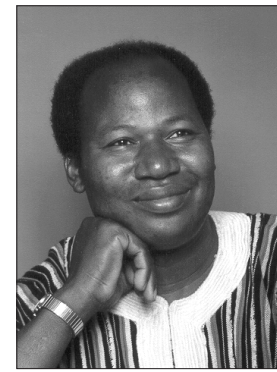
How Can I Help Make a Difference? An Interview with Robert Agunga



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Belcher: OK, actually I'm starting to put together a book, and what I'm trying to elicit from people are narratives of their language learning and literacy experiences. I'm going to people who are highly successful writers in different fields.

Agunga: I don't know if I qualify. *[Laughs]*

Belcher: Yes, you do!

Agunga: That's scary. That is very scary. *[Laughs]*

Belcher: I'm especially interested in people who are speakers of different languages, and who are in different disciplines. I'm trying to find out how they became so successful. This is the question that students in my program are asking all the time. You know, 'How can I become a successful writer?' or 'I struggle as a second-language writer so much; what hope is there for me?'. I can point to people like you. But what students would really like to

know is how it happens: what kinds of strategies you've used, what kinds of help you've had. So basically, I'd like to ask you questions about your development, even starting as far back as your childhood. In fact, the first thing I want to ask you about is what it was like in your family at home. Do you feel that your family gave you some advantages or encouraged you in ways that pushed you in the direction that you eventually moved in?

Agunga: OK, I'll try my best. But first, I just wanted to show you our magazine. This is part of our third writing course, and we just worked on this quarter's issue right now.

Belcher: It looks terrific!

Agunga: Each quarter the students work on this, and they come in with the same problems: 'What am I going to write about?' or 'I don't know what to do'. So we kind of go step by step until they get to the production stage.

Belcher: It sounds like a wonderful opportunity for the students.

Agunga: Yes, but to get back to your question, I grew up in Ghana.

Belcher: Were your parents eager to see you do well in school?

Agunga: Well, let me put it this way. Neither of my parents went to school. Actually, I was the first in my family to go to school. So, that in itself was unusual. My father used to work with the colonial structure. He was a chief and, you know, the chiefs, they are an indirect rule system in Ghana. My father, he would supervise the construction of roads to let the administrators go through, and so on. I always had the impression that he felt he could have been much, much higher if he was educated. He noticed what education did for the people who had it. He said to me, 'My son, I missed education, but my child, my son, shouldn't miss that opportunity'. And so that was the key behind him sending me to school. I am one of five brothers. But I was the youngest at the time when school came to our area. The others were fourteen or fifteen, so they couldn't go to school. But I was young enough.

Belcher: You were at the right age.

Agunga: Right, to make it. So, I was the beginning of education up there. Because of my father's interest that I make it, he didn't really spare the rod.

Belcher: Pretty strict?

Agunga: He was very strict. And there were days I didn't want to go to school but he said, 'You are going to school. It is not a choice.' So I'm grateful that he pushed me hard at that age; otherwise, it was easy to opt out because nobody else was going to school. I was the only one who would wake up early in the morning.

Belcher: That had to be hard.

Agunga: Right. So it was hard. And you have to walk. It was about six miles to school; return trip; we're talking about twelve to fourteen miles a day. At that tender age, it wasn't very easy. But there were a few other kids in the village going to school, so we would all team together and walk through the forest. So that was a very interesting beginning in the sense that it was instilled in me very early that you have to work hard to get what you want to get. I actually had no vision of what I wanted to get. I just wanted to go to school to please my dad. But that discipline was a good beginning for me.

As I got into school, I discovered that, generally, your roots dictate what you will do later in life. For me, agriculture was the mainstay of my people, and subsistence farming was the way of life. I felt that if I could help them improve their productivity and well being, that would be great. So that shaped my interest in agriculture right from the start. I never really gave too much attention to the arts, to literature, even though we had a rich, rich, rich literature. One of the little talents I have is art; you know, painting and so forth. I didn't develop that aspect, even though I had the opportunity to go to the University of Science and Technology to study art. I turned it down because at that time, in our society, they didn't think that was intellectual enough. *[Laughs]* You don't want to complain, you know. So that shaped my choice of a career very, very early.

Belcher: So was the school that you went to an English-medium school?

Agunga: Yes, it was. In the elementary years, we learned in the local language, which is Kusaal. But the Europeans call it Kusasi. Kusasi is the people and Kusaal is the language. But in many of the books they kind of mixed the two. Instead of learning the alphabet in our local language, we were taught English equivalents.

Belcher: So when did they introduce English? Or did you have to move to a different school?

Agunga: No, no, no. Actually, they gradually introduced English. From about primary three, they started introducing English. You used a slate to write the alphabet. So you could say that we just mixed the two languages together from the beginning and gradually tapered off the local language.

Belcher: Bilingual education?

Agunga: Yes, bilingual education. So that's how I got started. English became, more or less, the national language. You would go anywhere and English is spoken. As soon as you get past the elementary school, the rest is all English.

Belcher: Do you think people generally feel good about that – the fact that English is the national language?

Agunga: Well, because of the colonial heritage, we really are not too sensitive to the fact. I think that we should probably fight hard to preserve and protect our language. But we've been socialized at such an early age that we kind of accept it as a norm. But I know that in countries like South Africa, where the blacks really were not mixed and had the time to protect their language, they are very much sensitive to European influence. I know in Zaire, you couldn't wear a tie, and the girls couldn't wear mini-skirts. Mobutu wouldn't allow that. You wouldn't even have 'Robert' in your name; you wouldn't have any English names associated with you. You have two local names, period. So there were these areas where the resentment against the European influence was very, very strong. But in Ghana, I don't think it's that way.

Belcher: So you were able to go to the local school until you were thirteen or fourteen?

Agunga: Yes, I went to that school. It's a six-year school, from primary one to primary six. You could probably say age thirteen or something like that. Then we were moved to a different school. One of the things about my life is the fact that I was gradually moving away and away and away and away from home. I told you how I had to travel about six miles each way to the primary school. The middle school was even farther, located in Zebila, almost forty miles from my home. So I was at boarding school. In other words, we would stay there until school was over before we'd come back to our home. Thus from age fourteen, I began staying away from my family, and I would come home during the holiday period. But I was still doing my family responsibility. Any time I came home, I would weed, tend to the cattle, and so forth. School never excused me from doing my responsibilities or chores. So I would do that. And, you know, we had a horse; I would take the horse and water it, and so forth. I never got spoiled. I was still stuck to my roots. I went to middle school for three years.

Another thing that I need to point out along the way is the competitive nature of our education. Because, for example, even in primary four and primary five, at the end of each quarter we would take exams, and they would rank you first, second, third, all the way to the end. If you were among the top three, your name would be in red ink, and the rest would all be in blue. So it kind of makes you stand out. We were all striving to be at the top of the class. When you were up there, which was what I would have the opportunity to be, you never wanted to really drop back down. That kind of also influenced how much I committed myself to doing well. In

middle school, it was still the same competition. You had to pass a test to go to secondary school, which was what I did. And that again took me more than a hundred miles away from home, because I went to Tamale secondary school, which is located in Tamale, another town of about, I would say, 150 miles away from where my family was. So there was secondary school for five years before I went to an agricultural college because of my interest in agriculture.

There was a difference in our country between an agricultural college and a university, and I believe the same holds here. The agricultural college was a three-year program and would qualify you to go out and work as an extension agent. So when I graduated, around 1971, 1972, I went back to work in my home region as a district extension assistant. I did that for a really very brief period because I had the opportunity to go back to the university to get – it wasn't quite a degree – but it was a diploma that would give you a senior status in the Ministry of Agriculture. But you have to continue for another four years to get the Bachelor's degree. So I got that and went back again to work with the Ministry of Agriculture, and I was working with the ministry until 1979, when I got a scholarship to get a Master's degree in communication at the University of Iowa.

Now one would say, why go from agriculture to communication? But that was a necessary major leap in my life because, working in agriculture, we discovered that we had the technical knowledge of agriculture. We knew what this crop could do and that crop could do, what animal breeds the best, and so forth. But we weren't the farmers; we were the technicians. The farmers were the ones who would take our ideas and put that to productivity, while they didn't have the information that we had. We weren't good communicators, unfortunately, to deliver that information to them. So we discovered such a wide gap that we, the technocrats with Ph.Ds and Master's degrees, were struggling with the concept that we were developing the people, but the people weren't getting anywhere. Fortunately, we had some people, foreigners, who came and said, 'Maybe you guys are not really giving attention to communication.' That professor actually became my mentor. He came to Ghana in 1976 as a consultant for the Food and Agriculture Organization. He had just done his Ph.D. at Michigan State in communication. So he was the person who said maybe we should look at what communication can do for development. He picked me up, literally picked me up, because he said, 'I'll take you to America and I'll train you and send you back.' That is how I came to study at the University of Iowa under him. This was around 1981. I studied with him until I graduated in

1989 with a Ph.D. He and I really shared a lot of philosophies. We have since written book chapters together.

Belcher: He was from Malawi?

Agunga: He was from Malawi. Yes, Joseph Ashgrove from Malawi. He's a very good scholar, a good writer, a storyteller, and I think the African oral culture comes through in his work. That was one of the things that he taught me. You wouldn't believe it, but he never read my dissertation beyond chapter one. He never did. This was his philosophy. He said, 'Look, if I don't understand the first part, there is no reason to think that I'll understand the last part.' 'First,' he says, 'you bring me five pages at a time.' So when I wrote the first five pages, I took them to him. He'd read to page three and say, 'There's no flow here; take it back'. And he says: What I'm looking for is continuity in everything that you say. In your introduction, you tell the reader what it is that you want him or her to get out of this passage. When the reader then finds out that there is no transition between this and that, then there is no continuity. So you go back and find the transition that would link the rest of it to that.' So I just kept doing that for almost a whole term. We were on the semester system. For the whole semester, I worked on chapter one. You can see how frustrated I was. When I got past chapter one, he said, 'Now you go write the rest.' As soon as I bring in chapter two, he would just put it there. Chapter three, he'd just put it there and say go and write chapter four and five and so on. When I'd bring the summary, he'd then look and say, 'OK, so if I go to chapter two, I'll find what you're saying over here?' I'd say, 'Yes, you'll find it if you skim through the chapters'.

To me, that was the moment I learned how to write. You have to really take the pains to organize. Because when I got to chapter two, I started to say, 'What is my goal in this chapter, and how am I going to convince people that I'm really meeting my goal?' People have to have fun when they're reading. They have to believe that you know what you say. They have to trust you that they can believe the facts that you are providing. All that I learned. I liken it to drying your clothes on a string outside in the summer. There is only one string, A to B. But between A and B you can hang your blankets, your underwear, anything, and you can see all that. That, to me, is how you weave an essay. You have to have humor in some places; you have to have facts in some places; you have to provide your own content to your own views of life; you have to assert yourself in certain places. All that together, to me, makes the story worth reading. But it doesn't come easy. It requires a lot of research, a lot of understanding of what it is that you are doing. That's one of the reasons why I worry about our students of today,

because many of them don't want to take the time to visit the literature on their topic.

Belcher: What about your own reading? Did you love to read at an early age?

Agunga: Reading, yes, I loved to read. I read a lot of storybooks by African writers; I read Soyinka and many others. Reading was what we did, especially in the secondary school years. I also discovered that, the more you read, the wider the vocabulary you develop. The less you read, the more limited your vocabulary. Reading is really very helpful to writing; they complement each other very well. You see somebody's style and say, 'I like that! I like that arrangement of words!' Unfortunately, when you become a professor, your opportunities to read stories become limited. I switched from reading stories to reading professional texts, but that is also one of the reasons why I feel very comfortable in writing in my professional area, because to a large extent I have mastered what is out there. I stay on the cutting edge of the field because I am up to date with what people are doing. I can say with some degree of comfort that, especially in the development field, I think I've read so much that is out there that I can go to the World Bank and speak with ease even though they are supposed to be the experts out there. People know I have something to say.

Belcher: Of course, when you become an established faculty member, you have access to things even before they're published, as a reviewer of manuscripts.

Agunga: Exactly. Staying current in your field is so important. But it comes down to putting ink on paper; there's no substitute for writing. Initially, you might chew your pen and drink cups of coffee, and tear your paper several times. But that gradually begins to vanish, and you begin to enjoy your writing. The other thing about being a good writer is to be very critical of yourself. I remember my associate dean came in and I had just written a piece that I wanted him to look at. I had gone through and edited it like crazy. He asked, 'Whose paper is this? Your own paper?' I said, 'Yes, that's my own paper'. 'And you did that?' I said, 'Yes, I did that to my own paper'. That kind of commitment, to tear work apart and repackage it, is just essential.

Belcher: It's hard for a lot of people to do that.

Agunga: Yes, it is very hard for a lot of people.

Belcher: They can't distance themselves from their work.

Agunga: Exactly. But you have to do that. Otherwise your reader would be doing it for you.

Belcher: I was just going to say that – or the reviewers, the editors, and then you lose control.

Agunga: Right. And the other thing I found out is that, having published in my peer journals or refereed journals for quite a while, I have been able to at least judge what will get published and what will not get published. I know now that if I send out four papers, three of them will get published, or at least two of them. One or two may come back with a request for revisions. I know what they want, and I know how much work I have to put into it to get it published.

Belcher: Could you estimate how many articles you've published so far in your career?

Agunga: Oh, probably not a lot. But I have about probably 21 or 22 journal articles.

Belcher: Plus a 400-page book.

Agunga: Yes, this twelve-chapter book. And I have about four other book chapters.

Belcher: Do you have a goal? Every year, do you tell yourself, 'I'm going to try to publish *x* number of articles'? Or do you not think in those terms?

Agunga: Well, our department requires you to publish at least two a year. You could take that as the average expectation. But I feel that if I really commit myself and there are no distractions, such as faculty meetings and all these other things, I could publish easily three or four a year. That's not a problem at all. My problem is there are times I just don't feel like writing. You know those days.

Belcher: When the spirit doesn't move you?

Agunga: When the spirit doesn't move me, I don't try. But once I move myself, then I can put a lot into it. I just got one article published in the *Journal of Extension*, which arrived two days ago.

Belcher: When did you get your first article published? Were you still in graduate school?

Agunga: No, actually after. I never published whilst I was in graduate school. I could have, but it wasn't really what I wanted to do. I guess I am a delayed writer. I never felt that writing would be something I'd be spending a lot of time on. I never felt that I was going to be sitting in academia. I felt that after getting my Ph.D., I was going back to Ghana, back in the trenches, working in development, visiting with farmers, doing things day to day. Writing and being in academia was an afterthought. It was after I had gotten my Ph.D. that I began to evaluate my situation. I realized that the

field of development wasn't where I had thought it was. When I read all the books, at least, all that I could read on 'what is development' and 'how do you get there', I felt so dissatisfied that people who I had thought knew all the answers really didn't know anything that much. So I said, 'I'd like to contribute to the literature on development'. If I could help people get my vision of what the work is and how we should do it, I would be multiplying my efforts many times.

Belcher: Reaching many more people?

Agunga: Exactly. Reaching many more people. Then I started asking myself where I could have the opportunity to do that. Knowing that back in my village there is no library, no electricity, and not a book to read. Worse yet, once I get back out there, I'm probably lost forever. So I weighed the circumstances, and when the opportunity came for me to teach at Ohio State, I said I would capitalize on that because maybe that would buy me time to contribute to the literature on development. That is how I made that decision to come here. I should also mention, though, that my job in Ghana had been lost because I was here for five or six years and the project I was working for had died down; there was no more project to get back to. But I could go back and find a job. That was not the excuse. I just felt that the people I wanted to talk to are the people at the World Bank and the people at the United Nations, and they are not in my village, but right here, in New York. If I stayed here, I would be closer to them and hopefully could be heard, and I have been talking with them ever since. So that is how I came late to academia, but it's never really too late to write.

Belcher: Not when you have ideas.

Agunga: Exactly. The key is having a message to convey.

Belcher: Were your first publications things that came out of your dissertation?

Agunga: Yes, my first publications came out of my dissertation. My dissertation actually was a conceptual dissertation. I got a lot of mileage out of it because conceptual dissertations are essentially a literature review. You really do an extensive review in the dissertation. That really opens your mind up. That was what I discovered. After I had written my dissertation, it opened so much of my mind that I could begin to see one thousand and one opportunities to write. For most writers, at least for new writers, the problem is what to write about. I didn't have that problem. Two things helped me: My field experience helped me a lot because I could see the problem from right up to the person, the farmer, the policy maker, and the field agent in between. I could see problems at each level, so there was so

much to write about that you could write all day. And when I came to academia, then I got exposed also to the academic side of things, and I found a big gap between theory and practice. That has been what I've been trying to do, narrow the gap. How can we take theory and make it sound practice, and vice versa? How can what we learn in practice shape the theories that guide our thinking? This has been very challenging and interesting.

Belcher: You mentioned that you have collaborated with your advisor. Do you often collaborate these days? Do you like that approach to writing?

Agunga: I like collaboration when the opportunity arises, but I don't depend on it to write. Some students tend to rely very much on collaboration probably because they don't know what to write about. They lean on somebody for help.

Belcher: Like their advisor?

Agunga: Like their advisor. But in my case, it was more that I want to write an article with my advisor, and that kind of gratification: we have worked so many years together; let's write an article that will help us remember those years. I try to do that with my own students once in a while. I don't just want them to reference me as an advisor. I want them to be able to say that we did this together, that we presented a conference paper together. I think that brings the advisor much closer than just the formal setting. That's why my former advisor and I did the book chapter together. He has some strength in some areas in the collaboration process. He's a very good editor, and he really taught me a lot. I think I know a bit more of how to edit now, but there's always something more you can learn from your mentor. Your mentor will always be your mentor; that's what I've learned from him. Even when you are out in the wide world, you still need somebody to kind of confer with.

Belcher: What about when you're preparing a manuscript that you want to send out to a journal? Do you take advantage of your colleagues very much? Do you ask them to read what you've written?

Agunga: I do that too. I like that procedure very much. Not so much with my colleagues because some of the areas that I write about, not many of my colleagues are interested in or know about. But I try to draw on those who are interested in that. Sometimes I send my work to my friends in other towns, in other campuses, and say, 'This is an article I'm working on for this journal; can you take a look at it and give me feedback?' But the people I use most are my graduate students. I give it to two or three of my graduate students and say, 'Look at it and come back and tell me'. Because, believe it

or not, many of the people who read what we write tend to be graduate students.

Belcher: That's a good point.

Agunga: Right. It's not so much our peers as graduate students. So, if you don't understand it or don't like it, I think there is room for me to improve on it.

Belcher: That's a nice approach. What about reviewers? Do you find that their comments are helpful? Or do you think sometimes they're too critical? I know I personally have found that, if I get several sets of reviewers' comments, sometimes they'll be conflicting and not very helpful.

Agunga: That happens. But I think even in that conflict, there is still some truth that you're not getting your message across, because if you hear dissonance in their minds, maybe they're not seeing the problem from the way you are seeing it, and obviously it's not easy always to see the problem from that way. But at least you get the view of one group of readers. Sometimes you are writing a paper that's critical of what they are doing for a living.

Belcher: And those are exactly the people the editors may send it to.

Agunga: So they would do everything they can to say you're not right. For people like that, there's nothing you can do except tell the editor sometimes. I'm supposed to provide references to support my thesis, and I believe I've given you sufficient references. I've never really had a big problem of arguing with editors. One instance I had was an article on sustainable agriculture. Sustainable agriculture is a new concept that is coming out, saying that farmers should be more mindful of the land.

Belcher: I've worked with one of your students who was writing about this.

Agunga: Right. So the mainstream agriculture people are still not very happy with that concept. When I wrote this, the people who had to review it were in mainstream agriculture, and they were very sensitive about what I had to say. But the editor was very supportive of me and said, 'There are some concerns expressed by the reviewers, but I don't share their concerns. I'm going to publish it'. So that was one instance.

Belcher: The last thing I really want to ask you about has to do with what kind of advice you would give to people who are just starting their graduate careers and maybe they're new to this country. It seems to me, from what you've been saying, that one of the most important things for you was having a mentor. You still have a good relationship with your own mentor.

Agunga: Yes, I still have a very good relationship with my mentor. I think that's very important. A mentor doesn't necessarily have to be, as in my case, somebody who comes from the same environment. I've had professors who were not African, but we had a very good relationship. It is the subject matter that really unites the student and the instructor. If you're doing a topic that is of interest to your mentor or any faculty member, I think they'll be happier to work with you.

Belcher: And you're more likely to find a mentor.

Agunga: Right. So that's very important.

Belcher: Don't look for the person; look for the subject first?

Agunga: I would look for the subject first because some people want nice guys. You know, 'He's a nice guy, but he doesn't know what I'm doing.' Nice guys tend to just help you through the program. I've known people who have had dissertations that they've never had an article out of because it didn't make any sense; it had nothing of value in it. They had a nice advisor who just said, 'OK, OK, OK'. You can get that degree and go, but your future as a writer is not really that bright.

Belcher: How successful will you be?

Agunga: Exactly. But you have to just develop an interest in writing and look at what is happening in society and say, 'How can I help make a difference?' I think that is where you begin a discovery of a niche. Good writers find niches. They find an area that has been less trod, and then they begin to take that as their calling, and begin to do something about it.

Belcher: You talked about having a message.

Agunga: Right. You have to have a message. Without that, I don't think you really have a story.