Increasing teacher agency through use of openly licensed local language digital stories: the contribution of Saide’s African Storybook Initiative

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Availability of decodable texts and carefully levelled readers to support the teaching of reading is crucial in any programme for the teaching of early reading. But there is a drastic shortage of such materials in the variety of languages that are needed. In addition, on their own, they are not enough.

Decodable and levelled readers support struggling teachers with material that their learners can read on their own as they learn sounds and sight words. However, these resources are usually embedded in highly prescriptive programmes which allow very little scope for individual teachers to use their own creativity in response to the reading needs of particular children. If these are the only programmes and resources available to teachers, teachers are unlikely to develop the ability to analyse the knowledge and skills that learners have, and adapt resources and methods to ensure that learning takes place. An unintended effect of highly scripted teacher support programmes can therefore be the de-skilling of teachers.

By contrast, a combination of openly licensed stories for early literacy development and the tools to adapt or translate the stories for language, level and context of the learners is potentially a powerful way of increasing teacher agency, and supporting learning-centred teaching.

The African Storybook Project provides an ideal opportunity to explore the relationship between teacher agency and resource utility. On the website, www.africanstorybook.org there is a digital library of illustrated stories for early literacy development, where teachers and learners are not only free to translate and adapt and create stories, but also to publish these for others to see. The open licence allows them to adapt and translate these stories without having to ask permission or pay a fee. Through being exposed to a wide variety of stories in a wide variety of languages from which to select, teachers’ critical literacy skills can be developed as they read to select appropriate stories for their learners. They are free to make their own translation, or change a translation if they think that the dialect used doesn’t suit their area. They can use the pictures to create their own stories or encourage their learners to do so. As teachers and learners engage actively with stories, they learn about writing as well as about reading, and the relationship between the two. And instead of waiting to receive the correct materials in the correct languages and correct numbers, they can make their own – downloading and printing or projecting on a classroom wall. They can reclaim their agency as teachers. We are seeing this happen as we engage with teachers in teacher education institutions and schools in Kenya, Uganda, and South Africa.
Tessa Welch has been employed at Saide since 1996, working in policy research, quality assurance, course design, materials development and evaluation of distance teacher education. In 2013, she assumed leadership of the African Storybook Project, a Saide initiative aimed at providing access to and stimulating use of openly licensed digital stories for early reading in local African languages.

Prior to her work at Saide she was involved in language education, at the English Language Teaching Information Centre, coordinating the development of a teacher education programme to encourage multilingual learning.

To this work she brought experience as English Lecturer at the Johannesburg College of Education and the Soweto College of Education, as well as experience in publishing of two books of Southern African stories and poems for young people, My Drum and My Drum 2. Her career started in the classroom as a teacher of English. She holds a BA Honours in English Literature (University of Natal), and an M Ed in the Teaching of English Literature from Exeter University in the UK.