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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

"Paperwork is so important!": processes of literacising in bureaucratic contexts in Benin and Bolivia

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Abstract In both Bolivia and Benin, the state presumes that citizens can navigate its bureaucracy even if it does not provide them with the requisite literacy skills. However, bureaucratic procedures are highly characterised by literacy and digital literacy and people with little or no literacy require alternative strategies to manage them. This article contributes to debates on (il)literacy and bureaucracy studies by looking at the learning practices of persons with little or no literacy competence in La Paz and El Alto, Bolivia, and Parakou, Benin. It investigates their ways of coping with such bureaucratic requirements and especially how they manage to acquire specific literacy abilities in order to complete procedures. Our conclusions are based on empirical data obtained through various kinds of interviews and participant observation that we carried out during more than 12 months of fieldwork.

Our article shows how participants have independently acquired literacy competence on their own to achieve their goals and resolve highly relevant issues. For them, literacy is not so much an end in itself but a means of dealing with the state. During bureaucratic procedures, concurrent processes of illiteracising and literacising, as well as processes of learning and unlearning literacy, take place. We conceptualise and amplify the notion of this learning and unlearning with the terms "literacising" and "illiteracising" as processual and relational. Thus, we interpret literacising in the context and during the experience of bureaucracy as an instrument through which individuals try to affect, cope with and control bureaucratic procedures.

Keywords (Un)learning · Literacy · Illiteracy · Digital literacy · Administrative procedures

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„Papierkram ist so wichtig!“: Literalisierungsprozesse innerhalb bürokratischer Kontexte in Benin und Bolivien

Zusammenfassung Sowohl in Bolivien als auch in Benin unterstellt der Staat, dass seine Bürger*innen sich in seiner Bürokratie zurechtfinden können, auch wenn er sie nicht mit den erforderlichen literalen Fähigkeiten ausstattet. Bürokratische Prozeduren sind jedoch in hohem Maße durch Literalität und digitale Literalität gekennzeichnet. Gering oder gar nicht literalisierte Personen bedürfen alternativer Strategien, um mit solchen Prozeduren zurecht zu kommen. Der vorliegende Artikel ist ein Beitrag zu Debatten um (Il)literalität und *den bureaucracy studies*. Dabei wird der Fokus auf Lernprozesse von Personen mit geringen oder keiner literalen Kompetenz(en) in La Paz und El Alto (Bolivien) und Parakou (Benin) gerichtet. In dem Beitrag werden Formen des Umgangs mit bürokratischen Erfordernissen untersucht. Dabei wird gefragt, wie diese Personen spezifische literale Fähigkeiten erworben haben, um bürokratische Prozeduren abschließen zu können. Unser Artikel basiert auf empirischem Material, das wir mittels unterschiedlicher Interviewverfahren und teilnehmender Beobachtung im Rahmen einer insgesamt gut 12 Monate andauernden Feldforschung erhoben haben.

Unser Text zeigt, wie sich die Teilnehmer*innen unabhängig und auf sich allein gestellt literale Kompetenzen angeeignet haben, um ihre Ziele zu erreichen und hochrelevante Angelegenheiten zu lösen. Für sie stellt Literalität nicht so sehr ein Ziel an und für sich dar, sondern ein Mittel, um mit dem Staat umgehen zu können. Im Zuge bürokratischer Prozeduren finden gleichzeitig Prozesse der Literalisierung und Illiteralisierung sowie Prozesse des Lernens und Verlernens von Literalität statt. Wir konzeptualisieren und erweitern die Idee dieses Lernens und Verlernens mit den Begriffen des „Literalisierens“ und „Iliteralisierens“ als prozesshaft und relational. Damit interpretieren wir Literalisieren im Kontext und während der Erfahrung von Bürokratie als ein Instrument, durch das Individuen versuchen, bürokratische Prozeduren zu beeinflussen, zu bewältigen und zu kontrollieren.

Schlüsselwörter (Ver)lernen · Literalität · Illiteralität · Digitale Literalität · Administrative Verfahren

1 Introduction

> “My son was falsely accused of being the murderer of a girl. He wasn’t of course. I stood up for him—we spent about three years in legal proceedings—and I didn’t have much formal education. I cried when I had to manage all the paperwork and sorted the papers: this one is for the trial, that one for the mayor, they explained to me. At least I won in the proceedings. Because I invested a lot of money, I saved my son from prison. I knew some letters, of course, and during the procedures, I learned by effort. By effort: it took me time. In this way, I also struggled. Well, I read it, I knew the first letter, and the next was difficult, this other letter is that. In this way I succeeded.

Sometimes I was wrong: no, this is another letter, this should be that letter, I said. I suffered, but as I know how to work, there was no lack of money. Work dominates, money dominates. (Jairo, El Alto, March 2022)"

This is how one of our research partners described his experience with the justice system when he defended his son against allegations that he had murdered a girl in El Alto, Bolivia. This portion of his story implicitly evokes his relational experience with his country's judicial institutions. Other actors we met during our research in El Alto and La Paz (Bolivia) and Parakou (Benin) had other relationships with state institutions. The administrative sphere appears to be an environment where literacy skills are required. In general, the daily life of citizens with little or no formal schooling is marked by challenges related to mastering bureaucratic procedures and applying them to engage with state services. During those bureaucratic procedures, some find the learning processes imposed on them by specific situations in connection with state institutions challenging. This article proposes to examine these learning processes of people with little or no formal schooling in a bureaucratic context. There is a rich body of literature on bureaucracy and bureaucratic practices in social anthropology, psychology and the science of education, but almost no attention has been paid specifically to the encounters of citizens with little or no formal schooling with state institutions and bureaucracy.

Relations between the state (public services) and citizens are structured around bureaucratic practices. To demonstrate their citizenship or benefit from state services, citizens with any educational background must familiarise themselves with the bureaucratic practices needed to interact with state institutions. To obtain documents such as marriage, birth and death certificates, passports, or personal identification cards and to initiate court proceedings, bid for public contracts, or receive services including health care, justice and education, citizens must confront bureaucratic practices in order to address the state according to predefined norms or procedures. These practices have become even more complex with the emergence of digital technology, which is perceived as an instrument for the functioning and strengthening of the efficiency of state institutions.

Such relations based in bureaucratic practices demand effort on the part of citizens, especially those with low or no literacy, to discover the right strategies to deal with bureaucratic demands. They must manage their situations through specific strategies and learning processes, which also include processes of acquiring literacy competences that are linked in turn to processes of *unlearning* literacy. Based on field data, we want to use a concept that reflects the processual dynamic of this learning and unlearning of literacy. To energise largely static and linear conceptions of "illiteracy" or literacy, we thus introduce the neologisms "literacising" and "illiteracising". With these concepts, we aim to emphasise the contextual and dynamic nature of literacy and also the individual and societal processes that shape literacy and illiteracy over time. We expect these terms to reflect the processes of learning and unlearning literacy, which constantly move in both directions.

In bureaucratic contexts, we argue, literacy and practices of literacising are perceived as an instrument for people to affect and control bureaucratic procedures. Here, the need to learn reading, writing and the use of the digital tools appropriate

to the specific context arises. We develop our argument based on examples from two different countries in the Global South, the Republic of Benin and the Plurinational Republic of Bolivia, whose bureaucracies, dominant state languages (despite multilingual populations) and alphabetic writing systems derived from colonial state systems.[1] Furthermore, both states have addressed illiteracy in various ways and through various campaigns.

In Benin, the need for digital literacising arises in response to bureaucratic demand as the process of bureaucratic reform obliges people to engage in digital literacising. Here, state digitalisation encompasses entire procedures, including the standardisation of interactions between the citizen and state in virtual spaces. Digitalisation in Bolivia is limited to administration itself and individual interactions still take place on paper.

As our research participants' experiences show, learning and acquiring literacy skills are embedded in very concrete situations and seek to achieve specific purposes and resolve issues that are highly important to them. Furthermore, neither state guarantees the level of literacy training required to understand and make use of documents and forms. Literacy campaigns, despite their extensive aspirations, provided participants with little more than the ability to read texts and sign them.

To highlight these learning processes, this article asks how bureaucratic practices influence the learning processes of illiteracised people in Benin and Bolivia and, furthermore, how they deal with bureaucracy demands. Starting from these questions, it explores how people with little or no formal schooling experience manage to acquire literacy abilities in Bolivia and Benin.

In these contexts, learning and acquiring literacy skills encompass strategies such as trial and error, relying on existing cognitions, and drawing conclusions. Sometimes, people may ask others for explanations or help. However, they do not describe that process as at all easy but find it difficult and arduous. Thus, processes of literacising and illiteracising are related: the experience of illiteracising in the bureaucratic context brings about the need for literacising. Learning is not so much voluntary or shaped by individual interest as the result of state expectations or pressures.

After discussing different theoretical approaches on (digital) bureaucracy and (digital) literacy, we present our methodological approach and discuss our concept of literacising and illiteracising. Next, we describe the bureaucratic contexts in the two countries that constitute the setting of our study. We approach literacy processes that take place in such contexts based on case studies, which we will first present and then discuss.

2 Perspectives on bureaucracy and (digital) literacy

In an article on the semantic evolution of "bureaucracy", Fred (1979) observes that despite the term's original negative connotations Max Weber gave it positive nuances

[1] The aim is not a strong comparative analysis but to bring data and analysis together to develop and deepen the argument of the identified phenomena of the processual character of literacy skills acquisition in the specific context of bureaucracy.

by using it to designate both the power exercised by civil servants and civil servants as a governing class (bureaucrats) (Fred 1979, p. 606). Bureaucratic administration continues to appear, not only as a set of modernisation techniques but also as the actual expression of this modernisation (Darbon 2002, p. 2). As one of the leading social theorists of bureaucracy, Weber also considered literacy-based bureaucracy, characterised specifically by hierarchical structures, distance and secrecy between others, as the most efficient means of governing. Bureaucracy is a topic that has aroused a certain curiosity in researchers from various disciplines. Since the nineteenth century, it has become a classic subject of social science discourse (Caillosse 2016, p. 677). Many analyses have sought to describe its dynamism, highlight its limits and examine the effectiveness of bureaucratic organisations, the reasons for their expansion in the different spheres of lives, and the place occupied by citizens within systems that seem to exclude them (Péron 2016, p. 119).

Several scholars have approached bureaucracy by focusing on administrative cultures and the rules (formal and informal) that show how citizens represent the administration and its methods of action. This approach re-imagines administrative cooperation and engineering as an adaptation of all procedures to the forms of perception available locally (Darbon 2002, p. 6). In the anthropology of development, its expansion in Africa is interpreted as the transfer of a bureaucratic model that developers consider universal, both in terms of legitimacy and of effectiveness (Chauveau 1992, p. 4). However, bureaucracies and the meanings of documents differ from state to state and from context to context. Thomas Bierschenk and Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan (2019, p. 253) view bureaucracy as an itinerant model, subject to different historical changes and accumulated layers of bureaucratic reforms. This also applies to the specific issue of literacies within bureaucratic systems. The current state of bureaucracy in Benin is the result of two overlapping historical changes: the French colonial bureaucracy, whose practices visibly persist in contexts including organisational charts, official procedures, writings and reports (Olivier de Sardan 2004, p. 156) and the digital bureaucracy. Meanwhile, the Bolivian bureaucracy has been shaped by 300 years of feudal colonial administration and also incorporates some elements of pre-colonial bureaucracy (see Abercombrie 1998, p. 176). The colonial state bureaucracy was an important basis for the republican state, despite the discontinuity in public administration following independence in the early nineteenth century (Klein 2011). The contemporary plurinational state retains various elements and practices from both these eras (see Ellison 2018, p. 202): for example, in its administrative practices related to villages (Abercombrie 1998, p. 90). However, Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan (2019, p. 253) emphasise that the heterogeneity of different, inter-bureaucratic segments is especially visible in postcolonial bureaucracies in the form of “policies and reforms”. Bureaucracy cannot be reduced to something static that merely translates law into practice and decisions (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2021, p. 6). However, the definition and administration of resources and access to rights are linked to processes of normalisation, categorisation and statistics, which are sensitive to the forms of implementation of power and power relations. The idea that bureaucratic relations are arenas where strategic groups try to pursue their own interests is also related to power relations, although

hierarchies can change, and in some cases powerful (economic) clients can exert pressure on bureaucrats (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2021, p. 7f.).

In some studies and theories on bureaucracy and bureaucratic practices, literacy is mentioned as a central feature in state bureaucracy, albeit with varying depths and concentrations. Weber strongly links the two, stating that "the management of the modern office is based upon written documents (the files), which are preserved in their original and draft form, and upon a staff of subaltern officials and scribes of all sorts" (Weber 2006, p. 50), but he does not profoundly analyse its role as Goody claims. Indeed, Weber's *Economy and society*, in which he discusses different forms of government and endorses a bureaucratic state, does not discuss the role and function of literacy. In contrast, Goody elaborates on literacy as a functional means of communication for bureaucracy and state administration, a precondition of democracy, and entirely a technology of government (Goody 1990, p. 194; 196). In his eyes, it is not only the precondition of the emergence of specific states (implying a dichotomy between so-called oral and literate states) but also of a specific relationship between a territory's inhabitants and its rulers (Goody 1990, p. 158; 195). He argues that bureaucracy makes the state more efficient and rational by producing documents about tax revenue and expenditures (Goody 1990, p. 179).

In contrast to Weber and Goody's seminal but controversial and somewhat dogmatic and dichotomous perspectives on the role of literacy, actor-oriented studies, which focus on the daily practices of bureaucrats and their interactions with users of public services, place bureaucratic paperwork in a field of power relationships but also consider the protective qualities of documents (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2021, p. 7). Some authors focus explicitly on the oppressive aspects of bureaucracy and documents in bureaucratic practice (Matusov and St. Julien 2004; Graeber 2017, p. 100f.). However, Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan argue that although documents do not reflect an objective reality, they do produce an official one (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2021, p. 15). We consider this constitutive of the relationship between service seekers and officials.

Furthermore, the relation between state and citizens can also be mediated and shaped by the materiality of bureaucratic literacy products. In his review of anthropological works on documents within bureaucracy and document encounters, Matthew Hull argues that although different approaches emphasise aesthetics, emotions, or signs, all address the problems of administrative control and the construction of entities (Hull 2012, p. 254f.). Eva Muzzopappa and Carla Villalta (2011) take the documents produced by the state as the result of those power relations and as constituting the state itself. This refers to the way in which they are produced, to the knowledge that they imply, and to access to that knowledge by, for example, the police, social workers and the justice system. Max Weber had already emphasised the role of secrecy in bureaucracy: officials not only possess specific knowledge but secure their power through the principle of official secrets (Weber 1990 [1921], p. 126f.) that citizens are obviously denied access to, even when they concern them personally. In many countries, only an officially recognised lawyer is granted access to the file.

The current digitalisation of administration can be regarded as another turn to even greater standardisation and expected efficiency. Since its emergence, the importance

of digital technology in social and administrative practices has progressively increased. Digital tools have become omnipresent in daily life, even for people with no schooling. The digitalisation of administration is no longer exceptional, but has become widespread in administration and public services in both the Global North and the Global South. Digital technology’s development and deep penetration into the bureaucratic practices of public services and administration has provoked researchers’ interest and theoretical reflections. The development of digital tools and their gradual adoption into everyday social practices has spurred the development of concepts such as “digital literacy”, a term first used by Gilster in the 1990s. Since then, the concept has evolved, changed and expanded, becoming increasingly central to cultural, civic and economic participation (Meyers et al. 2013, p. 356).

In their book “*Digital Era Governance: IT Corporations, the State, and E-Government*”, Dunleavy et al. (2006) show that these changes have brought about a new paradigm in which changes in how governments use information technology are no longer viewed as peripheral or routine aspects of contemporary public management and policy. They argue that influences from computing and information systems are as salient for current public sector management as they are fundamental to contemporary Weberian rationalisation processes (Dunleavy et al. 2006, p. 217). They conceptualise this transition as Digital Era Governance (DEG) to highlight the central role that developments in computing and information systems are playing in a wide range of changes in how public services are organised as business processes and provided to citizens or customers.

E-government and digital-related reforms are analysed mainly from a macro perspective as a new way of organising public administration and public service delivery (Margetts and Dunleavy, 2013). However, there is some noteworthy empirical work on bureaucratic encounters in the digital age. This includes that of Pors (2015, p. 178), who looks at the impact of e-government reforms on the professionalism of frontline agents and their relationship with citizens in a bureaucratic encounter. She describes how digital reforms reorganise the tasks and skills involved in bureaucratic encounters. She concludes that, at the level of the first-line agents in the delivery of public services, contemporary political demands in terms of e-government imply a de-specialisation of tasks and an intensification of informality in relations with citizens. Meanwhile, Peeters Rik (2023) draws on a literature that conceptualises digital administrative burdens as a specific form of administrative burden to show how the digitisation of administrative practices is changing the nature of citizen–state interactions. In addition, he notes that digital administrative burdens are not distributed evenly but depend on variations in cognitive skills, digital literacy, self-efficacy, perceptions of fairness in digital government and convenient access to information technology (Peeters 2023, p. 10). Therefore, the shift from paper to virtual documents underlies both the loss of physical contact and the shift of control mechanisms from humans to algorithms, which he also describes as shifting labour from officials to citizens: digital bureaucracy may increase everyone’s workload, but it especially increases that of citizens. Even without referring to virtual bureaucracy, David Graeber questions the efficiency of contemporary bureaucracy given the very time-consuming paperwork it imposes on them (Graeber 2012, p. 108).

Finally, Döring (2021) adopts a citizen-centred perspective to address the interactions between citizens and street-level bureaucrats and proposes the important concept of “administrative literacy[2]” to understand citizenship skills that are acquired outside the educational system in general and other socio-economic variables in particular (Döring 2021, p. 1157). This multidimensional concept integrates the functional, communicative, structural, procedural, media, and civic dimensions and shows how they cover three essential phases of citizen–state interactions from the point of view of citizens: collecting and evaluating information; sharing it, and making personal decisions (Döring 2021, p. 1164).

Despite their richness, their relevance, and the diversity of their approaches to the description, understanding and analysis of the dynamics around bureaucratic encounters, these works remain almost silent when it comes to the actual learning processes of citizens. However, bureaucratic encounters following administrative reforms pose challenges to citizens and bring out specific forms of interaction between them and the state that impose forms of learning. By favouring a comparative and actor-oriented perspective, our article is aimed at analysing the learning processes that arise from bureaucratic encounters. We argue that, faced with the demands of bureaucratic practices and the state’s inability to provide opportunities to acquire the literacy skills demanded by bureaucracies, citizens individually take the initiative in specific literacising.

Although some accounts and approaches describe how the distance inherent in bureaucratic structures was mitigated by bureaucrats’ emotions when they met with their clients, in digital bureaucracy this has become limited as personal contact is almost impossible in virtual spaces. Impersonality, which Weber considered one of the most important achievements of bureaucracy, is characteristic of such bureaucratic practices. In addition, decision-making is far from an individual process: it follows what he imagined to be highly standardised procedures (Weber 1990 [1921], p. 129; 561; 579).

To account for these processes, we analyse examples from two countries of the Global South, Bolivia and Benin. These states appear to have insufficiently prepared their citizens to face bureaucratic challenges that are largely dominated by specific writing and procedural practices. The programmes they have planned and implemented have enabled few of their citizens to acquire appropriate literacy skills. In Bolivia bureaucratic practices are dominated by paperwork, whereas Benin is experimenting with a process of dematerialisation of public services during which paperwork and digital media coexist in public services.

(Digital) literacy is an instrument of bureaucracy that results in the storage of knowledge not accessible to citizens and is generally characterised by a specific form of bureaucratic terminology. Literacy, especially digital literacy, produces and expresses distance between state and citizens. Digital literacy shifts bureaucratic encounters to virtual spaces and relationships mediated by virtuality are even more

[2] According to Döring (2021), Administrative Literacy refers to “a set of skills and knowledge applicable on formal public encounters that result in either status-changing decisions based on discretion or formal service encounters such as consultation for unemployed”.

rationalised. Managing literacy tasks in bureaucratic contexts requires bridging this gap in order to obtain (digital) literacy skills.

3 Research approach and methodology

Starting from the idea that “illiteracy” is not a phenomenon of the past but an ongoing one reproduced through universal literacy standards, our research looks at the practices of persons whose life trajectories are developing in a world of globalised schooling and literacy. We try to look beyond statistics on literacy and illiteracy rates to identify strategies and methods of responding to various challenges, and examine the role that literacy takes through the life course in specific social settings. By following research partners[3] with low or no reading and writing skills or formal schooling, we focus on the processual character of learning and unlearning literacy over individual life courses. We approach those processes of learning and unlearning literacy through the neologism of literacising and illiteracising. These concepts are based on our preliminary research findings and, although continually developed and tested in the field, must still be understood as a work in progress.

Processes of literacising and illiteracising are neither linear nor unidirectional. People may acquire and assign meanings to reading and writing competences at specific moments. Self-literacising for a certain purpose takes place when, for example, people acquire some literacy skills to meet bureaucratic demands. Here, we are referring to autodidactic learning practices and/or processes in which individuals take responsibility for their literacy learning. When we refer to literacising through others or being literacised, we mean learning that includes or is based on specific interactions with professionals or others and entails the transmission of literacy abilities. In contrast, self-illiteracising happens when individuals do not practice or use their skills and their literacy competence loses relevance. However, people may later and for different reasons again feel a need to literacise. Furthermore, illiteracising can take place if people with low or no reading and writing skills are asked to fill out forms or sign documents but cannot follow written instructions and may then rely on “translation” by others. Thus, those processes do not correspond to a linear growth or accumulation of competences and knowledge. Furthermore, it becomes clear that the process of illiteracising is connected to the materiality and aesthetic of scripts and access to paper and literacy—but also to features such as decreasing interests and need.

To these concrete practices of learning and unlearning we add another dimension of literacising and illiteracising. This dimension is located on a discursive level: literacising and illiteracising also take place through processes of internal and external attribution to both the individual and specific groups and by general statements. This refers to the notion of literacised or illiteracised subjectivity. Whenever people

[3] We would like to take this opportunity to thank all our research partners for their availability and collaboration in this research. We are grateful for their willingness to share their experience with us. We want to adress our thank also to the members of the Research Section “Learning” (Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence/ Bayreuth University) for their constructive comments on a first version of this article.

are confronted with literacy demands, they become aware of a lack of literacy and may perceive themselves, in that context and moment, as illiteracised subjects. Even those who have acquired solid literacy abilities are illiteracised in racist discourses if others attribute low literacy or lack of education to them as something essential to their (imagined) "culture" based on ascribed ethnic features. Thus, processes of literacising and illiteracising can take place at the same time and are often entangled. Literacising by others on a concrete level can be strongly connected to discursive illiteracising: sometimes, it is at the moment when literacy abilities are transmitted that learners become aware that they lack them.

Hence, our research partners are illiteracised and illiteracise themselves and in turn are literacised and literacise themselves—all in rather complex and intertwined ways and, of course, with deep interactions with their lifeworlds and the chances and limitations these provide. By using the concepts of literacising and illiteracising, we take a relational perspective. On the one hand, literacising and illiteracising relate strongly to each other; on the other, both take place in relation to specific contexts: that is, to the demands, interests, behaviour and discourses of several actors. Thus, far from perceiving the phenomena of "illiteracy" or "literacy" as static conditions, we understand them as entangled processes that happen over time and in specific contexts: therefore, relationality and processuality shape our research partners' modalities of learning and unlearning. When we talk about literacy, we refer to reading and writing skills, as well as those skills needed in digital environments related to texts and text production, which (as discussed in the theoretical section) also involve a different and specifically virtual materiality. The latter are acquired through processes of digital literacy linked to digital illiteracy. However, this conceptual division between paper-based literacy and digital literacy may be arbitrary in some contexts and should be considered as more of an analytical tool.

Our article is based on over 12 months of qualitative research in and data from Parakou, Benin, and La Paz and El Alto, Bolivia.[4] In both sites, we conducted formal and informal interviews with individual actors and participant observation in various social micro-fields such as government offices, police stations, cybercafes and public spaces such as cemeteries, bus stations and markets, to observe the role of literacy and how people dealt with literacy tasks there. We also conducted interviews at additional public places where bureaucratic encounters take place involving lawyers, notaries and private entrepreneurs applying for public contracts.

In our research within bureaucratic contexts, we were ourselves confronted with bureaucratic procedures whose type determined the possibility of access. Although in most cases we could gain access by submitting a formal letter that received an informal response, a few sites kept adding more and more formal requirements and we decided not to keep trying. In still other spaces, we could conduct informal interviews and brief periods of observation without authorisation in advance. Furthermore, we could use personal connections to bypass some procedures or avoid

[4] Issifou Abou Moumouni carried out fieldwork in Benin, specifically in Parakou, whereas Rebekka Krauß collected data on Bolivia during fieldwork in El Alto and La Paz. The research took place within the Interdisciplinary Project "Learning beyond the classroom: Coping with illiteracy in urban literate environments in Benin, Bolivia (and Germany)" at Bayreuth University.

the need for formal applications (see also Muzzopappa and Villalta 2011, p. 24). This mirrors what Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardin (2021, p. 7) describe as the tensions between formal and informal in offices’ internal and external relations and also reflects something of what our research partners experience in different procedures: the bureaucratic context as an arena (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardin 2019, p. 248) in which they must seek appropriate strategies to pursue their aims.

Our analysis of these strategies, including self-literacising, is based specifically on parts of the formal and informal interviews we conducted during the different research phases.

4 Bureaucratic context in Bolivia and Benin

In Benin and Bolivia, bureaucratic contexts related to literacy have evolved in different directions. In Bolivia, bureaucratic practices remain largely dominated by paperwork: digitalisation has been slow, only began in 2022, and is optional and only available for very few procedures. In Benin, we observed a different dynamic, with a strong orientation towards the digitalisation not only of internal procedures and administration but also of interactions with service seekers and clients. However, neither state properly prepares citizens to deal with bureaucratic tasks.

4.1 Bureaucratic context in Bolivia

Despite the Bolivian state’s claim to have eradicated illiteracy in 2008, a significant number of inhabitants still lack (or have low) reading and writing skills[5] and a follow-up campaign is still active. One important feature of state campaigns was teaching the alphabet and basic reading and writing competences. Another specific goal that adult education activists used to emphasise was, importantly, the ability to sign and write one’s own name, which has become Bolivian society’s common understanding of literacy. Literacy promoters refer to the ability and the satisfaction to act autonomously within legal-bureaucratic contexts[6] and the ability to sign and write one’s name is in fact crucial when interacting with the state bureaucracy and state-regulated sectors. In comparison to the UN and UNESCO definitions, which emphasise literacy’s importance for functioning within a specific society and opportunities for self-fulfilment, the Bolivian campaigns seem to concentrate only on the ability to function at a very basic level within the bureaucracy. However, even this capacity offers only limited possibilities for acting in the bureaucratic context, as many persons who have achieved low literacy through courses or elsewhere do not

[5] In 2006, the new MAS (Movimiento al Socialismo/Movement to Socialism) government started a nationwide literacy campaign. After only 2 years, the UN and the state declared Bolivia free from illiteracy. Nevertheless, a follow-up campaign, including alphabetisation, basic education and training of reading and writing competences, is still running. However, its impact has been questioned by several NGOs and scholars (see Hernani-Limarino et al. 2015, p. 151) owing to the evaluation methods it used in generating statistics on illiteracy and Stefanoni (2011) observed a significant level of “functional illiteracy”.

[6] Personal communications with literacy promoters 9 December 2022.

have sufficient capacities to read and understand the documents themselves or the rather complex procedures that they may be part of.[7]

Another aspect of paperwork is aesthetics (see Riles 2006; Hull 2012). This includes the design and format of documents and features such as headline style, institutional logos, the number of seals and the place for the signature. During bureaucratic encounters, we see that the ability to sign also requires knowledge about the structure and appearance of documents. People sometimes need explanations or directions to know where on the paper to put their names and signatures, which suggests the importance of the material and aesthetic part of documents.

Furthermore, as service seekers our research participants see three main features as constitutive in bureaucratic encounters and having an impact on many of their experiences. First, mistrust is central to the relationship between service seekers and officers. Second, discrimination has marked and continues to mark significantly bureaucratic encounters. Third, people complain about informal paradox rules and a lack of transparency concerning issues such as payments and submitting records.

Service seekers experience much mistrust over the quality of officers' work, and whether their duties are compromised by their own interests (see Ellison 2018, p. 197f.). Participants in our research claimed that officers often do make errors that clients must solve themselves. Therefore, people with low literacy, especially older ones, mistrust such data on the new identity card, which they ask third parties to check. Our research participant Catalina criticises the state for not carrying out its duties. She claims that the state has taken no responsibility for her own case or innumerable others. Extending the mistrust to the next level, she says that the state, instead of protecting citizens, often exposes them to additional harm.

Aymara inhabitants of El Alto often experience discriminatory practices in such offices (Wanderley 2009; Bohrt 2019) that Catalina's experiences and observations also reveal. Here, ethnic identity, gender, class and language all affect those practices together. Many Aymara inhabitants only acquired informal Spanish language competence after moving to El Alto (Wanderley 2009; Albó 2006). Despite the city's multilingual majority, the state mainly continues to operate monolingually and in many of its offices this perpetuates discriminatory practices (Wanderley 2009, p. 68, 71).

Those discriminatory practices include refusing services, dismissing service seekers or giving them the run-around, and demanding additional payments. People also experience demands for further documents to deliver as discriminatory as even those required by law are often, paradoxically, impossible for the recipients to obtain. For example, getting a national identity card now requires submitting a school enrolment certificate that many elders and others who were never enrolled cannot possibly get, as one service person of an informal money transfer shop in El Alto explained to me. Officials are often not inclined to help persons with specific difficulties and send many service seekers away to gather further evidence and copies of documents. Service seekers often perceive such bureaucracy as dysfunctional, yet obtaining documents and completing paperwork seem preconditions for registration and getting support in offices and institutions (see Wanderley 2009, p. 70f.).

[7] Participant observation of basic literacy courses in El Alto 10 December 2021 and 9 December 2022.

4.2 Digitalisation of public services in Benin

Benin’s bureaucratic context is currently marked by the digitalisation of public services. Indeed, in 2008 the minister in charge of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) announced the government’s intention to dematerialise public services and implement “e-government”. The purpose of this commitment is to align public sector operations with current changes at national, regional and international levels, where businesses are increasingly adopting ICT for commercial reasons: efficiency and productivity. Subsequent initiatives at the top of the state have been aimed at operationalising this government vision. A new government elected in 2016 renewed this vision of public service reform, supported it, and made it more visible in the Government Action Programme (PAG 2021–2026), which clearly states a strategic objective of strengthening services to citizens and businesses by generalising e-services and increasing the digitalisation of public administration—a reform that the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated. Through this initiative, the Beninese government aims, according to the Minister of Digital Affairs, to ensure that “public services come to the citizen rather than the citizen always going to the public services”.[8]

Implementation of this project began as of 2020 and many platforms have been created by the state. These include platforms for downloading tax bills and making remote payments; platforms dedicated to financial transactions and land transfers; a platform for accessing public markets; a popular e-service; an electronic securities directory; an Extract from the Commercial Register. The Beninese state has thus undertaken a systematic process of digitalising its services and thus created a new context to which citizens now must adapt.

At the same time, this process of digitalisation for public services appears to be a springboard for a contradictory process leading to the emergence of new types of illiteracised people forced to engage in a process of digital literacising to benefit from state services. This new context, which is dominated by the state’s attempt to implement and stabilise digital technology, is generating new bureaucratic practices based on skills unknown to many Beninese citizens, as the platforms themselves, being new, are unfamiliar to everyone, even those familiar with other digital platforms. These citizens now face new challenges that make digital literacy an imperative for many who wish to communicate with the administration. The challenges can only be met by adding specific new learning processes to the strategies that they used before the digitalisation of public services in Benin. Cossi’s case, which we analyse later, shows how bureaucratic practices force some citizens to engage in digital learning and literacy processes to fully integrate into this new context.

[8] Our translation from French: “Le service public aille vers le citoyen plutôt que ça soit toujours le citoyen qui aille vers le service public”.

5 Processes of and multiple motivations for literacising in bureaucratic contexts in Bolivia and Benin

Starting from the multiple vision of (il)literacy, the issue of motivations and reasons that impel an individual to literacise regains all its relevance and complexity. It brings out a multiplicity of motivations that translate into specific and contextual forms of literacising. In bureaucratic contexts, the reasons for literacising are closely linked to the objectives of each actor and strongly depend on the difficulties/challenges of each in their relations with state institutions.

Nevertheless, people rely on different strategies and literacising oneself and controlling literacy products is only one. Some rely on mediators to "compensate for" their own difficulties in dealing with those demands and carrying out other strategies, but many try to manage their own (digital) bureaucratic demands by literacising. Simultaneously, several also stress that setting aside money to invest in legal procedures ensures that they advance. To this, we could add further non-literacy-based tactics, such as trying to influence events through spiritual means and challenging specific, intentional actions of officials. Many combine different strategies.

5.1 Learning to read in order to confront the state in Bolivia

Literacy practices in bureaucratic contexts seem to motivate people to become self-literate as they try to protect themselves by perceiving and trying to master them. Literacy, here, is seen as an instrument that helps individuals to confront and respond to the bureaucratic state, which uses literacy to both materialise and exercise power. During highly emotional court proceedings, many discover that they need to be able to read bureaucratic paperwork. Their previous strategies in oral contexts seem insufficient and limited in impact. The different aspects of literacy that now come up call for new actions. Catalina comments:

> "Reading is important because you have to understand all the notifications, requests, reports, etc. Paperwork is so important. You have to pay for everything; you have to make efforts yourself. If you don't, nobody will help you. Therefore, you have to buy law books. Those little books with articles and clauses, on family law, human trafficking, in order to understand what lawyers say. I save some money to buy updated law books, to also be informed about amendments. I don't use the internet. I just read the books. Before, I couldn't read. However, since my daughter disappeared seven years ago, I learned to read gradually. What's more, I slowly started to grasp the significance of terms. I continue to read, always: that helps me not forget. (Catalina, February 2022—El Alto)"

Catalina learned to read (but not so much to write) to advance the case of her disappeared daughter[9]. She wants to make sure that she does not miss any opportunity

[9] Human trafficking is quite present in Bolivia: in 2018 and 2019, respectively, more than 600 and 500 reports were filed under Law 263 against Human Trafficking—an average of almost two victims, persons of all ages, each day. (see: https://www.defensoria.gob.bo/noticias/defensoria-del-pueblo-evidencia-que-victimas-de-trata-quedan-sin-posibilidad-de-recuperarseante-la-falta-de-atencion-y-proteccion-estatal).

to locate her daughter and to know what she can demand and what to expect from state authorities. Therefore, she has started to accumulate expert knowledge. Catalina has invested a lot of time, money and energy in these learning processes. The hope of finding her daughter or those responsible for her disappearance motivates her to make great efforts. Her explicit knowledge about articles and clauses and the certainty that she can understand the contents of official documents creates self-confidence and self-reliance. It has become possible for her to influence the procedures, to take positions and to legitimise and argue for her claims. She can also keep up with amendments to the relevant laws, in which she is again investing time and money. In doing so, she tries to confront the state and the authorities in various institutions, who, as she constantly stresses, do not comply with or care about the law. Catalina's study has focused on the issues related to the files and laws concerning the loss of her daughter. She clearly feels the need to acquire specific knowledge so that she can claim and act in a competent way.

Other participants only attach importance to literacy after experiencing defraud. For example, as a *dirigente* (leader) of a neighbourhood self-organisation Eloisa was prompted to authorise what later turned out to be a fraudulent real estate transaction, which involved her in complex legal proceedings. She was convinced that had she been able to read, she would have detected the fraudulent intent and would not have been confronted with additional economic and legal problems. This belief also implies notions of responsibility. Reading and writing, for Eloisa and others in such situations, are abilities that the individual themselves must care about. Furthermore, those who lack literacy competence are themselves responsible if they become victims of literacy-based fraud.

5.2 Digital literacising to get access to public market and official documents in Benin

We illustrate this form of motivation starting with the experience of Cossi, whom we met in May 2022 in Parakou, Benin:

> "Cossi is a 31-year-old master mason who never attended school. In his work, he started to face problems of digital literacy as soon as bidding for public infrastructure construction contracts started to require documents to be submitted online. Before the digitalisation of public procurement procedures, Cossi could apply by providing all the required papers. For a long time, he worked with a literate mason friend who did not have the financial resources to make a bid on his own and therefore helped him, showing him how to prepare the applications. Cossi believes that, with excessive digitalisation, illiterate workers will eventually lose their businesses and abandon their trades. To adapt to the new administrative requirements of the tender process, Cossi has identified an institution, called 'Le Pélican' where he can get training in this area."

Cossi's experience highlights the profound changes that have taken place in administrative procedures and their effects on users of public services following e-service reform. As noted, the dematerialisation and digitalisation of public services introduced new bureaucratic practices that were unfamiliar to citizens. Before the

procedures for submitting applications for public contracts were digitalised, Cossi could submit everything on paper. He always had several copies of the most frequently needed documents and could routinely assemble a dossier as soon as he knew what was required. He would photocopy, collate and staple the documents and had arranged with a computer centre to have a staff member generate invoices based on a template. He no longer even needed to carry around a paper copy, just a photo on his smartphone.

However, when the new procedures were instituted in 2016 he could no longer gain access to the many public contracts he had once been awarded. Bidding on public infrastructure contracts required documents such as commercial registrations, professional licences, unique identification tax certificates (IFU), criminal clearances and invoices to be submitted in standardised electronic formats. In addition to obtaining documents that are almost exclusively distributed online, responding to a request for proposals now requires being able to use the public services platform. However, many entrepreneurs and other citizens do not even have an email address or web skills: their ability to use the internet is very limited and sometimes even extends only to using WhatsApp and Facebook. The state has clearly defined and imposed a new context for interaction where a specific literacy has become essential. Like many others we encountered, Cossi has embarked on the process of digital literacising so that he can meet the new requirements. In his case, literacising is not linked to a desire to confront the state or influence bureaucratic procedures but an adaptation to a new environment with new kinds of bureaucratic practices. Cossi believes that excessive digitalisation will result in illiteracised tradespeople losing work and eventually going out of business. He and his peers must meet new challenges to apply for public contracts and remain active in their professions.

However, it is not only unschooled people who face these challenges. Citizens with formal schooling have also become digitally illiteracised and been forced to acquire digital skills to meet such demands. During our fieldwork in Benin, we observed many schooled people asking institutional mediators to help them cope with bureaucratic procedures. This was the case of Malik, whom I (Issifou) met during my observation at the SED ONG (*Solidarité Education Développement Organisation Non Gouvernementale*) digital centre on 20 September 2022.

Malik is a trained geographer in his late 30s who does consulting for a living and was making observations at the SED ONG. He entered the centre at 10:13 a.m. and immediately approached the agent at the front desk. After they greeted each other, he explained that he wanted to apply for a passport but had been unable to attach the required documents. The agent offered him a chair, but Malik insisted on sitting next to him so he could watch the process on the computer. The agent initially resisted and then agreed; however, he was unable to complete the process as the platform was not working well. After waiting for about 2 h for a secure birth certificate (which was required to continue the process), Malik left for another appointment but said he would return the next day. The agent then explained to me that he had not wanted Malik to see the screen to keep him from learning the process himself and no longer needing their services. If that happened, he would even be able to help his parents!

The ANIP (Agence National d'Identification des Personnes) platform contains features that not all users master or understand. Malik's problem was that it delivers

documents in PDF format, but does not accept this format for attachments: he thus needed to convert them to a JPG version before uploading them. His lived experience allowed him to know his technical limits in using this platform and led him to embark on a learning process of taking advantage of SED ONG's services and observing what they did in order to learn to do it himself. Thus, he had insisted on staying in front of the screen next to the agent: he illiteracised himself before trying to digitally literacise himself.

The computer centres set up as institutional mediators receive daily requests for help dealing with bureaucratic procedures and particularly requests for administrative documents and civil records, not only from unschooled people but also from those with reading and writing skills like Malik, even state officials. According to Madjidou, one of our informants working in a computer centre called Wassangari Labs, most requests concern the NPI (Numéro Personnel d'Identification, personal identification number) and CIP (Certificat d'Identification Personnelle, certificate of personal information) application procedure, which have become prerequisites for all other administrative documents: secure birth certificates, criminal records, passports, and trade registrations. Many civil servants who attempt online applications become victims of their limited digital skills and must resort to institutional mediators. Madjidou explains:

> "In our centre here, Wassangari Labs, we get illiterate people as well as educated people, and even civil servants. Just yesterday, I had clients who work at the CEB (*Communauté Electrique du Bénin*). They visited the platform for certain administrative documents, but they had problems importing files. The platform always sends PDF files, but it asks users to attach only jpeg files. So, you have to convert to the desired format, which many people can't do, and that discourages them, and they give up."

This testimony from Madjidou shows that the digitalisation of public services is a factor in illiteracising and the creation of new types of illiterates. In the current context, it is essential to embark on a specific learning process to keep up with the new bureaucratic practices. Most civil servants have computer skills because they use computers and email in their offices. But these skills are not sufficient to use the various e-service platforms, which always seem to be under construction and sometimes require structural changes to make them more efficient and secure.

6 Learning processes in bureaucratic contexts

The bureaucratic environment is mainly characterised by literacy practices, which require reading and writing skills. In addition, in a context of (progressive) digitalisation and dematerialisation of public services, such as Benin, digital literacy skills are also necessary. Literacies[10] are dominant in bureaucratic encounters, for instance, where literacy is perceived as an instrument through which the state performs it-

[10] We use the plural here to recognise the multiple literacies that prevail in bureaucracy contexts. The emergence of and penetration of ICT into the bureaucratic environment has led to new forms of (il)literacies.

self—whether the environment is analogue or digital—and by which it regulates its relations with citizens. However, neither country's state literacy campaigns and programmes reached the whole population as claimed, they failed to enable persons to develop a reading capacity that is sufficient to deal competently with bureaucratic matters and they have never transmitted the techniques or skills needed for digital bureaucratic practices. Nor does the state seem sensitive enough to the emergence of new forms of illiteracy to offer such programmes and give people a chance to adapt to the new context, leaving it to individuals to engage in learning processes according to their specific challenges and needs.

In a bureaucratic context, the acquisition of reading and writing skills becomes something specific, precise and circumstantial, even if the competences can be used over time. These learning processes in literacy move from self-directed learning to the use of mediators. Catalina explains how she acquired literacy skills so that she could defend her daughter in court.

> "Life taught me a lot. It is not the only important thing to obtain school and university degrees. Sometimes, I know more than the law students whom I used to help (since I often spend night and day in the courts). I memorised everything. I know what is important. I only lack writing. Everything else is stored in my head. (Catalina, February 2022—El Alto)"

These statements clearly show that her literacising took place through immersion in the environment whose language she wanted to understand, the justice system. Learning is here part of an autodidactic perspective that mobilises personal resources, such as the capacity not only to memorise, but also to identify what is important, necessary or indispensable. To our research partner, writing seems less important than understanding the legal process, recognising which documents are needed, and knowing who to contact about specific issues.

Beyond the differences described, learning obviously concentrates on reading and the ability to write seems less significant. Catalina delegates writing to a lawyer (who is herself searching for a missing daughter of her own) and it seems more important to her to be able to control written documents than to be able to produce letters and documents herself. Her efforts are not directed at producing persuasive letters on her own or at demonstrating her achievements.

Jairo's learning experience of struggling to decipher one letter at a time, cited in the introduction of this article, is temporally related to the period of court procedures. Later, his interest in reading and writing decreased. Literacising and illiteracising are connected insofar that the experience of being illiteracised in bureaucratic encounters and procedures leads not to self-literacising as an ongoing process but to flexibly managing the acquisition of competence in relation to the significance it is assigned. This does not exclude applying these competences in other situations: Catalina uses the flyers found in public places to practice reading, whereas many years after his legal procedures Jairo is participating in a small Bible study group that includes some independent reading. In contrast, actors regard knowledge acquired by experience or by reading differently. Catalina is well aware that she possesses significant competencies that she appreciates and shares with others. In addition, students and professionals look to her for advice.

Some literacising processes in bureaucratic contexts also involve the use of mediators. Although the learners in Bolivia relied on more autodidactic learning practices, Cossi is a good example of someone literacising with support from other actors. Although he had been able to compile and submit routine files on his own, changes in administrative procedures made him illiterate again and he was forced to take the initiative to acquire digital literacy competences. To do this, he first had to resort to a training centre to learn the basic elements he needed to adapt to the requirements of the new bureaucratic context. It should be noted that it is not only people without school experience who have been forced to engage in digital literacising. The introduction of this reform has created a new type of illiterate. Many educated actors have become digitally illiterate and therefore forced to digitally literacise themselves.

The mediators used by those research partners are either institutional or personal, depending on the urgency and the resources available. Cossi used a personal mediator first, before being trained by an institution. In the absence of financial resources for such training, the only alternative is to call on a familiar person like a close relative or friend. Sometimes, the illiterate person can become the expert and mediate. Our research partner Catalina played this role to the full at the local court, where she mediated to help law students who were supposed to be literate in this field. Cossi also played this role after his training at the Pélican centre.

Furthermore, we can observe that in the context of the digitalisation of public services the learning process follows two paths, depending on the actors. Although those without literacy skills turn directly to mediators, civil servants prefer to proceed by trial and error, trying out the procedures themselves. Only in case of difficulty do they seek the help of an intermediary whom they observe during his or her performance. This is learning by observation.

The process of (digital) literacising is an external imposition, not merely a voluntary decision. It is related to paperwork and also the new conditions imposed by the state in Benin that triggered the need to embark on the (digital) literacising process to comply with the challenging bureaucratic demands. At the same time, the (new digital) literacy demands also show limits of networks and collaborations. With digitalisation, Cossi was obliged to find new networks made up of new actors with the skills required to meet its needs. Thus, people in some circumstances must search for new arrangements for (digital) literacising.

The experiences of our partners clearly show that it is insufficient to just be able to read and write. Only expert knowledge can ensure success in one’s case. Although those striking experiences motivate self-literacising, the learning processes are strongly related to the aim of solving urgent problems. Grappling with those highly emotional and existential problems takes high priority, at least during the period of bureaucratic proceedings. Under those specific conditions of high pressure, people make efforts to acquire literacy competences. However, the expectation of being able to manage challenges within bureaucracy remains in the foreground.

7 Conclusion

The examples from both Benin and Bolivia demonstrate that people without literacy or with low literacy may respond to challenging tasks in bureaucratic procedures by going through processes of literacising to achieve their goals and pursue their interests. Processes of literacising and illiteracising are related and are based on the experience of illiteracising in the bureaucratic context, where the need for literacising arises. The bureaucratic environment involves selective literacies. Literacy is less a mean in itself than a means of dealing with procedures in the state bureaucracy or to "compensate" for one's own difficulties in dealing with bureaucratic demands. People acquire skills to ensure that they achieve their goal in issues of high relevance. People take on the responsibility for their own learning.

The state does not guarantee literacy training at the level required to deal with, understand and manipulate documents and forms in either country. The administrative procedures and standards they must follow ignore the existence of citizens without literacy skills. They apply to all citizens regardless of their literacy abilities and despite the selective schooling aimed at training individuals capable of serving in the state that took place in (most) colonial states (Goody 1990; Graeber 2012, p. 114), and the fact that subsequent mass literacy campaigns and reforms promoting education for all have never succeeded in imparting (sufficient) literacy skills to all citizens. Literacy campaigns, though intended to be far-reaching and extensive, provided participants with little more than the ability to read and sign short texts. Although states do not provide sufficient literacy skills, they seem to assume that citizens are able to deal with bureaucracy. However, this does not mean that there is a long-term movement towards continuous literacising processes that starts at a determinate point. Those reflections are embedded in a process in which the need arises step by step. It is not so much about a unique temporal, sudden situation and they may finish when the problem is solved. Furthermore, owing to the dynamic nature of digital technology and its deep penetration into bureaucratic practices, the emergence and adoption of new tools—as well as the introduction of new digital-related reforms—will certainly lead to new needs for digital literacising in both countries.

Bureaucratic challenges made these abilities necessary and impelled those literacising processes. The often-repeated expression "learning the hard way" (*aprender a la fuerza*, literally "forced learning") connects the pressures leading to that "autodidactic" learning to the effort required. Owing to discriminatory experiences related to low skills—and, we suppose, to the lack of support in those processes—the learning is embedded in stressful experiences. In contrast, people do not use the expression about other (autodidactic) processes such as learning artisanal skills. Under different conditions, those learning processes might not have taken place.

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