Skills Development and Literacy: some ethnographic challenges to policy and practice

Preface 3

Introduction 5

1. Challenging assumptions of ‘skills deficit’ 6

2. Challenging assumptions on TVET 9

3. Challenging assumptions on TVET and literacy 18

Conclusion 34

References 36
Preface

This CARE Working Paper brings together the areas of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), skills development and literacy, and seeks to challenge some common assumptions in the areas of the concept of ‘skills deficit’, the provision of more TVET programmes, and the relationship between skills training and literacy.

The catalyst for this Working Paper was fieldwork undertaken in Afghanistan for two international agencies in 2005-6 and 2010-12 on projects combining skills development with adult literacy. Research teams of external consultants and local practitioners explored some aspects of both fields, adult literacy and skills development, from the bottom up, using ethnographic-style approaches. Within the limits imposed by security, through in-depth interviews with policy-makers, programme implementers and practitioners including skills development trainers and adult literacy facilitators, visits to community learning centres and observations of literacy and skills learning programmes, something of the voices of trainers and trainees was heard.

Further research based on an extensive array of documents from policy makers and reports from project implementers ensued. So that Afghanistan features prominently in these pages – and since little is available on that country, it is given pride of place.

However, this is not a report devoted exclusively to Afghanistan. I was specifically asked to bring international experience of skills development with literacy into the discussions in Afghanistan. Field visits elsewhere have thus provided examples from countries such as Kenya, Bangladesh and Egypt; and the literature provides relevant material from places such as Mexico and even Australia and Canada. Wherever case studies reveal valuable lessons, even in different contexts, they have been used to ask questions about dominant assumptions and paradigms.

What we have here is something of evidence-based policy making – not large-scale quantitative surveys but more detailed
qualitative ethnographic-style studies at grassroots levels. The aim was to see what the fields of skills development and adult literacy look like from the bottom up rather than from the top down and what are the implications of this for the development of skills and literacy learning. The findings here focus on three areas of policy and practice:

- the existing skills which trainees bring with them;
- the importance of the informal skills development sector;
- and the need for a twin-track approach to literacy and skills development rather than a one-size-fits-all programme.

The paper argues that approaches built on these principles would help to make both TVET and adult literacy learning more effective.

The proposals made here have started to have some impact. The Ministry of Education in Afghanistan in recent policy statements has spoken of “occupational literacies”, referring to the embedded literacy practices of different skills areas. The recent (2014) projected Phase 3 of the Enhancement of Literacy in Afghanistan (ELA), a joint government and UNESCO programme funded by JICA, envisages a “two-track” approach similar to that outlined here. Some projects in the country such as INVEST in Helmand Province (whose work is detailed here) are using this approach. And the launch in January 2014 of the National Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Strategy seen as “a watershed for the provision of vocational training and skills development in Afghanistan” (UNESCO 2014) includes literacy learning as part of the qualifications envisaged. Elsewhere, in South Sudan and in South Africa, these proposals for combining skills development with literacy using the embedded literacies of the different skills areas have attracted interest.

This paper is published in the series of Working papers produced by the Centre for Applied Research in Education (CARE) of the University of East Anglia; for it is work in progress. Further ethnographic-style studies of skills development and literacy are needed, and action research into combining training programmes in both areas alongside national adult literacy programmes will yield valuable evidence for policy-making and effective practice.

Keywords: TVET; skills development; literacy; Afghanistan
Introduction

With the discussions of the post-2015 Educational Development Goals in full swing, particular attention is being given to skills development. Signs of this interest can be seen in UNESCO’s *World Report on Technical and Vocational Education and Training* and its Inter-agency Group on Technical and Vocational Education and Training established in 2009 (UNEVOC 2004; IAG-TVET; McGrath 2012b), in the World Bank’s *World Development Report on Jobs*, and in the 2012 Global Monitoring Report (GMR 2012) devoted to *Youth and Skills*. The Third International Congress on Technical and Vocational Education and Training in Shanghai and the ADEA consultation in Burkina Faso on skills development similarly reveal international interest in skills development. In the West, new strategies for developing skills are being enunciated (see, for example, OECD 2011). It can rightly be said that “After a period of neglect, technical and vocational education and training (TVET) is now firmly on the agenda of governments around the world” (Editorial, *Norrag News* 46 p 3; see McGrath 2012c pp 619-623; Tang 2011 pp14-15).

However, it is acknowledged that “the knowledge base for TVSD\(^1\) programmes and practices needs to be enlarged. The sector is very diversified and a good understanding of the challenges raised ... is needed to be able to develop, implement and monitor effective interventions and programmes” (Editorial, *Norrag News* 38). Bottom-up approaches are needed for developing these new understandings (Singh 2011 p 79), and experience suggests that ethnographic approaches (Nirantar 2007; Gebre et al 2009; Street 2001) form one of the best foundations for the development of these new understandings and new approaches to programmes.

This paper, based on such bottom-up studies in different parts of Africa and Asia, especially Afghanistan, is intended to contribute to these discussions. I am aware that “context is everything”

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1. Technical, Vocational and Skills Development: TVET, TVSD, SD, VET and other abbreviations are used interchangeably in the literature. South Africa uses Adult Vocational Education and Training (AVET) but TVET is the more normal designation in policy documents.
(Crossley and Jarvis 2001): “the cultures and traditions of TVET are hugely different at the country or even regional level” (King 2011 p 12). But every case study can suggest lines of enquiry which may be pursued in different contexts; thus Afghanistan, although having many special features, can throw light on situations far removed. Despite that country “facing a complex, costly and protracted struggle with elusive and determined insurgent groups” (LCEP 2011 p 1), a number of innovative approaches are being explored in Afghanistan in both literacy learning and vocational training, and these are reinforcing insights from other contexts.

Afghanistan is of course heavily dependent on the flow of aid and it is therefore greatly influenced by international agencies (CESP 2011; USAID 2011; UNESCO Kabul 2011). This is particularly true of its plans for the skills development of the adult population (Nasry 2013). The National Education Strategic Plan (NESP 2010) lays emphasis on both literacy and skills. The reasons for developing a national skills development programme include the necessity to make alternative provision to the academic stream for post-primary students and the unschooled, a provision which will “not only improve local economic growth, but also address the unemployment issue and indirectly address security” (NPP 2011 p 9). In addition, there is the need to address a perceived ‘crisis in skills deficit’ in the work force as a whole – the national economy demands more skills.

However, more detailed ethnographic-style studies of TVET in practice raise challenges to some of the assumptions behind these policy trends. In particular, three main areas emerge as problematic:

• the identified ‘skills deficit’,
• the provision of formal TVET programmes, and
• the relationships between skills development and literacy.

This paper seeks to explore some aspects of all of these.

1. Challenging assumptions of ‘skills deficit’

The chief concern for TVET in many countries, including Afghanistan, is the perception of a skills deficit. This deficit is frequently attributed to the inadequacies of the formal schooling system (Allais 2012 p 635). In Afghanistan, however, other factors play a large part. Owing to many years of invasion and civil war, large numbers of skilled people left the country, and although
several have returned, their numbers do not meet current needs. In addition, the demobilisation of soldiers from the conflict years have led in Afghanistan, as in other locations, to a major DDR (Demobilisation, Disarmament and Rehabilitation) Programme: “Since 2008, a total number of 8,434 returnees, displaced, and deportees have been trained in Herat [and other] provinces” (NPP 2012 p 24). Thirdly, in a drive to reduce the amount of opium being cultivated, large resources have been deployed to encourage alternative livelihoods for farmers and others. Large numbers of men and women are seen to need (and often demand) training for livelihoods: “Getting accurate figures is difficult but as a guide the Afghanistan New Beginnings Program (ANBP) database as at June 2005 held records of approximately 60,000 ex-combatants enrolled in re-integration programs” (Stewart 2005 p6).

Thus a perceived ‘skills deficit’ is a key factor in the government’s policies for reconstruction. Usable skills at all levels, national and individual, are felt to be missing (Schwalje 2011 p 44). What makes this even more significant is that there appears to be widespread internalisation of this discourse of ‘deficit’; interviews indicated that a number of potential workers believe that they have nothing to offer, no existing capabilities arising from their experience which they can use for building an enhanced career.
But detailed studies from the ground up offer some challenges to this accepted picture. These reveal that there are skills ‘out there’ in the community, and that there are strategies which ensure that such skills are disseminated. For example, informal ‘apprenticeships’ in which a young person learns from and alongside a practising craftsman or woman remain common in both urban and rural areas (see Johanson and Adams, 2004; Fluitman, 2005); family-based learning remains the norm. The skills of using mobile phones are now very widespread and have been learned informally.

The Afghan National Association for Adult Education reports that “women [in their programmes] have relevant experiential knowledge and skills which need to be incorporated into ... trainings” (LIFE 2008 p 77). Many of the participants in the DDR training programmes and in the alternative livelihoods programmes have been found to possess substantial skills gained through their prior experience (ALCIS 2013); but they tend to be either unconscious or dismissive of these experiences.

This is not surprising: for adult learning studies especially in work-place learning programmes point to the fact that adult trainees bring with them to the learning programmes substantial ‘funds of knowledge’ and ‘banks of skills’ acquired through experience (Moll et al 1992; Gonzales et al 2005). These funds of knowledge and banks of skills, although used in everyday ways of living, are mostly tacit, the individual is unconscious of them (Rogers 2013; Rogers 2014); so that this knowledge and these skills are often ignored, demeaned or disavowed by trainer and trainee alike. A growing awareness of this issue has led in
a number of different contexts to attempts to give recognition to this prior learning (see Singh 2011 pp 79-80). These attempts take a number of different forms. At times, they consist of giving recognition to credits gained in other learning programmes, such as informal certificates of attendance issued to participants in training programmes. At other times, they seek to accredit the more inchoate knowledge and skills developed by experience in the course of participation in work, in community and leisure activities and in social movements (see Merrifield et al 2000; Pokorny 2013).

The fact that experiential knowledge and skills exist unrecognised among both schooled and unschooled populations suggests that a major task of TVET trainers is to help the trainees to recognise and value what they already know and can do rather than teach as if the trainees are ignorant and incapable. As well as focusing on a ‘skills deficit’, it would seem wise for TVET policy and programmes to ask what skills already exist which can be built upon – an asset-based rather than a needs-based development programme.

2. Challenging assumptions on TVET

It is widely assumed that a skills deficit is caused by a deficit in provision and/or in the quality of provision. In response, many governments have launched on a two-pronged strategy of increased provision and increased regulation – enhancing the national programme of TVET through institutions with shared curricula, and developing state-validated qualifications (Akoojee 2012 p 674). In Afghanistan also, this course is being followed.

Behind these trends is an assumption that the cause of mass unemployment is felt to lie in the inadequacies of existing skills training programmes rather than in the economy. Despite the fact that there is recognition that “the number of jobs and/or work opportunities created continues to fall far short of demand”, many Afghans remain unemployed or underemployed because (it is asserted) “they have [been] and continue to be trained in skills that are not demanded by the market or their training in a skill area is not aligned with modern practices” (NPP 2012 p 20). Rather than being faced with “an inflexible labour market” as in other countries (Allais 2012 p 635), in Afghanistan it is a mismatch between the training supply and the demand which is usually identified. The root problem is seen as a lack of usable skills caused by a lack of available and relevant TVET.

3. Different names are given to such programmes – accreditation of (or approved) prior learning (APL), the recognition of prior learning (RPL), the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL), prior learning accreditation and recognition (PLAR) etc. Some distinguish between APEL (experiential learning) and APCL (certificated learning).

4. The national policy was at first made subject (at least in rhetoric) to local cultures: for example, it was suggested in 2011 that women’s participation would be limited in certain areas because of local cultural and religious pressure, although this aroused a good deal of opposition, NPP 2011 p 9; this proviso was omitted in NPP 2012.
2.1 Three sectors of provision

However, ethnographic-style studies of what is going on in practice rather than at policy level reveals a more nuanced picture. A wide array of skills development opportunities exist already. It is easy to essentialise TVET in national policy documents, to talk about it as if it were all one and the same thing. But TVET in its widest sense is highly diverse: “[m]ost technical and vocational skills development does not take place in schools [or in] ... education institutions ... but in other sites such as ... private colleges and, above all, workplaces of myriad forms”(McGrath 2012c).

On the ground, three streams of technical and vocational training can be identified, what might be called formal, non-formal and informal skills development. As in many other countries, responsibility for skills development in Afghanistan is divided between different government ministries (Allais 2012 p 633; Akoojee 2012 p 674) with a number of other players. 

**Formal TVET** (two- or three-year courses with standardised qualifications) is provided by the Ministry of Education’s Deputy Ministry for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (DMTVET) in training institutions (Stewart p 5; NTVET 2012). Targeted at high school graduates who complete their secondary education in a programme of technical and vocational education rather than pursue higher education, this is at the moment very limited. In 2012, the government estimated that between 500,000 and 750,000 young people completed secondary school each year, making them eligible for this formal vocational education, but “only 5% of those eligible enrol”; in fact in 2010 it was below 1% (4247) (NPP 2012 p 19) although growing. Expansion is planned with seven regional institutes, 22 provincial schools and 60 district schools (“single trade, usually from the agriculture sector”, NPP 2012 pp 65-66).

A second wider range of skills development programmes (sometimes referred to as **non-formal VET**) is provided through the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabilities (MoLSAMD) in a National Skills Development Program (NSDP) and a General Directorate for Skills Development. NSDP consists of six to 18-month or shorter courses, run in 22 vocational training centres (VTCs, some with outreach programmes into rural areas), community learning centres (CLCs) and/or work-place establishments, and usually leading to less formal certificates. Courses are “targeted at all segments of the population who may lack formal education and are looking for
Skills Development and Literacy

short-term training ... to upgrade their skills and find jobs” (NPP 2011 p 10). With some 40,000\(^5\) enrolled students (CLC undated), this non-formal strand is more extensive than the formal TVET. Sixteen more VTCs are proposed (NPP 2012 p 62). Other Ministries such as Telecommunications, Health, and Power also provide training, but their “certificates are recognized neither by the Ministry of Higher Education, nor by the Ministry of Education” (ANQF Newsletter 1). And the Ministry of Education has recently embarked on the provision of some similar short-term vocational courses for the graduates of the adult literacy classes (see below page 21).

Beyond this provision of formal and non-formal TVET, there is a third much larger stream provided by a wide range of government, non-government and private organisations. This stream, informal VT\(^6\), is thriving. It consists of short-term, often tailor-made, courses run by some provincial departments, NGOs and community-based bodies, together with a number of urban-based commercial agencies. These are in addition to the workplace training programmes (which are largely unresearched but appear to be extensive, especially for migrant workers), the small-scale (often single-individual) apprenticeships, formal and informal, in many occupations, and home-based training, particularly strong in certain occupations such as carpet weaving. These programmes are mainly not certificated or provide certificates of attendance rather than of competence.

This picture is not of course uncommon:

“In most developing countries, skills development is delivered by very different entities - multiple ministries, NGOs and in the private sector, formal and informal enterprises, and through a diverse range of modalities including school-, college-, institution-based and work-based training” (King and Palmer 2008 p 42).

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5. NPP 2012 p 55 says there are 44,305 students ‘currently enrolled in formal TVET schools and institutes across the country’; this includes the 4247 in the TVET institutes, leaving some 40,000 in MoLSA-run institutions. But NSDP enrolment records report some 12,000, DFID 2011. The difficulty of obtaining adequate statistics in this conflict situation hampers all attempts at research.

6. The terminology varies in different documents; NSDP tends to call the MoLSA programme ‘informal VT’. It seems best to call MoLSA programme ‘non-formal VET’, as these shorter courses lie outside formal educational institutions, and to call the NGO and commercial programmes ‘informal vocational training (VT)’. 
Most of these programmes are for self-employment, individual or in small local groups rather than for employment in the formal economy. As King reports (King 2008),

“many developing countries are currently paying a good deal of attention to skills for self-employment, given the dramatic shortages of jobs in the formal sector of their economies. Countries as different as Ghana and India admit to having between 80% and 90% of all employment within the informal (or unorganised) sector. In many countries, for example in West Africa, relatively formalised apprenticeship schemes are responsible for skill acquisition for the very great majority of all young people, male and female”.

Afghanistan’s economy too “consists mostly of micro-enterprises in the informal sector and subsistence agriculture ... the formal sector with its medium and large-scale industrial activity is almost non-existent” (Nasry 2013 p 91). In response, at least one agency can report: “We have shifted our emphasis from vocational to apprenticeship training, as the informal sector across Afghanistan remains the best potential place of employment for the vast majority of our participants” (Literacy and Productive Skills component of Learning for Community Empowerment Programme (LCEP) 2011 p 1). Apprentices of auto mechanics and motorcycle repairers, plumbing, hairdressing, shoemakers and repairers, hotel and catering and tourism can all be found. Poultry and goat rearing, bee-keeping, weaving, dyeing and embroidery, tailoring, carpentry, welding appear to be among the more popular training programmes provided. Very little is known about these informal skills development activities. Courses are of different lengths varying with the trade being taught, often using experienced but
unqualified trainers. Their main aim is to help people to develop livelihoods for themselves and their families. Many have practical hands-on experience built into them.

This third stream is remote from the two formal TVET streams. The government recognises that there is “limited coordination and partnership” between the three sectors (NPP 2011 p 7). It is also highly fragmented, with “an emerging market for language and computer training fields that private providers have successfully moved into” at all levels from advanced IT and computer training to informal language schools (Stewart 2005 p 10). But it is not highly regarded by government: MOLSA regards it as “chaotic because many unregulated, unqualified and inexperienced organisations provide what is often an arbitrary range of vocational education and training activities that largely ignore the needs of the labour market, waste resources and lead to disillusionment of the trainees” (Nasry 2013 p 96; NSDP 2007); such judgments are not shared by all and remain untested.

Other sectors include work-based training limited to the employees of that firm or members of a particular trade. “Employer-based training delivery is likely to increase significantly” (Stewart 2005 p 11). There are also community-supported programmes meeting in a variety of locations in many different skills areas without any form of accreditation, together with some very large-scale skills development programmes such as the National Emergency Employment Program for Rural Access, NEEPRA (World Bank 2008), run by donors, either directly or through Implementing Partners (IP), some very standardised, some highly diversified.
This informal skills training sector accommodates the most numerous providers and largest number of participant trainees: “... the bulk of short-term skills training ... has been delivered via this sector, and notwithstanding developments at MoLSA, this is likely to continue, as it represents an efficient, flexible way to cope with constantly shifting demands for training. There are no reliable data on the total number of persons receiving training through programs such as NEEP ... as well as the myriad of training activities conducted by I/NGOs, private providers etc across the country” (Stewart 2005 p 9).

Despite the hesitations of MOLSA, this informal vocational training sector is likely to continue to be the most effective provider of vocational training here as in many other countries. For this informal skills development sector is capable of experimenting with innovative approaches. There are signs that some employers are willing to take untrained workers and in association with training agencies, train them on the job (Stewart 2005). The ILO-based Community-based Training for Economic Empowerment (CB-TREE) programme run in several countries such as Vietnam works in a similar vein = first find and opening and then comes the training, at times with other resources:

“The basis of CB TREE (community-based training for rural economic empowerment) is to identify income earning opportunities at a community level, including jobs, and then through whatever are appropriate means, deliver the skills that enabled people to access these opportunities. Much of the training is delivered by employers or experts on site” (CB-TREE pers. comm. 14 Sep 2011).

In countries such as Afghanistan with an inadequately developed infrastructure for TVET, as in other contexts, the third sector is clearly important for meeting any national skills deficit.

2.2 Policy seeks to expand formal and non-formal and to regulate informal

Faced with the perceived ‘skills gap’, as we have seen (above pages 6-7), the priority of government policies in many developing countries is given to two main programmes, enhancing systems of formal and non-formal TVET and regulating the whole sector, including informal skills development activities.

*Building up systems:* The policy of increasing provision is focused on developing systems of implementation and establishing institutions. One example, in the Afghanistan National Priority Program, is revealing:
“... the newly established Literacy Teacher Education Institute... will develop training resources and provide trainings to master trainers in Kabul; the master trainers will, in turn, train supervisors and teachers at the district level. These skills development programs, together with establishment of Employment Services Centers (ESCs) who are responsible for employment counseling, vocational guidance services, employment policy and strategy, and labour market information and analysis, are expected to generate significant employment opportunities in decent work conditions across the country” (NPP 2011 p 9).

In this case, two new central institutions will, it is planned, provide training and other services for the regions leading to a healthier economy based on enhanced skills.

At the heart of this policy of increasing provision through formal training institutions lie a number of assumptions, some of which are challenged by evidence from the field:

- that increasing the supply of TVET will lead to increased take-up by trainees;
- that creating new educational establishments will help the trainees to develop effective, relevant and usable skills;
- and that increased provision will lead to “significant employment opportunities”.

This despite the fact that many studies have shown that by themselves training and career guidance centres cannot generate ‘significant employment opportunities’. Many have pointed out that the relationship between skills and employment is complicated:

“Lack of skills does not cause unemployment or limited employment opportunities. Rather, it is ... economic conditions that cause ... problems ... as an increasing number of ethnographies of workplaces indicate; ... the problem ... is produced by the constitution of the job market, by economic and social inequality and political powerlessness” (Black 2004 p 10, original italics).

The sequence of ‘provision-leading-to-take-up-leading-to-employment’ is not realistic in contexts where there are no jobs. And there is widespread evidence that highly trained but unemployed youth with unusable qualifications can become a social problem (Dore 1997; Olowe 2009; ILO 2013; for a case study, see Jeffrey et al 2008).
For an approach to skills development through institution-building and regulation can make the situation worse. Systems, by their very nature, are exclusory – they determine what the entry requirements shall be for their programmes and thus they can increase rather than decrease inequalities. It is not the skills gap so much as the “widening jobs gap” which is the problem (Hart 1992 p 76); it is more a jobs’ crisis than a skills’ crisis (Marshall 1997). Providing more TVET will be successful only when there is a flourishing economy which leads to a strong demand from employers for adequately trained workers and from potential employees for improved skills. There are signs in Afghanistan, as elsewhere, that employers prefer to employ unskilled (and therefore cheap) or imported labour who can be trained on site in relevant practices rather than certificated workers who are more expensive and, being already ‘trained’, more difficult to train (Stewart 2005; see King 2011 p 11).

Regulation: Secondly, like many countries, Afghanistan has launched on a major programme of regulating skills development through nationally accredited qualifications to apply to all forms of vocational training. The third stream of informal skills training in particular is currently almost entirely unregulated but there are calls for the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) to embrace all three sectors. With support from the Netherlands under the World Bank Afghanistan Skills Development Project (ASDP), an elaborate system is being drafted with ten levels for formal TVET and five levels for non-formal VET; this is based largely on what is being done in Ireland and other countries (Malaysia, Nepal, the Philippines and the UK) (ANQF 2010). More elaborate still are the National Occupational Skills Standards (NOSS 2011) being formulated for every craft and trade by MoLSAMD. Some “150 skills have been identified as labor market needs. A five-level skills development framework” has been developed, and in 2012 it was reported that “MoLSAMD has developed 84 standards for different skills at different levels” (ANQF 2012). The size of the task is enormous; the list of competences for a stone-cutter’s assistant, for example, runs to no less than 60 pages. The difficulties, time and expense of adapting the informal skills development programmes to more formal vocational training have been greatly underestimated. It would seem that the government agencies are hindering their own objectives of providing effective skills development to meet the country’s needs by a burdensome system of standardisation and regulation to apply to all three sectors of vocational training.
2.3 Challenging language and practice

Looking at this picture of multiple TVET and the policies being pursued, a number of questions emerge. First, we are led to ask – ‘which TVET are we talking about?’ An important lesson for policy-makers in TVET is to find out what is already going on and seek ways to strengthen, expand and build on these activities rather than assume a programme deficit and build new structures. A policy designed for one sector run by one Ministry may not be appropriate for other sectors.

Secondly, we are led to ask whether a different language is needed. There is already a move away from talking about TVET to discussing the wider concept of ‘skills development’: “… it will be more important to reflect on the relationship between skills development and lifelong learning than on TVET and lifelong learning” (King undated). A refocusing from increasing provision of standardised TVET programmes and regulatory systems to encouraging ‘skills development’ of the actual and potential workforce in a wide range of formats and levels would seem to provide a firmer foundation for a national policy to remedy the perceived skills deficit.

The government of Afghanistan is making some moves in this direction – for example, seeking to promote a more informal approach to vocational training for women. “Using the existing women’s councils and female members of CDCs (Community Development Centres), a women’s community-based vocational training program will be formulated and adopted to provide them with culturally appropriate vocational skills to more fully participate in income-generating activities” (NPP 2011 p 11); these courses will be diversified rather than standardised.

Encouraging unemployed youth and adults to find some opening in their local community and providing both training and other resources (such as access to credit, equipment and tools etc) after they have chosen their occupation, as is being tried in some countries (see above page 14), may be more effective than training in advance of work. And providing further opportunities to enable those in employment to upgrade their skills would help the economy to move and thus provide in the long term further employment openings. More formal TVET provision and regulation of all forms of skills development are unlikely to promote growth.
3. Challenging assumptions on TVET and literacy

A third area on which qualitative ethnographic-style studies throw new light is the relationship between TVET and literacy learning.

Literacy and numeracy are usually regarded as a set of basic skills, developed in schools, and seen as necessary for any form of employment and training. TVET is normally planned as a post-school programme, a means to “relieve school-leaver unemployment” (Akoojee 2012 p 674; see Editorial Norrag News 38; Allais 2012 p 633). But in many developing countries, there are large numbers who have never had any effective schooling, officially declared as ‘illiterate’.

Again Afghanistan provides an example. Firm statistics do not at the moment exist10. The Ministry of Education speculates that, out of an estimated population of some 35 million (15 million or more under the age of 15), some two thirds (over 80% of women and 50% of men) are ‘illiterate’. Rural illiteracy rates are estimated to be much higher (90% of women, 63% of men) (NLAP 2010; Griffin 2011)11. Not all, of course, are unemployed: within the police force, 70% of policemen and women are defined as ‘illiterate’ (LIFE 2008 p 40). As with the skills deficit, through a process of internalisation, many people define themselves as ‘illiterate’, incapable of engaging in the formal literacy practices required by a modernising society.

Hidden literacies

However, a growing body of ethnographic-style studies have shown that many people who are defined or who self-define as ‘illiterate’ are using some forms of literacy in their everyday activities. A domestic servant reads the list of meals left for her by members of the family she serves, answers the telephone in their absence and writes a note about the call, and even keeps a record of items sent to the laundry; an ‘illiterate’ plumber offers a receipt for his payments. Shopkeepers make informal notes of stock, sales and credit given to customers; carpenters and tailors keep notebooks of their work; fishermen informal notes of their takings (Nabi et al 2009; Uddin 2004; Maddox 2001). So that some of the ‘illiterate’ are using some form of relevant literacy for their own purposes, even while they still call themselves ‘illiterate’ and cannot cope with the formal texts of the classroom. And many more create their own strategies for engaging literacy practices to meet their life’s requirements through mediation and other means.

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10. The Global Monitoring Reports of UNESCO provide no figures for the country, although a country paper was prepared in 2005 for the GMR on literacy and updated in 2008, Afghan MDG 2008.

11. Numbers given vary considerably; collating the various figures, national literacy totals range from 26% to 34%; women’s literacy 10-18%, men’s literacy rates 37-50%; Ministry of Education figures; DFID 2011; LIFE 2008 p 15; NPP 2011 pp 6, 21; NPP 2012 p 18; NESP 2010. The national population has recently been estimated at 34.5 million, GMR 2014.
Skills Development and Literacy

‘Illiteracy’ excludes from vocational training

Most forms of vocational training require some recognised literacy and numeracy skills on the part of the enrolled trainees. In Afghanistan, formal TVET, aimed at “post-secondary students”, sets standard 12 as the level for entry (DFID 2011; NLAP 2010); and non-formal VET also normally requires literacy. Although MOLSA says that it is “striving to provide training facilities for those Afghans who were not able to continue their education and studies due to different reasons” (ANQF Newsletter 1; NPP 2012 p 59), so that its training programmes are officially open to all comers, including non-literate adults, in practice, most MoLSA programmes require (school) standard nine.

This of course creates a barrier for many people, probably the majority of unskilled potential trainees, from participating in TVET. MOLSA reported in a formal interview that they did not know of any non-literate persons attending their VET programmes, although local reports indicate there are non-literate trainees in some centres. It may be that in some areas of the country, non-literate trainees can be found in non-formal VET; but in many other places they are excluded from such forms of VET until they have achieved the required literacy level.

More opportunities of course exist in the informal skills development sector. While most formal apprenticeships seem to require literacy, some informal apprenticeships and many forms of work-based learning do not make such a requirement; and in many NGO programmes of skills development, non-literate participants are found. It is formal and non-formal TVET programmes which perpetuate and increase existing inequalities.
There is widespread and growing concern to find ways of opening skills development programmes to non-literate adults, to see “how might literacy and numeracy training be most effectively incorporated into” TVET (DFID 2011 p 3). McGrath (2012a) has pointed out that UNESCO’s World Report urges that VET should promote “access, equity and inclusion across learning ... VET should promote access to skills for all, regardless of class, ethnicity, age, disability or other social characteristics”, and we might add, educational experience. For, as he comments, “access to initial VET, whether public or private, is shaped by factors such as prior educational attainment levels and socio-economic status. Thus, it can serve to reward those who are already relatively advantaged” in what has been called ‘the Matthew effect’ – “unto them that hath shall be given” (Blossfeld et al 2014).

TVET and illiteracy: different strategies

The issue of course is not simply one of enrolment; it is also a question of how ‘non-literate’ learners are taught within skills development programmes. Different strategies have been tried, with varying success: “There is no uniform approach to the teaching of literacy” in vocational training (Stewart 2005 p 10). Nevertheless, four main approaches may be identified:

- programmes of skills development (SD) with no literacy requirement (open access)
- programmes of SD which require literacy first
- programmes of literacy with some concurrent skills training
- programmes of SD with some concurrent literacy learning.

(a) In some vocational training programmes, there is no literacy requirement; non-literate trainees may attend if they so wish. In Afghanistan, the level 1 certificate under the proposed ANQF “has no literacy component” (Nasry 2013 p 93), it only requires “a limited range of very simple oral communication in familiar/ routine contexts” (Gul 2011 p 3; ANQF 2010). These are of course mainly the informal short-term training courses aimed at home-based income-generating activities such as poultry rearing, bee-keeping, carpentry, tailoring, hairdressing etc. But even in some of the non-formal VET courses such as welding, embroidery and weaving and dyeing, no literacy activities are included in the curriculum, nothing is given to the trainees to read, no writing is required, so that non-literate trainees are able to cope with the training if they are enabled to enrol. But they very rarely are. “The levels of literacy are especially low, particularly amongst women, and this has the potential to create barriers to
the effective delivery of vocational training programs” (Stewart 2005 p 5). This is of course not unusual; assessments of formal and non-formal TVET in many countries indicate an absence of facilities for the non-literate part of the adult population to access skills development programmes, or that “access for ‘non-traditional learners’ has been to low status programmes.” (McGrath 2012a)

(b) The majority of non-formal and formal TVET programmes insist on literacy first. In Afghanistan, as we have seen, entry to non-formal vocational training is set at grade 3 (basic literacy level, ELA 2010) or grade 4 (LIFE 2008 p 34). The USAID’s 2011 survey of all providers (formal, non-formal and informal) indicates that 90% require ‘literacy’ or some higher level qualification for entry to skills development training programmes (USAID 2011 p 87). The skills training provided by the Ministry of Education under the Enhancement of Literacy in Afghanistan (ELA) is intended for graduates from adult literacy classes, “selected ... neo-literates” (SDT-NLYA 2010). The vocational training programmes being initiated by the Ministry of Education are restricted to 10% of graduates from the National Adult Literacy Programme (NPP 2011 pp 3, 23-24, 26; NLAP 2010; LAND 2008; SDP 2011), and selection is highly competitive: as one literacy facilitator reported of one of her students, “with her great record in the literacy class, it was no surprise that she was chosen as a candidate” for this skills training (SD-Ag 2011 p 14).
Thus although the NSDP says that their programmes are open to all, “particularly … those who have not received formal education”, most of the prospective trainees are sent to literacy classes, usually the National Adult Literacy Programme, before being allowed to enrol in the VET programme. This however appears to have been rarely effective, for very few trainees are willing or able to spend six to nine months on a standard school-based literacy learning programme before starting their skill training; as the Director of the UN programme Habitat in Afghanistan put it, “their hunger is too pressing” (interview 2012). The relationship between the literacy they are taught in the classroom and the literacy they wish to use in the occupations for which they are seeking training was not apparent to them – nor indeed to others.

A few skills training providers incorporate some form of literacy ‘induction’ into their training programmes; these vary between “using either the MoE [Ministry of Education] material or in-house programs” (Stewart 2005 p 3). The FAO Women’s Empowerment Program, for example, spend the first two months on basic language and numeracy, the next two months on literacy using the national adult literacy primer, and only then can the three months of skills training commence (LIFE 2008 p 80). Some MoLSA programmes “enrol appropriate trainees in two-week long courses conducted either by MoLSA or by trainers/teachers who have been accredited by MoE to conduct literacy classes”. Such programmes are however usually tokenism, except as refresher courses for those who have learned some literacy skills but have not practised them for some time. Non-literate trainees cannot in the time available develop usable literacy and numeracy skills to a level adequate for the VET programmes (Stewart 2005 p 7).
Thus in practice, almost universally this approach excludes non-literate persons from the skills development programmes: “There is mounting evidence that the poor are not to be found in the majority of the pathways to skills development” (Editorial, *Norrag News* 38). Even where non-literate trainees are encouraged to join programmes, they very rarely join, since the whole climate is against their participation. Statements of entitlement are not enough to ensure the widening of participation to groups who feel themselves to be excluded.

(c) Some programmes provide skills training and literacy learning in “parallel livelihood and literacy components” (LCEP 2011 p 3). The most common approach is to incorporate some **skills learning into literacy learning** – the so-called ‘functional literacy approach’. It is agreed by many agencies that “literacy learning only works when there is an obvious livelihood improvement link” (LIFE 2008 p 84); thus this is the standard adult literacy programme in many countries in Africa and Asia. There is considerable demand for such an approach, for adult learners “express the desire to learn vocational skills as a part of literacy classes” (APPRO 2010 p 4).

However, this approach too has its problems. First, only a very limited number of skills areas can be included in these standardised national adult literacy learning programmes. Educationalists rather than the learners choose what will be included and what excluded, and thus the different skills’ aspirations of the adult learners cannot be met. Also, the level of skills acquired is low. One cannot learn to become a really competent poultry breeder through such a programme. In addition, the relevance of the kind of literacy taught to the occupation which the literacy learner wishes to engage in is not at all plain. Many evaluations show that even if some literacy skills are mastered, the trainees, once they commence their skills activities, do not use the newly learned literacy in these activities – they do not keep accounts or other written records of their activities and/or transactions (Rogers 1994; Rogers and Street 2012).

(d) In addition to putting skills training into literacy learning programmes, an increasing number of programmes are now putting **literacy learning into skills development programmes**. Some funders “encourage their Implementing Partners to include literacy as one of the sets of skills available to trainees” (Shukla 2005 p 29). “Most NGO training programs pair skill training with literacy” (USAID 2011 p 27).
A survey of NSDP programmes sought to assess “the appropriateness of the duration and content of training courses (including technical and literacy and numeracy skills)” (DFID 2011). But again there are problems with such an approach, for the literacy learning tends to be that of the classroom variety – and “most trainees indicate they do not wish to take this option – they do not see the relevance of the literacy on offer to the trade or craft they have chosen for their training” (Shukla 2005 p 29). Other countries report the same reactions: as one practitioner put it, “I have observed ... that people like to attend skills training rather than literacy” (Tolera Negassa, Adama University, Ethiopia, pers. com. November 2011; see Rogers 1994). Relatively few non-literate trainees apparently feel the need for the kind of literacy on offer when learning their occupational skills: “There is no overall call from this group for ... literacy training, with most noting that the acquisition and demonstration of vocational skills was their major objective” (Stewart 2005 pp 10-11).

The meanings of ‘literacy’

The fundamental issue here seems to be the concept of ‘literacy’ lying behind these programmes. ‘Literacy’ is seen as a set of skills which the trainee lacks but which, if he/she learns, can be applied to all situations, and which will bring many kinds of benefits, cognitive, social, political and economic – what Street (1984) has called the ‘autonomous’ approach to literacy. The literacy being taught in the classroom, in both literacy and vocational training programmes, is a formalised generic literacy, which ethnographic-style studies have shown to be far removed from the everyday literacies of the workplace or the home/community (Nirantar 2007; Gebre et al 2009). The difference between the formal schooled literacy and the more informal and varied everyday literacies of the home, family, community or work-place is so large that the transfer of literacy from the classroom into the workplace or the community rarely seems to take place (Papen 2005).

The trainees in vocational training programmes recognise this intuitively. A car mechanic does not wish to learn the literacy of the tailor, nor the tailor the literacy of the farmer. For those who seek employment in the formal economic sector, the certificate provided in formal literacy programmes is seen as the gateway to advancement; but to those who plan to work in the informal sector (and that is at the moment the majority in skills development programmes), that certificate and the kind of textbook-based literacy taught are irrelevant to the achievement of their immediate goals.
What is more, experience suggests that the use of literacy in occupational activities is not universal; it appears to be governed by different ideas about ‘what is normal’ in different contexts. In Egypt, one woman who had been through the formal literacy training and subsequently engaged in a small income-generating activity on her own, when asked why she was not keeping written accounts as she had been taught, simply replied, “It is not normal” for the kind of activity she was practising. In Bangladesh, a woman who achieved so much through her adult literacy class that she became the record keeper for the credit and savings group of which she was a member as well as engaging in buying and selling of fruit and vegetables, when asked why she kept written records for the savings group but not for her own activity, again replied, “It is not normal” in her context to keep written records in informal economic occupations of this variety for which there was no necessary accountability (see Rogers and Street 2012). Local cultural attitudes determine whether literacy practices are used in particular occupations, even when the necessary skills have been developed. Teaching literacy skills in occupations where writing ‘is not normal’ is not likely to lead to continued uses of literacy after the end of the learning programme.

**Embedded literacies**

It is then important to recognise the pluralities of literacies (religious literacies, occupational literacies, bureaucratic literacies, academic literacies); the literacy learned in the classroom is only one variety of literacy (Papen 2005; Barton et al 2000; Street 1995), albeit an important one with many functionalities. These different literacies are situated, embedded within particular social situations and activities (Rogers 2005). Within every occupation, there are embedded literacy practices,
often informal and local but an integral part of the performance of the occupation. The tailor’s notebook of clients’ names, materials and designs is an essential part of being a tailor but different from the notes kept by a poultry-breeder. Nor do these relate closely to the formal literacy of the classroom, for tailors’ literacies often change from location to location.

There are many examples of this in various contexts. The Embedded Learning Portal, an international specialist site (2005) for creating literacy teaching-learning materials for skills development in different occupations, contains specific literacies for Catering, Cleaning, Hairdressing, Horticulture, Hospitality, Painting, Retail, Construction, Social Care, Transport and Warehousing, among others. Judith Hunter’s research into the literacy practices in the catering industry is particularly striking and is worth citing in full:

“At the Urban Hotel, Karen, the night banquet manager, was preparing the orders for the conference room service the following day. She was transferring relevant details from the conference centre BEOs (Banquet Event Orders) to the hotel room set-up and kitchen transfer work sheets. She wrote on prepared forms in the usual hotel jargon: ‘U/S’ for U-shaped table arrangements, ‘Rds x 3’ for 3 round tables, ‘52 cookie monster’ for an assortment of large cookies for 52 guests. When she first arrived on the job, with a recent degree in hospitality services, she carefully wrote out the orders ‘in full’, in simple, clear English prose, so that the workers would understand. To her surprise, it wasn’t well received. She ‘had to be told’ by the workers that they couldn’t follow that kind of writing. I asked about literacy issues among the workers, and she said that the housemen could speak well enough, but their reading and writing were not as good. They needed the short-hand language of the hotel to do their jobs efficiently. So she learned to use their code” (Rogers et al 2007 pp 137-8).

Studies of literacy in use in occupations in various contexts show similar features. The literacy practices found in a bangle shop may be general to the trade but could not be understood by those outside the trade without special coaching; to learn to become a bangle seller required the trainee to learn those literacy practices. Similarly, dyers often use specific literacy practices (Nabi et al 2009 pp 43-50, 84-96), different from the literacy practices learned in the classroom.

There are then different approaches to the development of literacy and numeracy among skills trainees. A recent study of
the training programmes in two companies in an industrialised country describes the contrasting approaches particularly clearly:

“The role of literacy and numeracy in the training programmes was approached quite differently in the two companies. In one company, a trainer delivered the ... training to a group of workers selected on the basis of their formally assessed literacy and numeracy needs, and the training was preceded by some ‘upskilling’ in literacy and numeracy skills. We refer to this training as an orthodox ‘deficit’ model in which literacy and numeracy are seen as pre-requisite skills and potentially ‘problems’ for workers undertaking training programmes. In the second company, literacy and numeracy were not addressed specifically, and in effect were completely embedded in the ... training and indistinguishable as elements of the training program” (Black et al 2014 pp 2-3).

The one training programme taught ‘literacy’ to a group of non-literate workers and then admitted them to the skills training. The other did not teach ‘literacy’ but admitted all the workers to the training programme and ‘buried’ the learning of the literacy practices of the skills area into the training programme. Skills trainers concerned about the literacy of their trainees are faced with a choice.

Combining occupational literacy with skills development

Different approaches then to skills training and literacy learning are then being explored. In Afghanistan, the Ministry of Labour suggests that “Workplace-based literacy training and other more innovative approaches should ... be considered” (NSDP 2010 p 84). One such approach is to admit non-literate trainees into skills development programmes alongside trainees who have had more schooling in ‘mixed groups’, and to teach the embedded literacy of that skills area to all the trainees, not just the ‘illiterate’. The car mechanic trainee, whether with some literacy skills or none, will thus learn the literacy practices of being a car mechanic (e.g. using the catalogue of spare parts, reading the manual, writing out summaries of work done, etc) while learning the other skills of the trade. A tailor will learn to keep a notebook of designs, materials, customers’ names and dates, at the same time as learning about different materials, fashions and the uses of sewing machines etc; a carpenter will learn to use a pencil as well as a chisel.

Once again Afghanistan can provide some examples which will demonstrate something of both the achievements and difficulties of this approach.
The Enhancement of Literacy in Afghanistan (ELA) has been experimenting with several such projects. A non-literate woman can learn both the skills of poultry rearing and at the same time the literacy and numeracy practices of poultry rearing through the use of a simple notebook in which she (with her peers) keeps a record of the purchases of day-old chicks and food stuffs etc, and the sales or consumption of her produce; the notebook will become both a textbook for the trainees and a continuing record to be used after the end of the training programme.

Police training Some of the 20,000 police learning through the UNESCO-JICA Literacy for Empowering the Afghanistan Police programme (LEAP 2012) are using “a police-specific work and exercise book”:

“they can now ... read sign boards, at traffic checks read license plates, driving permits, car registration numbers, read an arrest warrant and check ID cards of suspects, write numbers and messages given over the radio and [complete] many more essential tasks that they could not even begin to perform before the course” (Thalmann 2010 p 5; GIZ-PIU 2010).

The everyday literacy practices of the police are being used as ‘authentic’ learning materials in the classroom – ‘authentic’, that is, not just as texts transferred from the police station into the classroom but “as real-world texts being used in the ways people use them outside of class” (Purcell-Gates et al 2002 as cited in Jacobson 2012 p 58).

LCEP Similarly, the Productive Skills component of the Learning for Community Empowerment Program has an element of Competency-based Economics through the Formation of Enterprises (CEFE) using “materials designed primarily for people who are barely literate” (LCEP 2011 p 14). This 18-month programme “integrates productive skills and business development training, literacy and numeracy education, and savings and investment strategies” (Nasry 2013 p 94). It is not a ‘learn-literacy-first-and-then-practise-it’ programme, rather it is enterprise training for mixed groups of literate and non-literate trainees learning an occupational literacy by using it. Such a programme appears to be more successful in persuading the trainees to continue to use such practices after the end of the skills training programme.

INVEST is a DfID-funded programme of skills development run by Mercy Corps in Helmand Province, in which nearly a quarter of all the trainees are said to have had no primary education (ALCIS 2013 pp 19, 32; see box below). Here those trainees who self-identified themselves as having inadequate literacy skills were provided with additional training, using the literacy practices of the skills area rather than a standard literacy textbook.
"The Introducing New Vocational Education and Skills Training (INVEST) programme in Helmand\textsuperscript{12} ... begins by opening vocational training centres (VTCs) ... [offering] three month courses on tailoring, embroidery, calligraphy, handicrafts, electric water pump repair, petrol water pump repair, refrigerator repair, air conditioning repair, mobile phone repair, plumbing; [they] are open to all .... It is worth pointing out that we never aimed to be a literacy project per se but rather to give non-literate people better alternatives than those otherwise available in Helmand.

We see students self-identifying as non-literate. The high exposure to aid programmes in Helmand makes this more complicated – on one hand some people may be motivated to understate their level of literacy in the hope of receiving additional support, but there is also the bigger problem that different donors have set different thresholds for ‘literacy’ from the ability to sign your own name right up to completion of four years of schooling, so people are differently defined in different project contexts, and this makes self-appraisal difficult.

INVEST teaches literacy and numeracy as additional hours of training alongside the practical skills training. ... this training is often done in the trainers’ homes or in the bazaar. We do try to teach embedded literacies and numeracy, approaching these topics through job costing, measuring, marketing etc very much focused on the practical skill set rather than any standard textbook and is not called “literacy” or “numeracy”. We are also very conscious of the fact that a lot of our students have children at school learning literacy in a conventional way and we want to avoid offending their pride by approaching literacy and numeracy in too similar a way.

... students sometimes don’t see the value in concurrent literacy training unless it is trade specific, our concurrent training is pretty trade specific, and our most recent data (semester 5) found no difference in attendance between the skills and literacy/numeracy sessions. Our focus groups found that for many, the chance to gain some literacy and numeracy was a big motivator for participation in the project as well as the livelihoods aspect of the project, particularly as this was a chance to learn without having to sit in a classroom (as adults) with children.

\textsuperscript{12} I am grateful to Mark Chadwick, Senior Project Officer of Mercy Corps and the staff in Afghanistan for their assistance.
The twin-tracked approach

The use of embedded literacy learning within skills development programmes, whether in non-formal centres or in the workplace, does not imply an abandonment of traditional national adult literacy programmes. Some of the police trainees in the LEAP programme asked for the national adult literacy programme in addition to the occupational literacies they were learning, since they felt that the certificate would be useful to them in a post-police life. A literacy learning programme nationally recognised by a formal certificate is valuable for many adults. It establishes identity and builds confidence; it opens doors to further education and some employment opportunities in the formal economic sector. But it will not meet the aspirations of all adults in society, and it is not in many cases the most effective way for trainees to develop their literacy and numeracy skills for use in specific occupations.

Afghanistan has recognised this need for more than one kind of programme. First, the development plan of 2012 is encouraging the inclusion of what it calls “occupational literacy in technical and vocational education” (NPP 2012 pp 18, 47). Ideally such moves will open these skills programmes to both literate and non-literate young people and adults. Secondly, the Ministry of Education is adopting “a two-track approach” with parallel programmes of “Basic general literacy for those expressing a demand for learning but not identifying a particular skill” (BGL), and alongside this, a skills-based literacy (SBL) programme with a “curriculum that integrates” skills learning with occupational literacies. This will develop a range of skills training using the embedded literacy practices of those skills areas as their teaching-learning component. “These two types of literacy provision are closely linked to each other” (ELA 2014). In this way, UNESCO’s recognition that the diversity of adult aspirations cannot be met by a single learning programme is being fulfilled: “A curriculum shaped by the standardization of learning processes and contents – a ‘one size fits all’ approach – does not serve the needs of all learners, nor does it respond to the context of their lives. This is becoming increasingly obvious to a growing number of countries which are seeking alternative pathways within educational systems” (UNESCO 2009 p 15).

Thus the process of incorporating skills training into literacy learning programmes which is a process which has been well developed for many years in functional literacy, is being developed further by the incorporation of ‘occupational
literacies’ into the training programme. And similarly, literacy and numeracy practices are being incorporated into the training of specific trades and crafts – not a generic textbook literacy but the embedded literacy practices which inherently belong within that particular skills development area - a bee keeper’s literacy, an electrician’s literacy, a weaver’s literacy. For by doing this, these vocational training programmes can be opened to the non-literate. They will cease to be exclusory.

Some objections

It is of course not as easy as that. In the discussions which accompanied the field studies in Afghanistan and elsewhere, a number of challenges were raised by different groups of policy makers and practitioners. These can be dealt with only briefly here:

1. First, it was suggested that some words in some occupations are too difficult for non-literate persons to cope with, that they need to learn ‘easy-to-read’ words (‘the cat sat on the mat’) first before the more difficult words. But research has shown (e.g. Moon 1993) that the difficulty in words lies in the experience of the reader, not in the words themselves. Words which a trainee such as a car mechanic uses everyday (for example, ‘carburettor’ and ‘alternator’) will be read quickly and easily by trainee auto mechanics, while a trainee carpenter will have much greater difficulty learning them. Literacy learners learn quickly when they know the contents of the text rather than learning to read texts which they know nothing about. Literacy learners in India, for example, learned to read film notices which they brought into class very quickly, since they knew every word on the paper (Rogers 1999). Women engaged in repairing hand pumps can learn literacy skills through the use of the manual rather than through a generic textbook (Mishra et al 1994). Trainees (including those labelled ‘illiterate’) do not come to the training programme empty-handed: their experience, their funds of knowledge and banks of skills can be identified, valued and built upon (Nirantar 2007).

2. Secondly, some felt that vocational trainers are not able to teach literacy in addition to the skills area. But a) first, the trainers are not teaching ‘literacy’, they are teaching the skills of the craft or trade with the literacy and numeracy practices of that craft or trade buried in the training, as we have seen above (pages 25-26). A tailor’s notebook is not ‘literacy’; it is part of being a tailor. Measurements, record keeping and other writings, what we called ‘communication and recording skills’, form part of
the essential activities of almost every occupation. Most trainers in skills development programmes engage with the embedded literacy practices of their own skills area. In the police training programme, “literate policemen ... [were used] as facilitators” (LIFE 2008 p 40), and they taught policing-with-literacy, not ‘literacy’. b) Secondly, the groups involved in such skills development programmes are ‘mixed groups’ of ‘literate’ and ‘non-literate’: the LEAP programme had groups of “semi-literate and totally illiterate learners together” (LEAP 2012 p 5). Sharing in collaborative tasks has been shown as a major way of learning a skill, so that not all the literacy learning need come from the trainer. Kalman describes the process particularly clearly:

“We gradually discovered that within the group there was a wealth of knowledge and resources that we could use as a starting point for organizing learning activities. ... The group was heterogeneous in terms of their schooling, their knowledge and writing, their everyday practices, their knowledge and their experiences. ... We looked for ways of interacting that allowed the participants to ... turn to their classmates for assistance and guidance in learning about new content, forms of representation, and practices” (Kalman 2005 pp 84-86).

Working in small ‘mixed groups’, the more skilled (in literacy terms) are able to help the less skilled, just as some of the ‘illiterate’ trainees can at times help the more literate trainees with the learning of the skills required. Once again we need to remind ourselves that all trainees bring funds of knowledge and banks of skills and these can be shared in the training programme. Peer learning across the curriculum is a well-known form of learning: both experience and adult learning theory have “pointed out that collaboration among learners promotes the occurrence of learning, it contributes to the development of horizontal relationships and creates a climate of trust in which learners can express their uncertainties without fearing ridicule from others. ... By working together and collaborating, they constructed their autonomy and strengthened their sense of independence” (Kalman 2005 pp 135, 119).

3. Thirdly, there was disquiet that such approaches would not contribute to the national statistics for men and women ‘made literate’ which international agencies and governments need and demand. Both international aid agencies and national government administrators expressed concern at the informal nature of much that was proposed. To which it might be answered that a literacy component at various levels can be included in the NQF in such a way that an appropriate level
Skills Development and Literacy

certificate can be regarded as a proxy for ‘being literate’ in the same way as a certain number of years of primary schooling. The Afghanistan National Qualifications Framework Project is “based on a “10-level system13 where each level is defined in terms of personal competencies ... Level one is the pre-literate level” (LIFE 2008 p 84). Level 2 which includes writing and reading practices related to the specific competency (not a general test of reading and writing) and Level 3 with more advanced literacy and numeracy skills (Nasry 2013 p 93) can thus be regarded as the proxy level for literacy statistics.

4. Fourthly, some felt that such an approach will result in a limited form of literacy being learned; it will restrict the trainee rather than widen their horizons. But this does not need to be so. This approach can lead from the specific embedded literacy practices of the skills area to wider reading and writing, to more generic literacy practices. Car mechanics can be facilitated to read magazine and newspaper articles and reviews relating to cars – and from that to engage with a more extensive range of reading (e.g. sports magazines) and writing; tailors can be introduced to standardised literacy practices through fashion magazines. It would seem easier for trainees to move from an informal literacy to more formal literacies than to move from the formal classroom literacy to the more informal everyday literacies.

5. And finally (though few policy-makers raised this objection) there is some concern that such an approach will not lead to any redress of social inequalities – indeed, by starting with the status quo, it may even reinforce existing inequalities of race, gender, wealth etc. But these are not ‘literacy’ issues – they relate to all forms of training and education, including TVET, which (as Freire demonstrated) either confirm or challenge inequalities. And in this case, such an accusation can hardly be justified: for to exclude the non-literate from skills development programmes until they have learned the school literacy is inequitable, it reinforces the dominance of the educated, resulting in more social exclusion; it can “reward those who are already relatively advantaged” (McGrath 2012a). In any developing country, it is particularly unjust to exclude the large numbers of ‘illiterates’ from skills development programmes simply because they are unschooled. It is not their fault that they do not possess the formal literacy required by many TVET programmes; most of them have never had any opportunity.

This last challenge leads to the question as to whether skills development programmes can be taught in a transformative

See note 9 above
rather than a conformist way, whether the trainees can be encouraged to engage in critical reflection rather than merely mechanical performance. “Too often [the trainers] restrict their classroom activities to the provided curriculum; hence their teaching often lacks application, innovation or inspiration” (LIFE 2008 p 84). And that is a whole other topic. More attention needs to be paid to vocational education as practice as well as policy, as process as well as systems, to ensure the quality, effectiveness and social justice of the programmes.

Conclusion

The argument of this paper is that ethnographic-style studies of TVET in practice lead to a number of challenges to some basic assumptions:

• that to talk exclusively in terms of ‘skills deficit’ is to demean the funds of knowledge and the banks of skills which already exist in any society, and which, although tacit, trainees bring with them. Vocational training in all its forms could with profit build on what already exists rather than focus on ‘needs’. Such an approach implies that it is important to develop the means to find out what skills already exist;

• that rather than being a single entity, TVET is complex, and when speaking of TVET, especially in policy making, we need to ask, ‘which TVET are we talking about?’ There is a wealth of difference between, on the one hand, helping a woman in a rural setting to learn to raise poultry for her own well-being and that of her family, and on the other hand providing an IT course for accountants in an urban context. It may be that different policies may need to be developed for different forms of vocational education;

• that rather than concentrating resources on the more restrictive and more highly regulated TVET sector by providing more formal programmes leading to advanced certificates, strengthening the larger informal skills development sector with less rather than more regulation may be more productive for a stronger national economy;

• that requiring literacy competences before engaging in skill development would seem to be exclusory, unnecessary and undesirable. Whether we are looking to promote more
adults using literacy in their everyday life; or whether we are aiming at wider participation in more effective forms of vocational education, the inclusion of the embedded literacy practices of each skills area in skills development programmes for all trainees, literate and non-literate alike, would seem to make sense.

“There is support for the view that skills training that teaches the functional literacy skills needed to achieve vocational skills competence can provide both the motivation as well as the building blocks to more advanced literacy skills” (Stewart 2005 p 10).

Sending out a trainee in any skills area without having mastered the basic literacy and numeracy skills of that skills area would seem to be selling both the trainee and any future employer short; and using the embedded literacy practices of the trade rather than a standardised literacy textbook would seem to have greater impact on more people. This is a win-win situation for both vocational training and literacy.

But this will call for more qualitative studies of occupational practices from the bottom-up. We need to learn how local beekeepers and poultry rearers, how local car mechanics, carpenters, tailors etc practise their trades. We need to find out the local literacy and numeracy practices embedded within each of the different skills area, what are the normal cultural practices in each particular context. TVET and literacy learning programmes need to adopt context-dependent approaches to meet the different aspirations of the adult population instead of one-size-fits-all literacy and skills training programmes. As UNESCO has recently said:

“In order to maximise participation by adults, best results are achieved if education and training systems offer flexibility, allowing adults to learn what they want, when they want, and how they want; facilitate access by reducing barriers to entry, such as institutional rigidities, up-front fees and age restrictions; offer a variety of entry and re-entry pathways for people who need a second chance or want to upgrade their skills or learn new ones later in life; and recognise all [learning] acquired throughout a working life, by ensuring that credit is granted for components of programmes ... ” (UNESCO 2011 p 16).

“Reducing barriers to entry” will include the requirement to learn a literacy first; this entry barrier will need to be removed if participation by adults in skill development is to be maximised.
Acknowledgement

I am grateful to a large number of people in both government and NGOs who helped with the surveys in Afghanistan made especially in 2005 and 2011-12 on which much of this paper is built, and in many interactions by internet in the interval. It is not possible for security reasons to name those in country, but others include Maryester Gonzalez Rojas, Subir Shukla, Suzanne Griffin, Amador Guallar. John Stewart in particular did a great deal of the fieldwork and helped with some parts of the drafting of this paper. Many others have read earlier drafts of this paper and have provided information, including Anna Robinson-Pant, Brian Street, Ken King, Simon McGrath. I must stress that, although part of this work was undertaken while working with two major international agencies, one donor government, and with various Ministries in the Government of Afghanistan and elsewhere, nothing I say here can be taken to represent the views of anyone but myself.

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