Chapter 1
An Assessment Project on the “Literacy-on-the-Job” Needs of Young Adults in Sierra Leone

Amma Akrofi
Texas Tech University, USA

Amy Parker
Western Oregon University, USA

ABSTRACT
This chapter outlines and describes a sponsored needs assessment process wherein a small group of researchers from various disciplines designed an approach for the burgeoning population of youth in Sierra Leone to learn literacy skills in a practical, motivating and sustainable way—“literacy-on-the-job”. In order to create a responsive and aligned intervention, the authors used a participatory methodology to understand the values and needs of representatives situated in industrial, governmental, educational and community-based youth organizations. The voices and perspectives of individuals across various businesses, schools, civic offices, and social groups were woven together to create a portrait of the complex landscape where young adults, in particular, are struggling to achieve and survive. Recommendations for a process of full implementation of the “literacy-on-the-job model” in both Sierra Leone and nations with similar landscapes are provided.

INTRODUCTION
“A majority of the youth lack basic education knowledge. . . [and] are traumatized,” (the Administrator of the Community Affairs Division at Sierra Rutile Limited, Sierra Leone).

The United Nations is focusing on the struggle to improve quality of life through education and healthcare for the burgeoning world population. As the population in sub-Saharan Africa continues...
An Assessment Project on the “Literacy-on-the-Job” Needs of Young Adults in Sierra Leone

to grow, true systemic intervention must happen with Africa’s youth because one of the greatest risks to the continent’s stability and corporate investments is when young adults are not adequately educated to participate in gainful employment. As often happens, governments and industry collaborate to invest in the advancement of their youth. In particular, some industries operating in nations whose resources are being harvested for a world market and whose populations are young and disadvantaged identify ways of addressing their corporate responsibility roles. Not only does this fulfill an inherent interest of the industry; it begins to address a complex, multi-faceted problem that affects regional stability and democratic participation.

Sierra Leone represents one nation in Sub-Saharan Africa where government and industry are making some strides in addressing these issues. According to the World Bank, before the recent outbreak of Ebola in that country, Sierra Leone had a projected 4% economic growth based on its iron ore export earnings. Furthermore, Sierra Leone was one of the nations in the West African sub-region whose governments had “implemented new legislation for youth-friendly initiatives that aim to provide an environment conducive to youth development, employment and empowerment (World Bank Group--IBRD/IDA, 2014). The purpose of the initiatives is to address the youth unemployment challenge which, at the current rate of 60%, is among the highest in the West African subregion.

The post-conflict struggles of young adults in Sierra Leone and the government’s determination and requests to international entities for assistance to rebuild the economy were first brought to the attention of a team of researchers at Texas Tech University by Melonie Kastman, a philanthropic filmmaker. Team members had expertise in the following areas: foreign relations, developmental literacy, special education/rehabilitation, educational technologies, higher education, and nutrition, hospitality, and retailing. With our combined transdisciplinary expertise and working with Sierra Leonean partners in a participatory action research approach (Pain, Whitman, & Miledge, 2014), we envisioned that our curriculum’s efficacy would be evaluated through outcome data on student literacy gains, job performance, employer perspective on the program’s feasibility, and mentor and young adult perspectives. The team designed a four-year, five-phase intervention project that sought to provide participatory learning to young adults through internships in literacy and technical/vocational skills in Sierra Leone (see Table 1).

This project was initially designed as a one year assessment and pilot program with the opportunity for expansion into a three year, more comprehensive series of activities. The initial one year assessment and pilot program is proposed to include the activities shown in Table 1.

This chapter dwells only on the first of the five-phase interventions listed on Table 1, that is, the initial 2-week assessment phase of the project. We informally referred to this as our “look-listen- &-learn” phase. Only the developmental literacy, special education, and hospitality team members went to Sierra Leone. For that visit, the team members were specifically interested in holding discussions with employers, government officials, educators, and young adults with the purpose of finding out the following, among other things: (1) What worker profiles do different industries have and what are similarities and differences? That is, what are industries’ perspectives on the knowledge base, literacy, and skills needs of young adults in their companies? (2) What current initiatives have government representatives put in place to increase their employability? (3) To what extent are educational institutions plugged in with industry and what outreach programs do they have in place to prepare young adults for industry? (4) What are young adults’ culturally-relevant knowledge, skills, work practices, and perspectives on literacy and employment? We used the questions as a basis