

# First Steps in Participatory Practice

## Program Context

I work as the Coordinator/Instructor of the Literacy and Academic Upgrading Programs for the John Howard Society (JHS) in a large urban centre. Our learners are men, women and youth who have been involved or might be at risk of involvement with the criminal justice system. The family members of our learners are also able to access the literacy and upgrading programs.

The majority of our learners are involved in the adult literacy program, receiving one-to-one assistance from a volunteer tutor. While most learners live in the community, including some at our halfway house, several are in the Young Offender Centre, and others are incarcerated in one of our three other local correctional institutions. A small number of learners pursue their academic upgrading through attendance at the JHS Learning Opportunities Centre, where they work on individualized programs with instructor support.

Recent graduate research I carried out on the literacy education of federally incarcerated women made me aware that prison education programs in Alberta and Saskatchewan at the basic literacy and upgrading levels offer little, if any, opportunities for significant intellectual growth or the development of critical thinking skills. Historically in Canada prison education has come under heavy criticism. According to Cosman (1981, p. 40):

Penitentiary education in Canada has been characterized by a general lack of interest in genuine educational achievement, by a lack of discrimination in matters of curriculum between the trivial and the important, ...a lack of discipline and structure, and by a complete lack of educational research.

Incarcerated women and men function in an environment within which they tend to be infantilized, and where they are for the most part deprived of any personal power or decision-making opportunities. To counter this tendency, the JHS literacy and upgrading programs offer learners the opportunity and encouragement necessary to take an active role in framing their individual learning experiences, with the assistance and encouragement of their tutor or instructor.

Historically in our programs, however, learners have not been offered opportunities to participate in program or project planning. Each year proposals must be submitted to potential funders to ensure the continuation of the literacy and upgrading programs, and decisions are made and programs planned according to funders' criteria months in advance of program commencement. The coordinator has subsequently maintained sole control of these projects.

Tutors are encouraged to work closely with their learners in acquiring appropriate curricular materials, but learners have not been afforded the opportunity to work together to contribute toward the development of curricular activities which would draw on their interests, knowledge, skills and expertise.

While development of reading and writing skills is of course fundamental, Jurmo contends such skill development is an inadequate literacy program goal; rather:

Literacy programs need to be structured to enhance the development of additional characteristics, including critical thinking or problem-solving, ability to work collaboratively with others, self-esteem, and interest in continuing one's education" (Jurmo, 1989, p. 20).

These personal qualities are deemed basic to the development of a healthy, mature adult, and without such qualities, learners are "likely to remain passive and not even use the technical skills that he or she already has" (Jurmo, 1989, pp. 20-21).

In September 1997, we received project funding from the National Literacy Secretariat to 1) address the need for high interest, appropriate and relevant literacy learning materials for youth in conflict with the law, and 2) to give youth the opportunity to take an active rather than passive role in the development of learning materials for use by themselves and their peers, and in their own literacy learning and continuing educational endeavours.

Our original JHS Participatory Curriculum Development Project held as its objectives:

- 1) To develop learning materials/curricula intended for the specific population of young men and women currently or formerly incarcerated or involved with the criminal justice system.
- 2) To facilitate learner participation in curriculum creation.
- 3) To make available to learners and teachers in both provincial and federal correctional institutions within Alberta the resultant curriculum document.
- 4) To encourage and promote ongoing participatory literacy activities with offenders and ex-offenders, within and outside of prison school settings, with the curriculum document and the curriculum creation process potentially serving as model and catalyst for both learners and teachers.

The participatory nature of this project made it an ideal focus for involvement in the larger Provincial research opportunity which was made available early in 1998.

## **Research Question**

While struggling to define my research question, I wondered if indeed our learners would be at all interested in, or have the time and energy for, taking part in such a project, given their need to deal with so many crucial life issues. Would they want to be part of a project which would present academic challenges outside of their experience? And most

importantly, would their experience of involvement prove personally beneficial to them? Therefore my research question became:

**When learners are given the opportunity to participate in a curriculum development project, what form will that participation take, and how will learners benefit from such participation?**

## **Inviting Participant Involvement**

Historically the JHS Literacy and Upgrading Programs have been offered via one-to-one tutoring or through independent study with instructor assistance, both for learners in the community and for those residing in correctional institutions. As it is quite unusual for any two learners to be working on the same subject or level at any given time, and because it is often physically difficult for learners to gather at one central location due to the size of the city, the costs and time involved in travelling the public transit system, and in some cases employment schedules, it has been difficult to incorporate group work into learning opportunities offered. It was therefore very challenging to assemble a group of learners willing to participate in this project.

Letters of invitation were sent to all learners in the JHS Literacy and Upgrading programs, inviting their participation in the curriculum development project, and inviting their submissions of stories and poems for inclusion in the booklet. A letter was also sent to each of the tutors advising them of the project and encouraging them to work with their learners on writings for the booklet, with the hope they would also encourage their learners to sit on the committee. In addition, learners demonstrating a commitment to academic upgrading in the Learning Opportunities Centre were invited by me to take part in the project. While no response was received from our Literacy learners, four of the five Learning Opportunities Centre learners so invited did accept: Fred, Nilda, Breeann and Jackie..

Each participant was asked individually to sit on the committee, following an explanation of the project. As each person agreed to take part in the project, formal consent forms (modelled after those required by the local university for research with human subjects) were presented and read to them prior to their signing. All of the participants wished to have their real first names used in any reporting of the project.

As the project had been planned many months prior to their involvement, in essence the project was defined and in place prior to their participation. Their involvement, then, was to, and did, take the following forms:

- As a committee they would choose the poems/stories for inclusion in the booklet
- Prior to deciding which submissions would be accepted, committee members would create a list of criteria for inclusion upon which their decisions would be based
- The committee would choose the layout for the booklet, the order in which the writings would appear, and suitable learner artwork to enhance the appeal of the booklet

- The committee would create some of the curricular activities to be included in the booklet. I believed the creation of activities to accompany the writings in the booklet to be a fairly difficult task. I did not expect the participants to come up with **all** the activities which would be required to make the final document a solid and worthwhile resource, but did rightly anticipate committee members would bring forward ideas for suitable activities which other literacy learners would find meaningful and worthwhile
- The committee would plan and host the World Literacy Day celebration at which the booklet would be “launched”
- Committee members would be asked to write of their experience of being involved in the project at an early point in their participation and again following the World Literacy Day celebration
- Committee members would be interviewed by the project consultant (a professor from the Graduate Division of Educational Research at the local university) regarding their experience of being involved in the project.

## **Collection and Analysis of Data**

I collected data in the following ways during the course of the project:

- I kept notes on and/or tape-recorded the meetings I deemed most critical to the project.
- I requested that committee members write about their experiences (thoughts and feelings) of being involved in the project, both at a point early in their involvement, and again later following the World Literacy Day celebration and booklet launch.
- To ensure unbiased input from a third party source, I contracted a professor from the local university’s Faculty of Education to act as project consultant. She conducted semi-structured interviews with project participants and attended the most significant meetings of the committee. Semi-structured interviews were chosen to encourage participant input beyond the interview questions I had developed.
- I kept fieldnotes on my observations of the learners as they worked on the project together outside of formal committee meetings.
- I kept a reflective journal in which I could document and explore my thoughts and feelings about the research project.

The data were analyzed in the following ways:

- Meeting transcripts were analyzed for level and type of learner input and participation
- Fieldnotes were examined for significant evidence of participant involvement in the project
- Interview transcripts were examined for self-reported perceptions of involvement in the project and for indications of personal benefits received

- Participants' writings were analyzed for themes, by which I studied their writings to determine the presence of material which could be seen to directly address the research question. I also sought to determine if similar ideas and/or areas of concern were reflected in more than one participant's writings.
- My reflective journal was analyzed for themes arising from my experience of the project. I chose as themes those ideas and strands of thinking which recurred throughout the life of the project, determining their significance by the frequency with which they were written about, and the level of impact they had on my participation in the project.

## Forms Participation Took

### 1. Group Work

Although it took several months, a group of four learners was formed to take part in this project with me. The first learner, Fred, assumed a leadership role from the very beginning (March), coming to the first formal meeting with a prepared, typed agenda, and he maintained this leadership role throughout the duration of the project. He seemed not entirely happy when Nilda joined the committee in April, but this was short-lived, and the two of them worked extremely well together in a very short time. As Breeann and Jackie came on board (August), there seemed not to be a recurrence of such resistance to sharing the project. Indeed, they were quite welcoming as Jackie and Breeann joined the group.

As the first two participants involved, Fred and Nilda spent a considerable amount of time working together on the project.

*We even took time ourselves when Linda wasn't around to discuss, well, we've got to do this, we've got to do that, and what should be done. We seemed to get together on that.* [Fred: interview]

Later Breeann and Jackie worked closely together as Breeann assisted Jackie, initially in confidence, with some of the more challenging literacy activities, namely determining criteria for acceptance of writings for the booklet, and creating learning activities to accompany the chosen submissions.

Several months prior to completion of the booklet and the World Literacy Day Celebration, Nilda was transferred to the local Remand Centre from which Temporary Absences are not granted. As she was thus unable to attend the meetings of the committee, I met with her in Remand on Thursday mornings, and shared with her the work of the rest of the committee. At our Friday morning committee meetings I shared with the rest of the group the ideas Nilda and I had discussed the previous day. While I felt the group continued to work cohesively, considering that Nilda was unable to be physically present at the committee meetings, Fred found this way of working difficult and stated during his interview:

*I figure the biggest point is discussion, and we lost that when she [Nilda] was incarcerated. I had to go through Linda to talk, and if I had anything Linda took it to her, and we went that way....That was a drawback for me....I found that a little frustrating.*

Although we attempted to hold committee meetings every week, the learner participants' changing work schedules, appointments, crises, and incarceration rendered it difficult to get everyone together at the same time.

By mid-August, the committee members were working diligently to finalize their criteria for inclusion of writings in the booklet, but as World Literacy Day rapidly approached, we realized it would be impossible to include the learning activities in the booklet to be launched at the World Literacy Day celebration. I decided the committee could continue with the "learning activities" segment of the booklet following the celebration. The committee thus determined the criteria for inclusion; read, discussed and decided which writings should be included; and then turned their attention toward planning the celebration in great detail, from the food and decorations to the guest list and hosting activities.

Following the very successful celebratory function, the committee began the challenging work of creating learning activities corresponding to the writings chosen for the booklet. Notwithstanding Nilda's continuing incarceration, all members of the committee contributed learning activities for the booklet. Once their involvement in the project came to an end in November, the committee folded.

## **2. Expanding the Parameters**

At the beginning of the project, I was very clear about how it would unfold. Literacy learners and learners in the Upgrading Program would submit their writings and art work for the booklet and our committee would 1) draw up criteria for inclusion; 2) read and discuss each piece in order to make our decisions; and 3) create curricular/learning activities to correspond with each text. The booklet would be typed up and printed, and on World Literacy Day we'd celebrate with the launch of the booklet and some great food.

But I had underestimated the committee members. With their shared focus on the booklet, they met together spontaneously in the Learning Centre to work on the project between regularly-scheduled committee meetings, and came up with ideas for the project which I had neither included nor planned to include.

Nilda decided that because so few people knew who John Howard was, a short biography on him should be included in the booklet, and she undertook research at the city's main library to write a piece for inclusion. Incarcerated in our local minimum-security institution, and attending the Learning Centre under the

auspices of a daily Temporary Absence, Nilda advocated for the project to other inmates by inviting their writings for the booklet. Upon being sent back to the Remand Centre from which Temporary Absences were not allowed, she advocated to the correctional officers, which resulted in two officers requesting an invitation to the World Literacy Day event.

Fred approached participants and staff of the Youth in Care and Custody Network (which maintains an office in our building) and later his peers in the JHS Employment Program, for writings for inclusion in the booklet, as well as urging me to contact inmates in all the local correctional facilities to invite their submissions. As a result of Jackie reading her poems aloud during one of the committee meetings, the parameters of the project were stretched to include the possibility of a tape recording of the authors reading their writings to accompany the booklet.

### 3. **Infusing Energy**

As with the majority of Literacy Coordinators, I am used to working in relative isolation. Thus I was surprised and delighted at the amount of energy the other participants brought to the project and to me.

*I don't have to work in isolation; others are dynamically involved, offering ideas, insights, and sharing the workload. The enthusiasm the learners demonstrate is particularly heartwarming. Their degree of involvement and their desire to be more involved is a very pleasant surprise.*  
[Reflective Journal]

### 4. **Sharing Power in the Group**

As the committee was to select the writings that would be included in the booklet (some of which were their own) following their drawing up of criteria for inclusion, and as they were to subsequently create corresponding activities to go with the writings, they were engaged in many literacy activities themselves. In addition to their reading and writing around the booklet itself, they were also asked to write about their experience of being involved in the project at two points – shortly after they joined the committee and again following the World Literacy Day celebration.

One meeting was spent discussing the criteria for inclusion. Fred drew up a list of ten criteria which he presented to the committee. None of the others offered additional ideas for criteria: as Fred's submission proved very appropriate, his criteria were confirmed as the ones which would guide the selection of the writings.

Once the criteria had been set, participants were given copies of the writings submitted, which they were asked to read and choose from for inclusion in the

booklet. Fred's suggestion that committee members put in writing their reasons for choosing or excluding each piece of writing was accepted by the committee, and each participant did so.

At the following meeting, committee members discussed each piece of writing and made decisions for inclusion. In light of the criteria Nilda had some difficulty with one of the stories in which the author used the phrase, "bust your ass." After discussion about whether or not the phrase would be offensive to others and whether the author should be asked to rephrase his idea, the committee chose to include the story as it had been written.

In discussing a poem which proved problematic in rhythm, one committee member suggested we remove a line in order to make the poem work. Following a short period of silence Jackie asked, "Can we do that?" Her question led to a discussion of "editorial ethics", and it was decided to return the poem to the author with a request for revision. The committee created several alternatives for the author to consider in her reworking of the piece.

In the meeting held in mid-November for the creation of learning activities (prior to which I had done brainstorming sessions with Jackie because she felt very inadequate to the task and was experiencing a great deal of anxiety around it), each participant offered wonderful ideas for activities which other literacy learners would find interesting. For example, Breeann suggested that several blank lined pages be included in the booklet for literacy learners to fill with their stories and poems, without which the booklet would not be complete.

In choosing the order in which the writings would appear, the committee decided that rather than having the poems at the beginning with the stories following (in essence ordered by length), the writings should be grouped in order of subject matter or theme.

Thus while the learner participants may not have realized it, they engaged in some fairly sophisticated literacy activities, at a level far beyond what I had anticipated.

## **5. Sharing of Gifts**

Beyond the tasks entailed in the compilation of the booklet, the participants offered many personal gifts and talents to the project. They demonstrated kindness and compassion towards each other as they struggled with some of the more difficult literacy aspects of the project. They offered their enthusiasm for the project and brought to it a high level of energy.

At the World Literacy Day celebration they shared their culinary and artistic gifts and talents; they welcomed their guests warmly and attended to their needs. They shared their thoughts and feelings about the booklet and the project with the guests, which included family members and friends. And to the overall project

they brought great fun and laughter, and an infusion of creative ideas which greatly enriched the project and my participation in it.

### **Barriers/Limitations to Learner Participation in the Project**

The original project had been developed well in advance of active learner participation, and thus the learners had no input into the overall design and focus of the project. Although participants expressed an interest and desire to be more involved, there were barriers to their doing so. While I had hoped to have the committee work together to write the letter of invitation for the World Literacy Day celebration, it was impossible to get everyone together during the critical time in which the invitations needed to be sent. Due to confidentiality concerns, I was unable to have participants address the envelopes to program learners and tutors, even though one participant in particular had expressed the desire to do more. She had also offered to transcribe the tapes of one of the significant meetings, which she had been unable to attend. Due to the lengthy process involved in transcribing audiotapes, and my desire to have the transcription done at the earliest possible time, I chose to complete the task myself. In the interview done by the project consultant with this participant, it became apparent she was also interested in working on the writing of this report, but felt she did not have the education required to do so. I had not anticipated participant interest in engaging in these kinds of activities; my view of the contributions learners could or would be willing to make was much more limited than the reality of the situation would suggest. I underestimated the learners in many ways.

On the other hand, I may have overestimated them in other ways. Perhaps by the very nature of the project (choosing and editing pieces of writing for inclusion in the booklet, setting criteria for inclusion) some of the participants found participation difficult, which in turn caused them undue anxiety. I had taken a great deal for granted. For instance, in asking the participants to come up with “criteria” for the pieces of writing which would be accepted, some participants perhaps did not understand what was meant by the word, although I did try to define it for them in several ways, i.e., what would be acceptable as content, subject matter, and use of language. How would we know if a piece of writing was “good” or suitable for other literacy learners at various levels of ability? Thus, the language I used may have proven exclusionary.

I was therefore quite surprised by the energy and enthusiasm with which they participated together on the project. Although there were “academic” tasks requested from them that they may have felt inadequate in undertaking, nonetheless they put a fair amount of work into them.

Fred voiced his preference for working in a group as opposed to working alone. Fred and Nilda spend a lot of time discussing their ideas for the project with each other, as did Breeann and Jackie. Whereas I felt group participation remained adequate and intact even after Nilda was incarcerated with no TA privileges, Fred found it difficult without the face-to-face discussion, stating “It was so hard to discover her thoughts from reading little sets of ideas...from her...to realize what she really meant by it.”

## **Benefits for Learners of Participation**

It had been my sincere hope the learner-participants would enjoy being involved in the project with each other and with me, and that they would have the opportunity to learn and grow, in areas both academic and personal, while they engaged in the many activities associated with the project. My hopes were in some measure realized, for each acknowledged enjoyment in participation.

I perceived further benefits [from my “educator’s” perspective]: the significance of their potential contribution to future literacy learners and tutors, teachers in correctional centres, and others who will use the booklet’s writings and activities as a vehicle toward increased literacy skills; the use of fairly complex literacy, problem-solving and critical thinking skills; the supportive group atmosphere which they developed and maintained throughout the project; and the pride they exhibited at the World Literacy Day celebration, surrounded by family and friends. Each learner-participant was dealing with some fairly serious life-issues during the life of the project, and I believe their project work allowed them freedom from the usual course of their days – gave them something else to think about, beyond their meeting with parole or probation officers and lawyers, returning to the correctional institution in the evenings, and the like. I observed their delight upon seeing the completed booklet (version one) with some of their own writings included, and their names in the front acknowledging their involvement in its creation. And while I identified these benefits, two identified some of their own. In her interview, Jackie stated:

**I think the best part for me was me being able to go home and write some poems, and at the same time not knowing if they’d be part of the project. And in the end they were accepted and nobody even found no mistakes in my poems. So being involved and having accomplished something and seeing it on paper.**

**I’m so used to not having to learn, or say or do anything. That was my first time being out doing and being in that kind of class. So therefore, it got me to open up and to express my thoughts, where I usually keep them to myself, so Linda had me talking and stuff, expressing my views, so I think I really opened up. The first meeting I really didn’t have too much to say, but a couple of meetings later I started opening my mouth, and it got easier and easier, so I started enjoying it.**

**I understand literacy better now than I ever have, cause I always thought that I was pretty illiterate. And I know now that I’m not. But a literacy program can help the slower people, and I am a slower people, so it helped me have a different look, a lot more confidence.**

Breeann indicated a benefit in the area of literacy as well. Some of the poems that were submitted for inclusion in the booklet contained words with which she wasn't familiar, which led her to conclude:

**I need to educate myself more on words or stuff so I can understand, cause there some poems that came in with words I didn't understand. I want to know more about the English language. I tried to be more intellectual about [my reading and writing], I guess. I think that's the word I'm trying to use. This project made me think of different words I could use. Like I would look in a synonym book, and what words would go, instead of "that was great." Everything was "great." So what other words would go? That's what it made me do. That was kind of neat.... Instead of "That was good," like those words are so plain. You could have words like "intriguing." Things like that sound better, I think.**

**It's a good learning process for a person, I think, this type of group. Because it makes you know yourself better, because you're looking into somebody else's stuff, and then you see what you could do to correct yourself. Like, I didn't like this poem or this sentence because of this reason. Well, what about me. If I was writing a poem, what kind of understandings would I want people to understand through my poem? So that's what I try to do, and I think it's important for people to know those things. It gets you to check yourself as well.**

Breeann felt she had the opportunity to make important decisions about the project, certainly in the area of helping to choose which poems and stories would be included in the booklet.

**It made me feel important, and it was important because I'm choosing...helping people decide whether or not this person's poem should go in or not. And there's a lot of thought to that, because they all have different characteristics and stuff.**

During the interview, none of Fred's comments touched on self-identified positive benefits from his involvement in the program. Rather, there were several areas of concern, some of which are reflected elsewhere in this report.

It was not possible to interview Nilda, as she had been transferred to a correctional centre several hundred miles away, and was subsequently deported to South America.

## **Reflections on My Participation in the Project**

What an incredible learning experience this project has been for me! Inner struggles regarding the sharing of power and control were frequent. Throughout the life of the project, constraints on time proved an unwelcome and constant challenge: especially

affected was time for reflective writing and deep thought about the project, and for writing the research report.

Because time was short, I experienced periods of intense frustration when the committee members expanded the parameters of the project by including components beyond those conceived for the original project. Ofttimes it was difficult to try to be true to the participatory nature of the project rather than simply taking complete control over every facet. It was very easy to completely give over the World Literacy Day celebration and booklet launch, however, undoubtedly because it was non-academic in nature.

It was difficult, too, to find an appropriate balance between being, at one end of the continuum, “in charge” of this project for which I held responsibility to the funder, and at the other end being a “noncontributing observer.” I struggled constantly to be “one with” the other members of the committee, but found it difficult to gain and maintain such balance.

Yet neither had I anticipated the many positive benefits of working with a group on a project such as this. The participants brought new ideas, heightened energy levels around the project, and offered their gifts. I didn’t have to work in isolation, for others were dynamically involved. When given the opportunity to participate, the learners jumped at the chance and far exceeded my limited expectations of them. Although the project placed the participants in a setting quite different from their day-to-day environments, and while what was being asked of them was in some ways quite complex, I was quite surprised by instances of literacy work they were doing, and only through the surprise I experienced, when the participants offered some astounding, insightful comments, did I realize I had cast these four in a deficit model. My assumptions regarding their abilities were significantly challenged.

I saw a reflection of myself in these learners as well. I experienced a great deal of stress surrounding the reporting of this project because I had just completed a Master’s Degree; had barely been out of the thesis defense, and here I was again, having to write another research report, and again feeling inadequate to the task before me. Were the project facilitators expecting things from me that I just couldn’t deliver? Although I frequently reminded myself that this was a research report, not a thesis, would they nonetheless be expecting an elevated level of rich data that we as researchers pray for? And while I tried to convince myself otherwise, because I so greatly admired the abilities and work of one of the other fellow-researchers in this larger project, I agonized over every thought, every word, so as not to prove an embarrassment to the project, and so as not to embarrass myself in front of my peers. I endeavored to find a “voice” that better expressed my delight in having the learners involved in the project with me, yet remained trapped in the formal academic language I had learned so very well. While I’ve never needed to be at the top of the class, I’ve always worked very diligently to avoid looking stupid. Much like Jackie, who sought out Breeann to give her the “right” answers, and who felt inadequate to her task, I too spent an inordinate amount of time searching (unfortunately for the most part in solitude) for the right answers, the right ideas, the perfect quotations, to include in this report, hesitating to seek out assistance from Mary or Grace, because I

didn't want to appear inadequate to **my** task. Thus while I cast the learner-participants in a deficit model, I seem to have cast myself within that model as well.

Much time has passed since the four committee members worked with me on this project, and I need to be realistic about the benefits experienced by them. My hope had been for each to experience a boost in self-esteem which would prove life-changing, and in the short-term perhaps this hope was realized. In the long-term, however, there seems little evidence of this. One learner has been deported to South America and is having a very difficult time essentially now living in abject poverty. Another participant has experienced a number of crises in recent months. Yet perhaps the project can be perceived as an oasis, a time and place in which they were able to concentrate their energies and gifts on a project outside their normal experience of life, perhaps finding respite in a place of safety and acceptance if even for only a brief period in their lives.