sometimes, spontaneous conversations with people on the roads, in museums, hotels or shops could not be recorded at the time and we captured the main points of these conversations later in the quiet of our hotel rooms. Wherever we went we tried to collect a variety of artefacts that were made available to us as guests. Sometimes these were given generously and freely and other times it was clearly inappropriate to ask for more than was offered. We had a digital camera and used it frequently to capture representations of the land, people, children and learning environments. Our cameras also allowed for the capturing of short video clips, children singing, young people reading their stories and poems, scenes of the landscape and cultural performances.

Reflection and interpretation as a second step

New knowledge and understanding are constructed in a variety of ways and from a variety of sources. Reading professional literature and official documents, capturing images, sounds and texts, and formal and informal conversations with key informants formed the bases of the following descriptive report as we attempt to summarize our observations of the six areas we set out to explore.

The Education System. In Ethiopia today, as in the past, school is the primary location and focus for teaching children to read with little evidence of family literacy or an educational role for parents. Literacy is strongly linked with national pride and government goals for national social and economic development. It was common to see people reading as they went about their work in the markets and in the fields. Posters and billboards portraying and encouraging reading were part of the public landscape.

Everywhere we went—in elementary and secondary and postsecondary schools, in private and government schools, in urban and rural schools—we observed a traditional system of education. Knowledge is transmitted by teachers and texts, and students are expected to memorize, copy and recite back to those in authority (teachers and common tests) what they learned. Teachers are regarded and respected as wise elders although many were not necessarily old in our Western eyes. We rarely saw students reading fiction for pleasure, even in libraries. More commonly, students of all ages were reading difficult textbooks (in terms of content and readability level) in English and most always accompanied by “exercise books” in which they copied information or searched the texts to find the right answers to questions. Monthly testing was a major focus for both teachers and students. Students seemed

always to be studying for the next test and schooling was a matter of passing these tests each year.

Despite a most challenging situation for instilling positive feelings about education, every young person we queried about their future believed in the potential of education and schooling for a better future for themselves. Nearly all aspired to be professionals, most commonly doctors. The exploding enrolment in post secondary schools is testimony to the persistence of this belief at least for males, while for females options are more limited and many drop out of school in adolescence to work at home or to start their own families. There is a concerted campaign to keep girls in school. We saw billboards of young women with books and heard about gender issues in education research from graduate students.

Role of libraries in communities and education. Reading rooms were a focal point of their communities and closely tied to national literacy goals. Each of our visits to a reading room was an occasion for the entire community to gather, with warm formal greetings of dancing and singing and handshaking with local leaders, the tours of the facilities and resources, the time given to us for talking with the students about their reading and schooling, and the performances and speeches and gift giving. These reading rooms were established collaboratively with their communities who were responsible for the building and the management. Adults explained to us how happy they were that their children had such a library with books as they had nothing like that themselves.

First and foremost, all types of libraries provide textual resources related to school subjects and spaces for doing school work. Since few government schools actually had their own library, the community reading rooms and the public libraries served as extensions of schools. Students would come to the library as part of the school day during an allotted period of time for their class, usually two periods weekly. One period was used for a teacher or librarian to read aloud to the children and the other for studying and/or silent reading. Other than this, we saw little evidence of any library programming; rather the main work was organizing the materials and in the case of younger students, monitoring their on-task behaviour. All types of libraries—community, public, and academic—were heavily used for studying. Except for the university libraries which were open 22–24 hours a day, the community and public libraries were limited to daylight hours openings mostly due to lack of electricity after dark.

Library collections, facilities and staffing. Except for one children's library in Addis Ababa which was well endowed by North American literacy associations and donors, adequate collections were a challenge in all types of libraries. Collections are exclusively print-based and consisted largely of donated textbooks in English. While some of the textbooks were relatively new and shipped by publishers in bulk, they were not necessarily reflective of the school curriculum. Being used to school library collections that directly support the curriculum and to which teachers have input, we noted the disconnected and unplanned nature of the reading room collections. Old and traditional reference books dominated these collections and those of the public libraries as well. There is a growing awareness of the importance of first language books for young children especially, and a new industry of local authoring, illustrating and publishing is emerging. For example, CODE Ethiopia has over 300 titles of children's books either in one of six local languages and/or dual languages with English and has a new annual award for new publications. Shola Children's Library has an extensive and high quality in-house publishing industry as well.

Library facilities in Ethiopia are basic. There tended to be minimal shelving, plywood tables and chairs and little or no decoration or art—even children’s art. Some reading rooms had “learning to read” posters donated by US-based commercial reading programs that included traditional Western nursery rhymes and their characters. Reading rooms built by communities were of generous sizes and brightly lit with natural light. Shola Children’s Library and the libraries of the international schools stood alone in their rich and extensive collections and attractive and high quality facilities.

Each library had a “head librarian” who could be recognized by their white lab coat. Many of these librarians were untrained and volunteers; others had minimal training sponsored by the NGOs. Librarians in the international schools were fully qualified by Western standards and were assisted by library technicians. The two university librarians had formal training in librarianship but few if any of their hundreds of staff had any training. This put immense pressure on them to include professional development in their work especially in the face of rapid advances in technology such as shifting from card catalogues to automated systems. The National Library was in the process of digitizing its collection of government documents—the first such initiative in the country.

Technology and libraries. We observed extremely limited physical access to hardware and the Internet in all types of libraries. As mentioned above, card catalogues were the norm and in most cases they were very simple and sat on the librarians’ desks. The university libraries had much larger card catalogues in separate areas on the main floor. Few libraries permitted borrowing and security checks upon entering and leaving the libraries were the norm. Some computers were available in the university libraries that are transitioning into automation. The reading rooms that we observed did not have computers although one was donated by request of the community during our tour to one of the reading rooms. As mentioned above, we were shown the digitalization project of government documents by the National Library. All of their other resources were on the shelves. We visited one school in a rural area that had a modest computer room adjacent to the school library, funded by a non profit association in the European Union. Students in this school and their parents were able to earn certificates in word processing and basic Internet skills.

Education/professionalization of librarians. CODE Ethiopia and Shola Children’s Library provide training workshops that focus on library management and encouragement of voluntary reading. Librarians are paid little, often working as volunteers. Also, because of the remote rural locations of the reading rooms, there is a high turnover rate of librarians and it is difficult to build continuity and any programming. Beyond the reading room training programs for librarians, we could find no evidence of specialized training in post-secondary institutions for librarians working in schools. Professionalization of librarianship is also changing with the revival of the Ethiopian Library Association and one of the university librarians we met holds an executive position in the association. Our conversations with the academic librarians showed us that they are more aware of advances in librarianship brought on by technology and the Internet and the consequent changes in their own responsibilities even with limited resources and access. For example, one of the university librarians told us about his plan to design and implement an information literacy framework for the university library to support their courses and research. His efforts to support students in research were not always received positively by faculty who are used to being in control of what knowledge sources students consult (often their own publications). Tensions arising between such views of learning sources and the vast number of online sources now becoming available to students are just one example of the cultural changes Ethiopia is facing.

Building research collaborations in international contexts

As the world becomes more global, researchers are working increasingly in international contexts. Laying the groundwork for new research relationships, settings and issues adds another layer of complexity to the research process and calls to our attention issues of mutual respect, cultural awareness/sensitivity and the need to listen and to engage in meaningful conversations with potential research partners. Although some might argue that these issues are not part of the research process, we have learned that this reconnaissance and reflection process is critical to conducting any further inquiries, and must become an explicit part of the research process. In this paper, we described how we approached our goal of moving our research context to an international context and how we went about forming a framework for investigations of literacy education in Ethiopia and the roles of libraries in that endeavour. Our key considerations at this time are: 1) how we can play a role in supporting a growing research culture in Ethiopia; 2) how we can help educators at all levels of the system to extend and deepen their notions of what constitutes “basic literacy”; and 3) how we can help strengthen the role of libraries in learning, teaching and research.

First and foremost, any new research projects undertaken by Westerners in developing countries must contribute to building a research culture in the non-Western country. Our Ethiopian colleagues clearly expressed this need and any collaborative research we undertake would be founded on this premise. The Ethiopian ED Project, a collaborative project between the British Council and Ethiopian universities is an excellent example (<http://www.ethiopia-ed.net/index.php>). The project “has been constructed jointly by colleagues in the UK and in Ethiopia to provide a free resource to support the development of educational research in Ethiopia” (¶ 1). At the end of two years (May 2009), responsibility for the website will be transferred completely to the College of Education at Addis Ababa University as a powerful research resource for supporting local knowledge development and dissemination. Our experiences convince us that building on such existing initiatives would be more effective in supporting Ethiopia’s research capacity adding yet another silo project to the many well intentioned projects in the country. It seems time to begin to communicate and collaborate across these silos to maximize use of precious resources.

In terms of a topical research focus, we soon realized that literacy research in Ethiopia needs to be situated in broader concepts of literacy than basic or functional literacy. The country is being rocketed from an enduring peasant culture to modernization. Given the scarce resources, traditional beliefs and practices in education, and the fact that half the country’s population is the target of government’s basic literacy initiatives, extending concepts and ideologies of literacy and knowledge to constructivism, inquiry and critical thinking in policy and pedagogy is immensely challenging. Our observations and communications with our Ethiopian colleagues have led us to identify the introduction of digital literacy into teacher education programs as a mutually important focus of collaborative research. Again, we recognize the benefits of laddering onto existing work (Commonwealth of Learning, 2004; Nekatibeb & Tilson, 2004; Unwin, 2005). In our own teacher education programs, we are embarking on this challenge of extending the teaching of literacy to digital literacy; thus all participants would share an equally compelling research problem, but in different contexts.

The place of digital literacies within Ethiopia’s most urgent educational challenge, Education for All, is controversial (Leach, 2008). While some argue for focusing on basic print literacy as a goal, this would only perpetuate the economic, social and cultural gap between Western and developing countries—a gap that is heightened by the digital divide.

UNESCO (2008) has begun to develop a framework for digital or ICT literacy consisting of three areas: technical literacy, knowledge expanding, and knowledge producing. While this framework is useful for designing new curricula for teacher education and for schools, such broad assumptions about literacy conflict with long held beliefs and practices in Ethiopian education. Uninvited ethical issues will be brought to the table (e.g., Brocke-Utne, 2000; Dalhstrom & Lemma, 2008). How can literacy practices be extended to include digital literacy? How will digital literacy relate to existing, longstanding literacy practices that focus on copying and memorization? How can teacher education programs begin to build digital literacy into their reading/literacy methodology courses? Will a Western-based concept of digital literacy be used as a means of cultural change, reproduction or colonization? There are a myriad of logistic and technical questions as well related to access, software, and technical support. Leach recommends that “ICT practice and policy needs to be closely matched to local contexts, with a particular focus on classroom relevance, learner achievement and community need” (p. 801). However, for Western countries, digital literacy has rapidly become the primary means of participating in global communication and knowledge production (Dede, 2003). How can these contrasting contexts and purposes be reconciled in pedagogy?

The timing is right for libraries in Ethiopia to play a critical role in such projects and the academic librarians that we met with are well aware of their potential role. Rapid developments in ICT infrastructure and educational opportunities from elementary through post secondary indicate the inevitable shift to digitized and online resources that will open the world to African learners. African countries face unique challenges in increasing access to and training in digital learning technologies (Mutonyi & Norton, 2007). Such developments as the offline resource, e-granary (<http://www.egranary.org>), and the online African Digital Library (<http://africaeducation.org/adl/>) along with the current push to automate academic libraries indicate the growing momentum towards digitization, open source software, community-based delivery, and efficient management of collections and services. While the Western world moved from oral, to print and then to digital landscapes for library collections and library services, the emerging world of libraries in Africa may actually leap forward through the digitization process. It's only perception that is standing in the way of tapping the role of libraries in promoting a research and learning culture: “Great effort with strong commitment is needed to make the government and policy makers turn their eyes on libraries and librarianship so as to change the prejudice of people and also help libraries and librarianship play their key role appropriately and fit with the global atmosphere” (Tsigemelak, 2006, p. 7). Facilitating specific ways in which libraries can use technology to play a stronger role in teaching, learning and research and following the process and impact is needed now. These initiatives could include facilitating building banks of digital resources for all levels of education, developing information literacy programs, and designing Virtual Research Environments. Ultimately, “if ICT is to play its part in achieving (universal and improved quality of education), there is an urgent need for collaborative partnerships between a wide range of stake holders at both the local and global level” (Mutonyi & Norton, 2007, p. 1). It is in this spirit that we build our framework for international research in digital literacy.

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Statement of Originality

This statement certifies that the paper above is based upon original research undertaken by the author and that the paper was conceived and written by the author(s) alone and has not been published elsewhere. All information and ideas from others is referenced.