

**KABULTEC: THE ROQIA CENTER**  
**The Adult Literacy Project**  
**Founder and President: Nasrine Abou-Bakre Gross**  
**Evaluator: Susan M. Andersen, Ph.D.**  
**July 1, 2004**

**The Context**

A full 90% of women and 80% of men in Afghanistan are illiterate. When one walks down the dusty unpaved roads and alleyways of the capital city, Kabul, in the neighborhoods in which these adult literacy courses tend to be held, one is struck viscerally by the open, untreated sewage slogging slowly down each road, the stench baking in the hot sun and searing one's nostrils. The children excitedly rush out of their doorways to meet the foreigner and her entourage who have arrived, walking across the short, little planks of impacted dirt or stone that bridges the little rectangular sewer trench running just inches in front of their doorways. Walking with video camera in hand along these little alleys, one sees children leaping excitedly from one side of the sewer to the other, at play, while carefully eyeing the newcomer.

Unpainted, mud homes, under repair, show nothing if not vestiges of endless bombing and rocket fire. The structures have no electricity and share access to a neighborhood water pump serving many, many families. As one approaches the pump, one sees it is surrounded by gaggles of children fetching water, sometimes in old plastic jugs imprinted with the faded imprint of NGOs like CARE, vessels so large one can barely imagine a full-grown adult carrying them.

Several blocks from there, there is a kind of village center about the length of a short city block and also situated along a wildly pock-marked dirt road lined with broken down hovels that are little more than lean-tos covered with tin and tarps. One is greeted by a relentless roar of generators that hammer away to provide the only source of available power. The beating, battering sound is loud and so common around Kabul as to be dizzying and nearly deafening, and yet it is greeted with some relief by the Afghans fortunate to be in its midst.

It is down one of the quieter, powerless alleyways, that the most longest standing class in the program is held. One exits the open sewers of the street, ducking down under the low flung doorway of the classroom, perhaps relieved to be spared the stench and flies. Upon entry, though, one quickly sees not just a rough-hewn floor with neatly aligned rows of weathered student desks made of simple raw wood, but also a floor that is dirt and in fact "outside," since the classroom has no roof. The adult students excitedly prepare for class, honored to have a visitor there to observe their work, and look ahead to the one item evincing modern times – a white board bolted to the mud wall that the teacher and students write on using a magic marker. This is the classroom to which these students recently moved when the prior location became unavailable, and is actually the front section of a

dwelling where one couple in the class lives. They are so committed to the class continuing in their neighborhood that they offered up their own home as its permanent location.

The main streets of Kabul, of course, are paved, if potholed, and parts of city are even on an electric grid, as evidenced by the street lights that sometimes work. There is an endless glut of cars, taxis, and SUVs, and a dizzying cacophony of horns honking, laced with the once or twice daily experience of oncoming army tanks and humvees in the simultaneously alarming and reassuring presence of ISAF. A bumper-to-bumper bottleneck and lull in the noise and chaos is usually a sure sign that a military check point is just ahead where one senses the sucked-in, somewhat anxious pauses, even though these are manned by Afghan Army men (with AK-47s) and not ISAF or the Americans. Aside from the urban accoutrements, and the fact that downtown Kabul does have running water, there remains plenty of raw sewage to be encountered around the paved roads of the city, if less so than off these main drags. Off the main roads, where regular people (vs. embassy and NGO staff) live, the raw sewage also bakes in the sun just inches away from the newly installed water pumps, making it seem a miracle if this sewage were not leaching into the groundwater, an impression seemingly borne out by the high prevalence of skin sores on people's faces – young children and adults alike.

### **The Program and Its Students**

This small adult literacy project consists of 4 ongoing classes of about 20 adults each. The program offers courses in two distinct categories. The primary category is the Couples Program. The secondary one is the Apprentice Program, which directed toward tradesmen. The overall project uses a 3-book literacy series and covers one book every 3 or 4 months so that the 3-book series can be completed in about one year. When students complete Book 3, they are eligible to enter the 4<sup>th</sup> grade in regular government schools (i.e., public schools) in which 8 or 9-year-old children would typically matriculate without accompaniment by adult students – under other circumstances.

Approximately 80 students are engaged in the program, and they range in age from 19 to over 70. The longest running class includes an age range of approximately 19 to 50, whereas one of the shortest running classes (consisting mainly of folks of Hazara background) includes an age range of about 38 to 75. All students in the couples classes are married, although a few women attend alone because their husbands are paralyzed or otherwise bed-ridden and cannot take part (so an exception was made for them). Even in the apprentice class, all but the youngest students are married.

Only a small number of men over 50 reported having (or having once had) more than one wife. When this was the case, it was because the first wife became incapacitated or otherwise ill; the "second wife" (a fellow student in the class) always concurred with this description. In no case did the first wife live with the couple and with the couple's family.

Household size ranges from about 4 people – in addition to the couple in the class – to about 15, and these relationships range from daughters and sons to brothers and sisters (i.e., the children's uncles and aunts), to parents (the children's grandparents), cousins, and in-laws.

Observing the classes in motion, one can quickly glean that each teacher keeps these students exceptionally busy and on their toes. One minute, they are reciting aloud as a group, and the next, they are reading aloud individually standing up with book in hand at their desks or in front of the class, having been picked at random. When mistakes are made or the student is struggling, she will run her finger running along the line of text where an error was made or a word mispronounced to help the student focus and correct the mistake. Likewise, when the work at the chalkboard begins, students are called up to the board – which is actually a nice, new white board with a magic marker – to individually to write out what the teacher requests. The teacher meticulously corrects what they write on the board, by erasing mistakes and having them try again until they get it right, whether arithmetic or sentences in Dari or Pashtu. The students track their teacher carefully and she's quick to call them to task when their attention drifts. People are tired from all the years of war and sometimes it shows, but they perk up quickly when prodded. They work hard and persist, and all are very committed. Each teacher keeps her students engaged by arranging that they are up and down from their seats and performing for everyone throughout each session.

There are currently 3 couples-only classes ongoing. Two (let's call them A and B) have been ongoing for about 2 months and these students are hard at work on Book 1 of the 3-book literacy series. The third (let's call it C) has been ongoing for a little under 12 months and is hard at work in mastering these lessons of Book 3. When these students complete Book 3, they will qualify to enter the 4<sup>th</sup> grade. These adults are highly motivated to qualify to enter the 4<sup>th</sup> grade.

There is also another couples class of "graduates" (let's call it D). Their course ended around 4 months ago. It ran for a little under a year and enabled students to complete Book 2 of the series. These students wanted very much to continue, i.e., to move on to Book 3, but they could not because there were not sufficient funds to enable it. These students are rather despondent about having to stop and want very much to start up again so they can eventually move on to the 4<sup>th</sup> grade.

As for the apprentice class (let's call it E), it reaches out mainly to tradesmen – who work, for example, in tire repair, rug-making, engine repair, construction, and so on. It is a relatively new class, having been ongoing for a month or 2 and the students are working on Book 1.

A guiding theme of all these classes seems to be that none should be entirely homogenous. Every class includes people of more than one ethnic background: The first couples' class (A) is largely Hazara (a minority in Afghanistan toward which there is some prejudice), but includes 1 or 2 Tajik couples; the second (B) is also largely Hazara but includes one couple that is Sadat. The longest running couples' class (C) is largely Tajik but includes some Pashtun couples as well. The couples who have "graduated" (D) include both Hazara and Pashtun students. The apprentice class (E) is mainly Tajik with some Pashtun, and also includes one woman. Even the couples-only classes include an exception here or there for a woman who must come alone due to her husband's health.

In my view, it is the couples' program that is particularly innovative. It reaches out to men to identify those who want to participate in a class to become literate in their own language. It is then emphasized to each man that this is a couple's program and he is invited to attend, but only if he brings his wife. For those who agree, attending often means being the same room with other men and women not in their own family – with the women's faces uncovered – for the first time in their lives. It is also one of the first times (if not the very first) that the husband and wife are themselves doing something together on equal footing with each other's efforts and abilities respected, nurtured, and encouraged. My impression is that the experience is life-changing. Quite beyond the teaching of adult literacy, the program is transformative – both psychologically and culturally.

### **The Evaluation**

The interview questions I tended to use are included in the Appendix.

As far as the number of interviews conducted with the students in these adult literacy courses, 27 were conducted as shown in the Table below:

Adult Literacy Students Interviewed			
Couples' classes	Women	Men	Total
Currently enrolled	11	9	20
Previously enrolled	3	0	3
Apprentice Class	0	4	4
Currently enrolled			
	14	13	27

Nine men and nine women were interviewed as couples from the ongoing couples classes (A, B, & C), and 2 women (from one of these classes, class B) were interviewed together and without their husbands who needed to leave for work. For one such class (C), a few questions to the group as a whole before they departed because they were all so eager to be interviewed and yet most could not stay (and wait) while each couple was interviewed in turn. From the class of "graduates" (D), three women were interviewed as a group without their husbands who were occupied. Finally, four students (all men) were interviewed from the apprentice class (E) and this was done in sets of 2.

The preliminary results are summarized below. These initial impressions, based on the interviews, will be updated once assistance can be found to produce written transcripts that can be examined more systematically.

Overall, the students clearly articulated how much of a problem it was for them not to be able to read the signs and placards at the bazar (the market), not to be able to tell when a shop would be open or shut, or when their favorite bus would be running. The question of which building is a school and when that school might be in session and how one's children can be allowed to attend – even in the post-Taliban era when schooling is possible – had remained mysterious. They also recounted being unable to read signs at hospitals or pharmacies or other medically relevant shops, and thus being unable to access what services may have existed (if any). In some cases, they could not even tell time by reading a clock. This meant enormous amounts of wasted time, arriving places on the wrong day or at the wrong time, responding to hearsay or rumors from others without being able to check or know for sure for oneself what was transpiring, and generally having the lifelong belief that things were unfathomable, unpredictable, and out of their personal control.

Now they are reading their literacy books and love them, and they want to read even more. Some spoke of the newspapers and of not previously knowing what these pieces of paper were or what the symbols on them might mean, and now relishing their newfound ability to read and understand the news reported. For some, the newspapers are a particularly important inspiration. They are beginning to understand what is going on in their country politically and in other ways as well, and beginning to understand also what has gone on before now. Based on this, some want to be able to read extensively about the history of Afghanistan and also about their own religion. Several report that they just cannot get enough of reading. They want to read absolutely everything they can get their hands on, and their hope about their own futures is obvious and growing.

On a more personal level, many mentioned how frustrating it had been in the past to receive a letter from a family member (e.g., sister-in-law, aunt, brother) or other loved one in another town or neighboring country (e.g., Pakistan, Iran) without being able to read it. Finding someone to read it to them was often not easy and the difficulty of this and of finding someone who might also write for them their reply would lead the otherwise happy experience of being painful and difficult.

In terms of writing, these students mentioned how important it has been to them that to learn to write their own name, the name of their husband or wife, and their children. They also reported knowing how to write numbers, and to add and subtract and sometime do fractions. And their newfound competency of being able to fill out job applications and other kinds of forms (such as at hospital or elsewhere) was frequently mentioned with some prides of accomplishment.

Beyond these highly basic, practical skills, it was with great emotion, pleasure, sometimes a giggle or tears in the eyes, that they spoke of being able now to write a letter to a loved one who lives far away – in another town or in Pakistan or Iran. They described with a kind of joy and lightness their new ability to be in contact with these loved ones or to rebuild bridges to them (people who are deeply meaningful in their lives). These stories were described in the most moving ways.

One of the most tender stories I heard sort of along these lines, but a little different, emerged in the very first interview. This couple, married for over a decade, revealed to me, in giggling, embarrassed, and playful tones, that the husband was now writing, yes, but, well, he was writing love letters ... to his wife! And, they exclaimed: this was making them both very happy! We all laughed with delight at the disclosure, and enjoyed this connected moment. In a related instance, once one man's wife had finished her part of the interview and left, due to having to be somewhere else, he mentioned in somewhat wistful, somewhat playful tones that he wished he'd learned to write when he was young because, now he's a married man, but he would have wanted to write a love letter. When asked if he'd ever thought of writing a love letter to his wife, he replied, "no, no, not really, it's just not the same." These very personal moments were filled with truth and clarity, and the meaningfulness of the class to their lives was thus cast in a clear light.

In fact, some students who had not yet written a letter to someone in their own lives also nonetheless mentioned spontaneously that this was one of their most important, personal goals. For example, one man mentioned an aunt who lived abroad and "had been like a mother to me," and yet he'd been out of touch with her for 8 years. Finding an address for her and writing her a letter was high on his list of personal goals. In another vein, some students reported with palpable pride that now they had been asked by someone else to compose a letter – so that that person (usually someone in their neighborhood) – would be able to be in touch

with a family member in some far-flung place. They were greatly pleased to have the tables turned like this and to be able to be of help to someone else as they had been helped in the past.

In more general and psychological terms, virtually all reported feeling better about themselves now and also feeling that others now respect them more and see them as more important now that they are learning to read and write.

In terms of their marriages, most indicated that their relationship with each other had changed in various ways since being in the literacy course. Several even reported that they now fight less and talk more than they did before, giving the impression that the husband may even strike the wife less often now. Most reported that they now study together and work on lessons at home and that this was very different for them and very satisfying.

In terms of their broader family, virtually all of the students who have children reported that they now help their children with their schoolwork, and in some cases, that their children help them as well! Several referred to the whole family spending lots of their time at home engaged in studies and that this has created a whole new atmosphere in the home. They also mentioned learning to be kinder and more polite with students in their class and that they are now more like this – kinder and more polite – with their own family and extended family as well.

On different level, many also indicated how much they love their teacher and how grateful to her they are. Especially the lead teacher, Hawa, was praised greatly. Some indicated that she is now a part of their family and proclaimed as well that they now want to be just like Hawa, becoming a literacy teacher too, to help their people and their country as she does. This identification with their teacher has occurred both for men and for women, and is most common among the young adults who have their whole lives ahead of them and now have this as an abiding aspiration.

Many students reported as well that they have met many new people in the class that they did not know before, many of whom they like a great deal. Some in each class are of a different ethnic background as well, and yet no student reported finding this in any way problematic. Several offered the reply to a query along these lines that "we are all Afghans; it does not matter. It's good." They have come to like their classmates and sometimes spend time in their homes studying their lessons and preparing for class.

Many also spontaneously mentioned how tired they are from the wars and how much they want peace. One can see the tiredness in their faces, especially the women. The women are often more guarded and careful, and less quick to smile

and engage. As a psychologist, it seemed evident to me that many were manifesting the kind of emotional shut down or emotional numbing and exhaustion that is typical among victims of trauma (in PTSD or in clinical depression). But they are still hopeful about their country, the possibilities for their own lives, and that they will finally have peace.

In terms of how the lives of these students – both men and women – had changed based on being in their literacy course, the most penetrating and yet simple comment frequently uttered was that before the class they just had no idea what was going on around them or in the world. They did not understand, were often confused, and were basically blind. And now, they said, "I can see."

So they want to do more with their newfound skills and with their learning. Now they know how to learn and they want to continue to do so. They also have confidence that, having broken this first barrier, other learning will come more easily to them because they know how to learn; they know how to do it. They want to continue on and want to improve their lives.

They also want to serve their county and help the country rebuild, and they say they will do whatever they can take part. At a rate of 100%, they are registered to vote. At exactly the same rate, they report that they intend to vote in the upcoming fall elections.

Report By: Susan M. Andersen, Ph.D., Professor of Psychology, New York University, 6 Washington Place, 7<sup>th</sup> Floor, New York, NY 10003 (Tel: 212.998.7799; email: [SMA1@nyu.edu](mailto:SMA1@nyu.edu))

## **Appendix** **Interview Questions**

1. What is your name, age, and ethnic background?
2. How many people are in your household and what relation(s) are they to you?
3. Given that probably so many people you know cannot read or write, why is it that you decided you wanted to learn to read and write? Why did you want to be in this class?
4. What was your life like before you began to learn to read? Give examples.
5. What was your life like before you began to learn to write? Give examples.
6. How is your life different now that you are beginning to learn to read? Give examples.



7. How is your life different now that you are beginning to learn to write? Give examples.
8. What would you most like to be able to read that you have not yet read?
9. What would you most like to be able to write that you have not yet written
10. Is there an experience that has been especially important or surprising in this class?
11. Have you met new people in this class you did not know before? If so, who? And do you see them outside of class? And if so, what did you do at that time?
12. How do you feel about being in class with people of a different ethnic background?
13. How do you feel about having both men and women in the same course?
14. Do you feel better about yourself – or more confident in yourself – now that you're learning to read and write? Please explain.
15. Are there ways that your marriage has changed – your relationship with your wife/husband – since starting this literacy class? Do you do different things together now? Please explain.
16. Has your relationship with other members of your family changed in any way? If so, how?
17. Do you feel differently about your neighborhood or your community now that you're a part of this class? If so, in what way?
18. Do you feel that other people respect you more – see you as more important – now that you've begun to learn to read and write?
19. How do you feel about the rebuilding of Kabul? Do you feel more able to be a part of the reconstruction?
20. How do you feel about the reconstruction of Afghanistan as a whole? Do you feel more hopeful now about your country?
21. Are you registered to vote?
22. Do you intend to vote in the election in September?