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Letters, Imagined Communities, and Literate Identities: Perspectives from Rural Ugandan Women

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Historically, letter reading and writing have been pervasive across human societies, cultures, and communities (Barton & Hall, 2000). Like all literate activities, it derives its meaning and significance from how it is situated within cultural beliefs, values, and practices. Despite its prevalence, however, little is known about the meanings and uses of letter reading and writing in diverse cultural contexts. The purpose of this article is to examine the desire to independently read and write letters as a rationale for rural Ugandan women to join an adult literacy program. Drawing on sociocultural theories, and in particular, the frameworks of a literacy ecology of communities, communities of practice, and imagined communities, the authors use ethnographic techniques to explore the role of letter reading and writing in the lives of 15 women participating in an adult literacy program in 1 rural Ugandan community. The authors argue that letter reading and writing practices, personhood, and identity are intertwined within an imagined community to which these women hope to belong, and these imagined communities may play a critical role in their success in adult literacy programs.

Numerous government and development agencies have taken up the education of women and girls as the key to improving the lives of poor families (Robinson-Pant, 2004). Indeed, women's literacy programs typically serve as the entry

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point for other types of development interventions. Researchers and program evaluators have attempted to measure the impact of literacy on women's lives using indicators as varied as empowerment, child mortality, and fertility; policy makers have focused on the barriers to women's participation in education, the high drop-out rates in literacy programs, and the poor long-term retention of skills (Robinson-Pant, 2004). Street (1993b) argued that in quests to identify universal indicators of development, the diversity of women and their identities, roles, and aspirations has been largely ignored. In her recent edited volume *Women, Literacy, and Development: Alternative Perspectives*, Anna Robinson-Pant (2004) questioned whether women themselves feel the need to learn to read and write to learn about contraception or immunization; she asked, "What are the real reasons why some women want to come night after night to study in literacy classes?" (p. 1), a question rarely addressed in the research or policy literature. In this article, we take up this question within the context of rural Uganda and focus specifically on the significance of letter reading and writing in women's decisions to take literacy classes.

RELATED LITERATURE

Correspondence through letters is one of the most pervasive literacy practices in human societies and represents one of the earliest forms of writing across a range of cultures and communities (Barton & Hall, 2000). Historically, letters have been used for purposes such as narrating experiences, disputing points, describing situations, providing explanations, outlining instructions, making requests, and expressing sentiments. Like all other literacy events and practices, letter correspondence derives its meaning and significance according to how it is situated within cultural beliefs, values, and practices. Despite its prevalence, however, there has been little study of letter correspondence as an activity. In particular, we know little about its meanings and uses as a literacy practice in different cultural contexts. Some exceptions include cross-cultural research that demonstrates the distinctiveness of letter content and letter correspondence practices within particular communities. Fishman (1991), for example, noted that letter writing among the Amish has a circular quality whereby information in letters is disseminated by passing each letter around a designated circle of families. Scribner and Cole (1981) found that the content of letters written by the Vai in Liberia tended to be restricted to local news. Besnier (1995), in his study of Pacific Islanders, observed that personal letters were used to express forms of affect and emotion that people did not express orally.

Our study extends this earlier work on letter correspondence by emphasizing more specifically the meanings attached to the roles and identities associated with letter reading and writing, which Barton and Hall (2000) argued is

a critical aspect of studying the practice of corresponding by letter. Baynham (1995) described letter scribes as “mediators of literacy” (p. 60) who make their literacy skills available to others on a formal or informal basis. Historically, this mediator role has been taken up by community members such as priests, schoolteachers, and public writers. The role of the scribe also has been examined by researchers such as Kell (2000), Mace (2002), Wagner (1993), Baynham (1995), and Prinsloo and Breier (1996). In each of these studies, the scribe’s role is described predominantly as a collaborative one involving a joint construction of texts.

The relationship between personhood and literacy practices more broadly has been well articulated by Street (1994), who argued, “What it is to be a person, to be moral and to be human in specific cultural contexts is frequently signified by the kind of literacy practices in which one is engaged” (p. 141). In other words, across different contexts, particular cultural understandings are applied to forms of reading and writing according to how these forms are associated with the characteristics and potentialities of the person. This link between personhood and literacy practices, and in particular, the judgments of people and events as moral, is highlighted by the ways in which the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization historically associated literacy with the idea of being fully human (Street, 1994). Street suggested that this association, which is characteristic of many cultural contexts, serves as a powerful reminder that literacy acquisition involves more than technical skills.

Insights from linguistics, anthropology, ethnographies of communication, and educational and social theory have led to increasing recognition that literacy is not only a skill to be learned, but a practice that is socially constructed and locally negotiated (e.g., Baynham, 1995; Fairclough, 1992; Heath, 1983; New London Group, 1996). In his work on literacy and development, Street (2001) argued persuasively that if literacy projects and programs are to be effective in diverse regions of the world, researchers need to understand the meanings and uses of literacy practices to local people themselves. With a focus on the local meanings of letter reading and writing, we locate our study within a “literacy ecology” of communities framework (Barton, 1994; Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Hornberger, 2003) which, rather than isolating literacy practices to understand them, “aims to understand how literacy is embedded in other human activity, its embeddedness in social life and in thought, and its position in history, language, and learning” (Barton, 1994, p. 32). Closely linked with a literacy ecology framework is Baynham’s (1995) argument that investigating literacy in social context involves understanding not just what people do with literacy, but also what they associate with what they do, how they construct the value of literacy, and the ideologies that surround literacy in a particular community.

There is, of course, no dearth of literature on what literacy is and how it develops, yet there is little agreement on the topic. Olson (1994) argued that the

concept of literacy needs to be reconsidered and that terms such as *basic literacy*, *functional literacy*, *scribal literacy*, *critical literacy*, and *restricted literacy*, which imply that literacy is stable, have little theoretical value. For Kress (1997), literacy is “neither autonomous nor stable, and nor is it a single integrated phenomenon; it is messy and diverse and not in need of pluralizing” (p. 115). Carrington (2003) advocated a critical view of literacy, one that conceptualizes literacy as providing skills and knowledge to mediate self in relation to one’s social and cultural context. In particular, we take up her notion that “literacy is about who you are allowed to become in a given society” (p. 96) in relation to Norton and Toohey’s (2003) definition of literacy as practices that construct, and are constructed by, “the ways language learners understand themselves, their social surroundings, their histories, and their possibilities for the future” (p. 1).

We also draw on the sociocultural work of literacy researchers such as Heath (1983) and Barton and Hamilton (1998) and the critical literacy work of Lave and Wenger (1991) and Luke (1997), who also viewed learners’ literacy practices within the local and larger contexts in which they live and learn. This perspective draws attention to the importance of learners’ communities of practice (i.e., the communities to which they belong) as well as their imagined communities (i.e., the communities to which they hope to belong) in understanding how and why they engage or do not engage with particular language and literacy practices (Norton, 2000; Toohey, 2000; Wenger, 1998). *Imagined communities* refers to groups of people who are not necessarily tangible or accessible, but with whom we imagine we are connected. Wenger explained the notion of imagined communities in his argument that engagement with community practices is not the only way in which we belong to communities. An equally important sense of community is derived from imagination—“a process of expanding oneself by transcending our time and space and creating new images of the world and ourselves” (p. 176). From this viewpoint, learning is much more than a cognitive process of acquiring particular sets of skills and knowledge; it is an integral part of changing patterns of participation in various communities with shared practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

The concept of communicative practices is also central to current literacy research because these practices reflect the cultural context in which literacy and discourse are used (e.g., Street, 1993a). Communicative practices draw attention to the idea that “meanings are made, distributed, received, interpreted and remade in interpretation through many representational and communicative modes—not just through language” (Kress & Jewitt, 2003, p. 1). We find Betts’s (2004) perspective on communicative practices particularly helpful in the cultural context of Uganda, where oral tradition historically has played a key role in communication (e.g., Mushengyezi, 2003). Betts combined “communicative practice” with the anthropological notion of “cultural performance” in what she referred to as communicative performance, described as “conscious

acts of performance, moments of theatre in a complex, multidimensional and shifting tapestry of discourses" (p. 82). Performance has been used extensively in Uganda as a means of education, particularly in rural areas. This pedagogical approach emerges from the work of Augusto Boal (1979), who used theater as a mechanism for self-liberation of oppressed populations in Brazil and Peru, and Freire (1973), who used interactive theater as a tool for facilitating dialogue in education. By extending the notion of literacy to include communicative performances as conscious acts, the objective of human agency as the freedom to think, talk, and act concerning what one values is promoted as a meaning of development closer to a concern with human flourishing than notions of a certain level of gross domestic product per capita or a prespecified level of resources (Unterhalter, 2005).

SETTING AND PARTICIPANTS

Plagued by civil war over the past 19 years, the northern part of Uganda has become extremely isolated and unsettled, placing rural residents at a distinct economic and social disadvantage in relation to other parts of the country. Just to the west of this northern war-affected region is the Nebbi District, which is the site of this study. The people in this region of Uganda are primarily Alur speakers.

Our study included 15 women who were enrolled in the UPLIFT (Ugandan Programme of Literacy for Transformation) literacy program from March 2004 to December 2004. The women were from three parishes (i.e., small administrative districts); each of the parishes is within a 30-km radius. The women ranged in age from 22 to 53 and, representative of many women in this age bracket in rural Uganda, are married with children and have no prior formal school experience. All women enrolled in the literacy program in the three parishes were invited to participate in the research study. Fifteen were selected based primarily on predictions about their ability to complete the literacy program. Given the patriarchal nature of this community, completion of the program is largely dependent on whether or not the women have the support of their husbands in joining the literacy classes.

The women and their families live in circular-shaped mud houses with thatched roofs; the homes are typically one room, which serves as both living and sleeping quarters for all members of the family. None of the families has access to electricity or running water. Cassava is their main food crop, with other crops such as millet, beans, maize, and sorghum grown in smaller quantities. A typical day for the women begins before sunrise and ends well after sundown. One domestic chore follows another: sweeping the compound; cleaning the house; chopping wood for the fire; preparing breakfast; preparing children for school;

going to the garden to dig or weed and sometimes harvest food; walking 5, sometimes 10, km to collect water from the river; cooking lunch for the family as the children return from school; collecting more water; searching for scraps of firewood; preparing afternoon tea for the children when they return from school in the late afternoon; pounding cassava for the evening meal (which the women describe as a very strenuous task); cooking supper for the family; and then sponge-bathing the young children. In between afternoon and evening activities, some of the women try to do schoolwork with their children in the lower primary grades. On the days when they have their literacy class, they start the day even earlier to make up for this "lost time." Sometimes they must miss going to the garden to have time to attend classes twice a week from 3 p.m. to 5 p.m.

For women who manage to attend the literacy classes regularly, the entire family must be committed to their success. Although children, particularly girls, must help their mothers with household tasks, an endless list of chores consumes the better part of the women's days, and all of the women made reference to the difficulties they had allocating time for other activities such as learning to read and write. Several of the women confessed that to meet their family's needs, they were unable to attend some of the literacy classes. Collecting water and selling in the market in particular interfered with their ability to attend classes regularly. Moreover, because of the patriarchal system in Uganda, women must secure their husbands' permission to participate in activities that take them away from domestic duties.

Oral and performance traditions such as story, song, and dance are integral to communication in this rural community. People share knowledge indirectly by singing, dancing, and dramatizing their understanding of a wide range of events in their lives. Indigenous knowledge and ways of communicating have been integrated into a locally developed adult literacy program, UPLIFT, that is based on the Freirian philosophy of emancipation through interactive participation (Freire, 1973). Learners in the literacy program, primarily women, construct dramas both on their own and with the assistance of a literacy mentor to internalize important class subjects. The women are highly creative and able to spontaneously convert into dramatic performance almost anything that inspires them.

The women begin constructing dramas orally at the outset of the literacy program (i.e., before they are able to use the written form of Alur) and then perform them for a variety of audiences and purposes. For example, many of the dramas are performed exclusively in class to help all class members develop a deeper understanding of the subject matter. Other dramas are performed for the community as a whole to teach moral lessons, such as the consequences of indiscriminate sexual behavior, or to change particular beliefs and attitudes about the causes of diseases such as HIV/AIDS or malaria. The women also take responsibility for encouraging others to join the literacy program and use dramatic per-

performances to demonstrate why literacy is important. Community performances typically take place during important functions such as graduation, marriage ceremonies, and political meetings. Following the oral performance of the dramas, they are written in the local language and used as follow-up reading material.

METHOD

Research Team

This research is a thread in a larger study being conducted in three districts of Uganda: Masaka in the southwest, Mbale in the east, and Nebbi in the northwest. The larger study began in August 2003 and is centrally concerned with the relationship between literacy, gender, and sustainable development, and includes both formal and informal schooling, children, and adults. Data collection for the research reported here took place between February 2004 and January 2006, led by a literacy researcher located at a large Canadian university, who makes frequent visits to the site, and the developer and director of the adult literacy program, who lives in the community where the program is located. We were assisted by trained local research assistants: two literacy program facilitators who are fluent in Alur and English, and two Ugandan university students studying adult education and community development. The research assistants worked closely with both researchers during all phases of the data collection process.

Description of Data

We used ethnographic data collection methods to gather information about the women's literacy practices, goals, and interests. These methods included participant observation, informal interviews (see Appendix A), and artifact collection. All interviews, which were audiotaped or videotaped, were conducted in Alur and English with the assistance of a translator/research assistant. Questionnaires are administered to all learners when they join the literacy program (see Appendix B). We drew on these data by selecting questions that relate specifically to the women's rationale for joining the literacy program (e.g., Questions 23 and 24).

We also included three dramatic performances that focused on letter reading and writing. These dramas were constructed by the women within the context of the UPLIFT literacy program and performed for a community audience to encourage others to join the program. Two of the research assistants recorded, translated (from Alur to English), and transcribed the plays. The events and issues depicted in the dramas were an important part of understanding the meanings and uses the women attach to literacy broadly and letter reading and writing

more specifically. The translated plays, as well as the informal interviews, are presented in nonstandard English to provide a sense of the color and flavor of local conversation and storytelling.

Data Analysis

Our critical ethnographic analysis of the data was ongoing throughout the data collection process. All transcripts of conversations and retellings of the dramas, along with selected questions from the questionnaires, were analyzed and coded using a constant-comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Proceeding from the perspective that theory and method are inseparable, focused coding was used following the initial identification of themes to understand not just the practice of letter reading and writing in this community, but also what the women associate with it, how they construct its value, and the ideologies that surround its use (Baynham, 1995). Triangulation of codes and themes was applied across the various data sources, and a constant application of member checks (with members of the research team, literacy facilitators, and the women themselves) was used throughout the data collection and analysis cycle.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of the data suggested three overlapping themes that relate to the women's desire to be able to read and write letters independently, which was their primary reason for joining the literacy program. First, many of the women maintained that *loss of privacy* was one of the major problems associated with not being able to read one's own letters. Second, they did not want to be seen as an "illiterate woman" because of their *dependence on others* to read their personal letters. Third, the women feared the *potential for marital problems* that could result because they did not understand the content of a letter, the information in the letter was misrepresented or miscommunicated, or resources such as money were appropriated by letter-readers.

Loss of Privacy: Having to Disclose "an Embarrassing Secret"

Letters are typically personal communications between limited numbers of individuals; the general expectation that most letter writers have is that only their intended audience will read their letters. When someone is unable to read a letter, community members often become literacy "brokers," which breaks the closed circuit of correspondence and potentially discloses intimate information

to an unintended audience. As Judy explained, with this disclosure comes the potential for problems:

There are times when somebody sends me a letter. That letter needs only two people as a secret letter. Now you may take the secret for somebody to read for you; that is not good. That person will know your secret and that may create another thing when she knows the secret. So I have to read my own self, like private letters, which I have received.

Frances provided a similar perspective, which was punctuated by feelings of embarrassment because of her literacy status:

I want to read [letters]; sometimes the letter may be a private letter. There will be some secret they may have so when someone is reading, they may know the secret before you. Being illiterate also makes you look like someone who is a fool.

Alice echoed Frances's sentiment in her statement: "[It was] very embarrassing when other women had to write for me."

Jane's comment illustrates her perception of how independent letter reading and writing would benefit not only the members of her family, but also those in her community. She alluded to the problem of community disharmony that often results when family secrets become public:

Letter reading and writing will help us to write and read letters that will be sent by our friends and relatives. When you read and write letters by yourself, you are keeping the secrets of your letters so other people not to know it. We are working hard to know reading and writing due to the problems we face when letters [are] sent to us, we must look for someone to read to us. And later on, that person who read the letter exposed the points to other community or anybody to know it.

In a dramatic performance that the women in Parish 1 titled "A Stupid Husband," a woman's inability to read her own letters is blamed on her husband, who is unwilling to let his wife join the adult literacy classes. Although the story refers indirectly to the pervasive problem of husbands not allowing their wives to attend literacy classes, the women highlighted their feelings of embarrassment because they are forced to disclose their "secrets" when another community member must read (or write) a letter for them. The dramatic performance was retold as follows:

There was a man who never wanted his wife to go for adult class. His wife had been asking him for several times to go for adult class, but he couldn't accept. One day Mrs. Lurence's son sent a letter to her from Kampala. In the envelope there was money put. He told the mother in the letter to use 50,000 shillings for school fees and 50,000 shillings to help the parents. The total of money was

100,000 shillings (approximately US\$57). Since she didn't know [how] to read, she was looking for someone who could read for [her]. She went to one of the adult learners to read for [her]. That woman she went to read for her the letter, but she was not satisfied with what was read. She again went to another person who was also an adult learner to read for her. She read the same thing the first reader read.

The adult educator told the illiterate woman that "I advised your husband to allow you to be coming for class. He didn't agree. See how embarrassing it is. Your own secret—if others are knowing, do you think it is good?" The illiterate woman was annoyed with the husband. She wanted to leave the husband but was advised by the adult educator not to leave her husband. There were children whom when she left the husband, no one could care for them.

The overarching message in this drama is that there are inherent dangers for men if they do not allow their wives to join the adult literacy program. Specifically, if women are unable to independently read their own letters, the family's secrets (e.g., their financial situation) may soon be spread throughout the community. The women's emphasis on the embarrassment of disclosing a family secret potentially has dual meanings in this scenario. It refers to a secret contained within a letter, but more broadly, it may also refer to the secret of illiteracy itself, which is a secret many of the women try to hide because it positions them as vulnerable, uneducated, and marginalized in their community.

Dependence on Others: "Not Being a Cartoon"

In this community, news about upcoming political assemblies, church events, health clinics and workshops, and special interest groups often arrives in print forms such as letters and bulletins. For Ruby, attending particular types of meetings in the community was important, and learning to read and write letters independently meant she could stay informed about when and where meetings were to be held:

The reason why I have started these programs? I want to read and write because they have a group and in that group sometimes they call for you somewhere. So if they send for you, say I received a letter from the place where the group is, I could not read, and I will look for somebody. Or if they invited me for a meeting the next day, I may not know. Then the following day when someone is bringing [a letter], the day has passed. That is why I have joined the class so I can read what is on the way coming.

Integral to the women's sense of independence in their community is active participation in public events and the opportunity to connect with others who

share their interests. Being unable to read often precludes participation in such events because the women are not able to interpret written announcements about community events and, due to lack of experience with print, may not fully understand the participation requirements for particular kinds of events. Jane explained the problem this way: "I would like to know reading and writing because when they send for me a letter, or I receive a letter, somebody has to read for me instead of me reading for myself." She indicated that learning to read and write letters would help her "not be a cartoon" in her community, and described the inherent challenges she faces when she must travel on her own outside the familiarity of her village:

There was a day I received a letter from Nebbi [town] telling me that I had to go to Nebbi for a workshop on Monday. I got the letter on Saturday. As I did not how to read, I stayed with the letter, trying to look for someone to read it for me. My husband was not there, so I gave the letter to my brother-in-law to read for me. He looked at the letter and said, "Ee, you are being called for a job."

"What kind of job?" I asked, "They said here 'workshop.' What does it mean?"

The reader confidently replied, "It seems you are going to be a shopkeeper at Nebbi."

"I don't think so," I replied. The reader did not know the meaning of the word workshop. Again, I had to look for someone else to read the letter for me. This time the reader told me the correct meaning. So on Sunday I prepared myself. On Monday my journey to Nebbi was also a problem because I did not know where Nebbi was and how I would know if I had reached.

Jane's experience parallels that of Santa, who explained that,

In the future I would like at least to know reading and writing so that I could get a letter from my husband so that if I am to go to a certain place, to go there will not be difficult.

Her husband is a police officer and is often away from home for extended periods. Reading English road signs is very difficult for her and, like many women in this community, she is forced to depend on her husband as a language and literacy broker who mediates many modes of communication, including personal letters and road signs. From a broader perspective, Jane outlined how women's independent reading and writing could contribute to the development of women's associations in her area:

Our target is to form women groups or associations . . . but the main problem was reading and writing. Literacy has started to help us to write our names in meetings and signing documents of our group. This is how reading and writing will help us. Reading and writing will help us take the minutes in our meeting for proper record of our group or association. Some of us have objectives or aims

of contesting for the post of women representative in the village, subcounty, and parish level. Reading and writing will help us to read the government policy that is written in Alur or Luo language.

Some of the problems associated with choosing the “wrong kind of person” to assist with reading a letter are highlighted in this drama, which the women called “Story of Illiterate Woman”:

There was a woman who was being told for several times to go for adult class by her fellow women but refused. The woman said she couldn't go for adult class at the age she was. She was 40 years of age. She said her father didn't give her a chance to go to school, how could she manage this time? When her fellow women were going for class, she kept on pounding cassava. She had been saying to them these were women who fear [the hard work of] cooking.

One day her husband sent a letter to her. In the letter, she was told to go and collect something from a woman who came from Kampala yesterday. As she didn't know [how] to read, she went to one of the community members to read for [her]. That woman asked her whether she had known reading. She replied, “I don't know.” This encouraged the woman to insult her by reading a different thing. The woman read for her that “Your husband is dead; the body is in Mulago Hospital.” The woman was broke and couldn't know what to do. She had children whom she couldn't care for alone.

She went to another person to read for [her]. The person she went to was one of the learners [from the UPLIFT program] who were advising her to go for class. She read for her the letter correctly that your husband has sent for you something. You go and collect from your neighbor who came from Kampala yesterday. The woman was very happy and had promised to start adult class.

In this drama, the women juxtapose two community members: a dishonest one (who is not associated with the literacy program) and a trustworthy one (who has attended the literacy classes). An interesting comparison is Kell's (2000) study of the letter-writing practices of unschooled adult laborers in South Africa, in which she demonstrated that the role of the letter reader is based on trust and is completely embedded in family life. The depiction of learners in the literacy program as honest and trustworthy reinforces the widely held assumption that to be literate is to be moral (see, e.g., Street, 1994). Literate persons have obvious status in this community and are treated with considerable respect. At any community gathering, regardless of the purpose, it is common to see the literacy program facilitators wearing nametags such as “literacy educator.” Others may carry with them literacy implements—books, letters, pens. All of these literacy tools represent not only reading and writing as activities, but also by association, literate identities. The women were very aware of the powerful relationship between community status and having a literate identity, so much so that learners in the literacy program frequently requested uniforms (T-shirts

with the UPLIFT logo) so they can be identified with the program and by extension, as literate persons. Jelis, for example, explained that these uniforms were “important for identification.” One of the research assistants elaborated on this notion of identification in a summary report in which she recommended the need for uniforms based on the large number of learners who expressed the desire to have simple, printed T-shirts distributed in the program. The learners emphasized they were proud to be identified with the UPLIFT program and thought T-shirts would advertise the program to the public and boost their own morale by giving them confidence and a sense of pride.

The Potential for Marital Problems: “This Was Going to Cause a Divorce”

Several women attributed marital problems to their inability to read and write letters independently. For example, when their husbands are away from the village and send letters and money back home, many women must rely on the skills and goodwill of literate members of their community to find out the contents of the letters. In “A Stupid Husband,” the letter readers left the money enclosed in a letter for the intended recipient. As Rita revealed, however, this is not always the case:

The problem that I was getting . . . was that when a letter was sent to me, I took it to another person to read for me. Even if there was money in that envelop, it became difficult for me to know since I took it to somebody else, and I only received the letter but not money even if it was enclosed.

When the receipt of money is critical to a woman’s ability to provide food, school fees, or clothing for her children while her husband is away, there is a high potential for domestic problems when the money goes missing. Indeed, many of the women talked about the need to “sensitize the men” to these kinds of issues so domestic violence did not result.

The women in Parish 3 depicted one of the most poignant examples of the consequences of not being able to read their own letters. Their play is entitled “The Importance of Education”:

The story was about an illiterate woman and her husband. When the illiterate woman came home from visiting her sick father, she got a paper put on a table in her house. As she did not know [how] to read, she thought it was her husband’s girlfriend letter. She took the letter to someone who could read for [her]. The reader read to her that it was her cowife’s letter. [Men in this community often have more than one wife. In such cases, the women are referred to as cowives.] She wants to come back to her former husband. On hearing this she was annoyed.

She was only waiting for the husband to come home. The husband was busy drinking in a bar. When the husband came back home, she straight asked him about the letter. The husband was surprised of what the wife was asking. He said when he was going for drink he left no letter on [the] table but only paper for smoking. His wife couldn't agree. She said it was read for her that the cowife is coming back to you. That argument led some other community members to come. That letter was given to a person who could read and found out that it was not a letter but a class assignment given to pupils. The husband was annoyed and beat the wife. This misunderstanding came because she was illiterate. When the wife was literate, she could be able to know what was in the paper.

Jelis, whose personal experience served as the impetus for the drama, elaborated on the background for the story:

My husband was in love with a certain girl who was an angel [a highly regarded girl] in senior secondary school. There was a woman who was my friend and she one day came and told me about the girl whom my husband was in love with and that he wanted to marry her. I said, "Ee!" I was very angry and wanted to cry. I realized it was because I was not educated. That was why he had to find an educated girl in senior secondary school to marry. . . . It is good to know how to read because this was going to cause a divorce with my husband. This is why I want to know how to read so that I can read my own letters.

Jelis's story reflects her construction of her own identity as an uneducated woman, which significantly shaped the unfolding of the drama, beginning with her assumption that her husband would prefer an educated wife. Because many women in rural Uganda are almost entirely financially dependent on their husbands, the addition of a cowife to a household or the possibility of divorce can have dramatic material consequences for women. Being able to independently read personal letters was like an insurance policy of sorts that potentially allowed women to foresee and possibly avoid marital interference.

Letters, Literate Identities, and Imagined Communities

In this rural community, the letters people receive typically contain very important information such as news of a death, illness, or financial or family problems. As such, we were not surprised that so many of the women placed a high premium on letter reading and writing. Given their emphasis, we also assumed they engaged in letter exchanges on a monthly basis. When we discovered that on average, the women received only two or three letters per year, our inquiry became focused on understanding what Street (2001) referred to as local meanings and uses of literacy practices, in other words, what letter reading and writing mean to the women themselves. We examined in more detail the links across the

three emergent themes: loss of privacy, dependence on others, and the potential for marital problems. Each theme highlights the experiential consequences of not being able to read and write letters. These consequences are deeply personal and strongly associated with each of the women's sense of self within her family and community.

In her study of the cycle of low literacy, Purcell-Gates (1995) illustrated that women who are unable to read and write live in another world, a world without print, and their exclusion and marginalization in the community (and within their families) are primary factors in what she referred to as the status-literacy relationship. Similarly, in Zubair's (2004) study of Pakistani women's literacy practices, "illiterate" women referred to themselves as "silent birds" or "caged birds" (p. 87). For the women in our study, their perceptions of their own status as "illiterates" in their community manifest in feelings of embarrassment, isolation, and exclusion from community participation, and fear of losing their marital status. Jane's poignant reference to not wanting to be a "cartoon" provides a powerful image of a two-dimensional figure that is not fully human, which, as Street (1994) pointed out, has long been associated with literacy in development contexts such as Uganda. The notion of being two-dimensional represents how many of these women defined themselves in relation to literacy practices and their status within their families and communities. What appeared to be at the heart of the women's desire to read and write letters independently was a desire to be recognized as active and contributing family and community members, and as such, to have the status and respect associated with a literate identity. From both Carrington's (2003) and Norton and Toohey's (2003) perspectives, the women were keenly aware that their ability or inability to read personal letters positioned them in particular ways in their communities and made public statements about their histories (e.g., whether or not they were educated) and their possibilities for the future.

The literacy classes provided an important space for the women to reconstruct identity and belonging as emerging literate members of their families and communities. Several of the women enjoyed trying on this new identity early in the program: They marked class materials such as writing tablets and books with their names, placed them in sealed plastic bags, and mounted them in highly visible locations in their homes. Because most of their homes had few if any reading and writing materials, these materials took on considerable prominence and signaled to others that a literate woman lived in that home. Carrying writing implements and reading materials on excursions in the community was another way the women experimented with having a literate identity. Letters were very important in this regard because of the limited availability of other kinds of print materials such as books and newspapers. These role-clothings served a critical purpose for the women; they allowed them to test how members of their community would respond to them as literate persons. The experience of being

perceived as literate allowed them to live—if only for a moment—in an imagined community where they had a sense of belonging and being valued; where they enjoyed fuller participation in community events and activities, including those that involved reading and writing (e.g., political assemblies, Bible study); and where they were independent of relying on family and community members as literacy brokers.

These imagined communities have considerable potential to influence the women's current actions and investment in wanting to learn how to read and write (Kanno & Norton, 2003). Imagined communities present new possibilities for self; moreover, an imagined identity envisioned within an imagined community can significantly influence the kinds of choices learners make about educational practices (Kanno & Norton, 2003). Indeed, they may very well provide a reason and motivation for what learners do in the present. As Kanno and Norton explained, "Our identities . . . must be understood not only in terms of our investment in the 'real' world but also in terms of our investment in *possible* worlds" (p. 248).

The relationship among letter reading and writing, imagined communities, and literate identities raises important questions about how the benefits of adult literacy programs should be assessed. Fiedrich (2005) argued that the educational content of adult literacy programs should not be the key element from which learners draw benefit. All too often, he attested, program content is upheld as the driving force in achieving the complex self-transformation that most adult literacy programs advocate. For the women in this study, the opportunity to imagine themselves as literate members of their families and communities appeared to be a strong factor in their motivation for wanting to join a literacy program. Because learners' visions of the future can be linked to their current actions and sense of self (Kanno & Norton, 2003), perhaps one of the most important benefits of participation in adult literacy programs is that it provides a space for learners to negotiate their own identities and an opportunity to imagine themselves as readers and writers long before they are able to read and write.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The ethnographic design of this study allows us to focus on the identities of these 15 women during their participation in the adult literacy program and to speculate on factors that may have contributed to particular kinds of outcomes for the women. We argue that the learners' own motivations to become independent letter readers, which constituted their imagined communities and identities, played a critical role in how the literacy program was taken up in the women's daily lives. As Fiedrich (2005) maintained, learners' motivations are typically viewed as negligible in establishing what participation in adult literacy programs

achieves in the lives of learners. Street (1993b) similarly argued that in the vast majority of functional literacy programs designed for women, their identities are seen as inevitable, unchanging, and unchangeable. By focusing on the diversity of women's identities, roles, and aspirations in relation to literacy, a capabilities model of development is promoted above the economic efficiency rationale for educating women (Robinson-Pant, 2004). This focus on diversity also honors women's right to control their own life circumstances.

Further research exploring women learners' imagined communities and identities may provide new insights into understanding their decisions to join adult literacy classes and into what contributes to their success in these programs. Moreover, the questions of what kinds of literacy practices are dominant in particular societies and why should also be examined in relation to what these practices represent to learners and how these representations are linked to motivations and goals for joining and succeeding in literacy programs. We believe there are also important lessons to be learned by better understanding not only the meaning of literacy to the local people themselves, but understanding the relationship between local literacies and how these articulate with both local and global perspectives on development and empowerment. Finally, drama as both an indigenous mode of communication and a pedagogical approach for empowering learners to design their own learning experiences within the literacy program is worthy of serious consideration for helping us better understand the diversity of women as learners.

We conclude by reporting that following the completion of the literacy program, 6 of the 15 women (Judy, Faith, Karungi, Jedida, Jelis, and Jane) were nominated and appointed as health assistants by their community members. The role of a health assistant is considered an important position, one that carries particular status. Responsibilities include educating communities about how to ensure safe water sources, proper nutrition, household property ownership, and personal hygiene. To carry out these duties, the women must be literate and demonstrate strong leadership. For at least some of the women, their imagined communities are gradually becoming more tangible, as Karungi wrote in a letter at the end of the literacy program. The letter has been translated into English from Alur:

To Mam,

Greetings to you and appreciate the lecture you are doing. Both me and my husband and the nine children are okay.

The teaching of UPLIFT literacy class has enabled me to know much. I am able to write and read and do numeracy. For this knowledge, members of my association has elected me being their chairperson.

When are you coming to visit us?

Thank you great.

I am Karungi

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APPENDIX A

Informal Interview Questions

Do you have a job outside of the home? Is it a full-time or a part-time job?

1. Do you have to read and write when you are at home? At work? Are there particular situations outside of home or work where you have to read or write (e.g., at the health clinic? market?)?
2. Do you have to speak English in particular situations? If yes, how often? When?

3. Do your children go to school? How often do they attend?
4. Do you ever attend your children's school events?
5. Do you sometimes receive letters or notes from your children's school or from their teachers?
6. Do your children often ask you to help them with their homework? If yes, what do you do to help them? Do you find it difficult to help them?
7. Do you help any of your family members with reading and/or writing?
8. Do you have a post-box? Do you receive letters? Do you write letters? From whom do you receive letters and to whom do you write?
9. Do you sometimes receive official letters? Do you receive invoices?
10. Do you receive health information? From where?
11. What do you do when you receive something you are unable to read?
12. Do you have a bank account? When you go to the bank, do you have to use forms like deposit slips?
13. What do you do when you are expected to write something that you are unable to write?
14. Do you write things down to help you remember them?
15. If you want to learn about something, are there places you can go to find reading materials (e.g., a public library, community resource centre, internet café)?
16. Do you have any books, magazines, or newspapers at home (Bible, school-books, etc.)?
17. Have you taken part in elections in your community? How do you receive information about elections?
18. Do you have a radio or television?
19. Do you have a telephone at home, or do you use public telephones or go to phone shops?
20. Can you think of any other situations in everyday life where you have to read and write?
21. If you think about a normal day, the things you do everyday, when do you speak English? When do you use your own language? Can you think of particular situations where you have to speak English?
22. What do you do when your children (or other family members) are sick? What language do the nurses and doctors speak in the hospital or local clinic? Is there anything you have to write, for example, is there a form you have to fill out? What about the health record? Who writes in it? What do you do when the doctors give you a prescription?
23. When did you start attending the literacy classes?
24. Why did you decide to join the program? What do you want to learn?
25. Do you like the classes? What do you like about the classes?

26. Tell me about the things you don't like.
27. What have you learned? What has changed since you started attending the classes?
28. What do you think about your teacher? Do you like the way s/he teaches?
29. What is the most important thing you want to get from the classes? What do you want to achieve?
30. Why do you think education is important?
31. What are your plans and wishes for the future?

APPENDIX B

Questionnaire for Uplift Uganda Literacy Learners

Before administering this questionnaire:

- Introduce yourself
- Explain the objective of your visit to the interviewee
- Tell him/her that this is not a test
- Ask for his/her kind co-operation and patience in filling the questionnaire
- Assure him/her of the absolute confidentiality of their replies

1. **Full name of learner** _____
2. **Sub-county** _____ **Parish** _____ **Village** _____
3. **Sex** _____ **Age** _____ **Marital status** _____
4. Number of children _____ How many of them are staying with you? _____
5. How many people are there altogether in the household? _____
6. Which languages do you usually speak? _____
7. What is your religion? _____
8. What is your main occupation (the work which takes most of your time)? _____
9. Do you have any other source of income? _____
10. Do you have any books or magazines in your home? _____
What kind? _____
11. In your family, apart from children below the age of 15, is there anyone who cannot read and write? _____ If yes, How many? _____ Do they attend literacy classes? _____
12. How many children do you have who are old enough to go to school? _____
boys _____ girls _____

13. At what levels?

	Boys	Girls
Completed primary school		
Go to primary school		
Went to primary school, but dropped out		
Never started school		

14. If some dropped out or never started, why is this the case? _____
15. If some go to school, do you discuss what they learn in school with them and the progress they are making etc? (Tick one)
 Never _____ Once in a while _____ Often _____ Very often _____
16. Do you check the way they do their homework? (Tick one)
 Never _____ Once in a while _____ Often _____ Very often _____
17. Some people say that when children have good examination results it is because they have good teachers. Others feel that it is because the family helps and encourages them. In your view what is the most important?
 The teacher _____ The family _____ Both _____ Other _____.
18. Do you support the schools your children attend in any way? _____

19. Do you send food/snacks to school with your children? _____
20. Did you ever go to primary school? Yes _____ No _____
21. If yes, for how many years? _____ Which class did you reach? _____
22. Which year did you leave school? _____
23. What are your reasons for joining this literacy program? _____

24. If an advanced literacy course is later available to you, what area/subject would you be most interested in learning? _____

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