

**Crossing Critical Thresholds at the Bob Steele Reading Center: Transforming  
Potentiality Into Actuality**  
(2000/2005 revised)  
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(comments appreciated)

We always live at the time we live and not at some other time, and only by extracting at each present time the full meaning of each present experience are we prepared for doing the same thing in the future. This is the only preparation which in the long run amounts to anything (Dewey, 1938/1963, p. 49).

### **Introduction**

The Deweyan quote points to a key factor in the development of the Bob Steele Reading Center as it grew from a germ of an idea in the mid-1980s to one of the more cutting edge literacy sites in the LVA network a decade later. That factor is the unleashing of *potentiality* as the underlying force that undergirded the transformation of the program through several critical incarnations. I linked such a felt sense of potentiality formally with Dewey's (1916/1944, pp. 41-53) concept of growth defined as the *enhancement* of experience through the exercise of critical intelligence as a compelling heuristic to both grasp and shape the Reading Center's organizational culture.

Growth on Dewey's interpretation contains two dimensions, a productive component through the "extraction" of maximum potential within a given situation, and an aesthetic component in the "consummation" of experience into art (Dewey, 1934/1989; Alexander, 1987). Such a self-realization ethic reflected some of the most profound aspirations of students and tutors at the Bob Steele Reading Center, which enabled many program participants to enact the "literacy myth" (Graff, 1979). The following conversation between a student and myself provides an apt illustration (Demetrion and Gruner, 1995, p. 58):

**George:** How strong is your motivation to continue?

**Elaine:** It's very strong.

**George:** What is the source that drives it?

**Elaine:** I want something. I want to do something; to have a goal. That's the motive. I want to go up in life.

**George:** You want to go up?

**Elaine:** To the top.

**George:** Where's the top?

**Elaine:** To be a nurse.

That sentiment, expressed in a variety of ways, represented a prevalent quest among students at the Bob Steele Reading Center between 1987-1996. Such a climate of potentiality motivated not only the students, but represented a major organizational drive

which shaped the program's expansion through major transformative stages during much of its first decade (Demetrian, 2002; Demetrian and Gruner, 1995). However "mythical" this perception of growth through literacy may be, I argue that such a belief played a significant, although ambiguous role in shaping much of the emotional, cognitive, social, and cultural climate of the program during the formative period of the program's history. Without such "illusions," what William James refers to as "A live hypothesis...which appeals as a real possibility to him to whom it is proposed" (Wilshire, 1984, p. 309), the program very well could have deconstructed under the depressing weight of "objective" reality. My objective in this essay is to unearth something of the phenomenology of key transitional events during the program's founding decade in order to provide the reader with a felt sense of the Center's historical development, at least as viewed through my eyes. Most basically, I want to examine the role of potentiality as a vehicle of program transformation and secondarily as a means of mediating and mitigating organizational conflict as well as my own intrapsychic tension.

In order to grasp something of such a force field, a historical overview of events surrounding the Center's founding may be useful. Public documentation for this early history is scarce. As an observer-participant, I draw on a profusion of local knowledge and my own recollections, while recognizing that others may have different slants on the little known history of the Bob Steele Reading Center and the growth of Literacy Volunteers of Greater Hartford during these formative years.

### **Historical Overview**

The concept of a learning center was developed among the board and staff leadership of Literacy Volunteers of America-Connecticut (LVA-CT) in the early 1980s. LVA-CT was formed in 1972 through a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, which enabled LVA national to set up centralized offices in Connecticut, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and New York City for the purpose of expanding local programming. LVA-CT focused its first decade on the development of eighteen local affiliates across the state. In the LVA model the affiliates provide direct services while the state organization offers auxiliary support in training, public relations, fund raising, and other related areas.

Literacy Volunteers of Greater Hartford (LVGH), which in 1989 took over the management of the Bob Steele Reading Center, also began its history in 1972 as the state's first affiliate, which was initially incorporated into LVA-CT. A few years later, as other affiliates in the state were formed, LVGH became an independent entity. Grounded in the ethos of LVA founder, Ruth Colvin, the early pioneers of LVGH emphasized the spirit of volunteerism. The agency leadership consisted essentially of middle class women largely living west of the Connecticut River, who used their homes to carry out various managerial functions of data collection, tutor support, and the matching of students and tutors. In its initial stages, the LVGH program was completely decentralized. Students and tutors met as isolated "matches," typically in libraries and other locations throughout the greater Hartford community based on the one-to-one

tutoring model in replication of the LVA set-up as pioneered by Syracuse-based national agency founder, Ruth Colvin in the 1960s (Colvin, 1992). This decentralized format of program delivery and volunteer tutoring remained characteristic of the vast majority of LVA affiliates in Connecticut and throughout the nation through the early 1980s.

The state organization operated out of a different organizational culture. It exuded an ethos of professionalization via a managerial ethos, which it desired to foster at least among the larger affiliates, often without a substantial grasp of the culture of the local affiliates. In its differentiation from them, LVA-CT possessed the financial resources and network connections to develop a full time paid staff, which included an executive director, field services personnel, clerical support, and eventually a director of development. Although local affiliates had representation on LVA-CT's board of directors, the major sources of authority and legitimization within the agency stemmed from the corporate sector and the Connecticut Bureau of Adult Education. Both of these entities stressed the importance of statistical accountability, a management by objective organizational structure, and a functional literacy orientation geared to "re-tool" the workforce to meet the "informational" needs of the post-industrial economy (Adult Education Study Committee, 1985; Alamprese, 1988, 1989, 1993).

Much of the revenue raised by LVA-CT came in the form of grants, which required the state office to move in directions that differed from that of most of the local affiliates throughout the 1970s and 1980s. However, the more sophisticated urban affiliates shared certain affinities with LVA-CT in the embrace of a managerial, corporate vision while maintaining the volunteer ethos of Ruth Colvin as a central component of their organizational culture. Thus, while most of the affiliates shaped their organizational imagery from the paradigmatic student-tutor bond, reinforced via a powerful volunteer ethos, the state organization embraced more of a systems approach, although not at an overly advanced level of complexity. The latter prioritized management over pedagogy and identified the center of organizational power and legitimization with staff, key board members, and funders. This was buttressed by a professional ethos, which placed volunteers and students in a subordinate role within the iconography of the state office's organizational culture, notwithstanding LVA's rhetoric, in which, as stated by founder Ruth Colvin "[t]he most important person in the LVA organization is the student, next is each individual tutor" (Colvin, 1992, p. 81).

The gap between this ideal and the reality of practice has generated considerable conflict within the cultural politics throughout the LVA network. In the broadest of socio-cultural terms, the conflict of interest and values within the LVA network in Connecticut may be described as that between the old Yankee traditions of benevolence, charity, and voluntarism on the one hand, and those of the managerial class on the other hand. Conflict over pedagogy, funding, and organizational development between the local affiliate in Hartford and the state organization had their foundation in these cultural tensions. This was indicative of tensions pervasive throughout the LVA network all over the United States.

It was within this tense climate that the Bob Steele Reading Center was formed in Hartford in 1986. The idea for a centralized learning center surfaced within LVA-CT in the early 1980s. The state office presented it to LVGH for its consideration. In the LVA system only the local affiliates provide direct services. To the state office, also located in the capital city, Hartford seemed the only reasonable location for such a center. It was also the most likely place at that time in Connecticut where sustainable funding sources would be found.

The local agency declined on the rationale that it lacked the resources to finance and manage such a program. The state organization moved ahead, nonetheless, in large part because its staff believed that such a model would serve as a viable way of providing support services to students and tutors in Hartford. LVA-CT staff also believed that such a center would help move LVGH toward the more professional model that the state agency deemed essential for program efficiency and organizational survival in a major urban context.

These efforts proved successful. In November 1986, the Bob Steele Reading Center opened with the assistance of a ten-year \$50,000 seed grant from the Hartford-based 1080 Corporation. LVA-CT, which procured the financial support, would manage and finance the program while tutoring hours at the Center would be reported to LVGH. A program director and VISTA Volunteer with strong community activist leanings were hired to operate the Center, located at the Moylan Alternative High School in a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood in Hartford's southwest end. LVA-CT sought to develop the program as a neighborhood reading center, which would serve students and draw on staff and volunteer resources in the immediate local of the school. The Center's first director set up an advisory committee comprised of representatives of Moylan School, social service agencies in the neighborhood, and LVA-CT and LVGH staff. The VISTA volunteer, who became the second director, spent considerable time creating linkages between the Center and various schools, head start centers, social service agencies in the neighborhood, and Trinity College. She particularly made a strong effort to link the Center with various Hispanic neighborhoods around the school.

I came on board in September 1987 as the third director and shifted the direction away from the neighborhood concept. I placed my energies instead on developing the instructional program. The executive director of LVGH and I worked closely to identify students and tutors throughout LVGH who might enjoy the support of a centralized site. Drawing upon the rationale written in the initial grant proposal for the Center along with my own reconstruction of the mission, I redefined the purpose of the Bob Steele Reading Center. As I began to define it, the Center would provide a staff operated, materials rich centralized site to support students and tutors in individual tutoring matches throughout Hartford and the surrounding towns of Windsor, Bloomfield, and West Hartford, where we occasionally drew students. The Center would also develop programs and projects in small group tutoring and writing, and would serve as a model program for other LVA affiliates particularly in urban or highly populated suburban areas. Much of this was explicit in the original vision articulated by LVA-CT in 1985 and 1986.

The primary difference was the shifting from the neighborhood concept toward a stronger orientation on pedagogical development. Nonetheless, my colleague Steve Benders's critical work in the formation and expansion of LVGH's Family/Community Literacy programs in the early 1990's, with a multitude of sites located throughout Hartford represented a reconstruction of the neighborhood concept initially articulated in the 1080 grant. Personalities and events have brought LVGH into some unanticipated twists and turns from the original vision 1986, but what did emerge throughout the 1990s and into the first few years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century was an underlying coherent urban vision, consisting of a main center and neighborhood sites located throughout Hartford.

It was this underlying drive shaped by a mix of ideologies and visions empowered by the "literacy myth" that provided the energy for the creation of the reading center "pilot" model. The program in turn acted as a catalyst in the transformation of LVGH from a fledging volunteer managed program supported by minimal part time paid staff to a fully staffed urban oriented program. Through this transformation, the affiliate became engaged in cutting edge work in small group tutoring, the creation of learner-generated texts, and the proliferation of neighborhood sites supported in part by paid neighborhood tutors. Thus, in the ten-year transition from 1986-1996, the expansion of LVGH into a well run urban affiliate fulfilled the mid-1980s vision of the LVA-CT leadership.

### **Programming at the Bob Steele Reading Center & Further Developments at LVGH**

During the Moylan phase (1986-1989) the LVA-CT staff viewed the Reading Center as a "pilot" project that may or may not have proven viable within the essentially decentralized LVA organizational structure and culture. By 1989, the Center had experienced modest growth in numbers of students served with about 30 participating on a regular basis, but that was not the only reflection of its viability. A more intangible factor emerged of an *esprit de corps* among students and tutors where sense of community began to develop even in the borrowed space and even in an essentially one-to-one tutoring program. A centralized meeting place, the accessibility of materials, and the presence of a staff person seemed sufficient to establish an inviting learning climate not usually available in the more commonly decentralized LVA model of program delivery. The Center, as program originators at LVA-CT envisioned, began to bear fruit.

Opportunity to recruit several workshop leaders and tutor support personnel among the Center's volunteers for the entire LVGH operation represented major, unanticipated outcomes of the program. This not only strengthened the organizational capacity of the affiliate to provide services and better support students and tutors. It also bolstered the credibility of the Reading Center with LVGH and LVA-CT as a resource for organizational development. This, in turn, helped to place the Center's development by 1989 as a high priority within these agencies as key stakeholders began to take notice that beyond providing a supportive environment for students and tutors, the Center held considerable possibilities for the development of the affiliate at large.

Thus, a dawning recognition emerged within both the state and local agencies that the "pilot" stage of the Center was over and that the program worked. In order to

stabilize the program, and also to provide better headquarters for the LVGH office, key constituents argued for the need of a permanent location. Through the efforts of the affiliate and state agency leadership, a two-year Hartford Foundation for Public Giving grant was obtained. This supported the transfer of the Reading Center's supervision from LVA-CT to LVGH in October 1989 and the location of the program along with the administrative office of the affiliate to 56 Arbor Street, in the ethnically mixed Parkville neighborhood. The grant also included an agreement that within a five-year period LVGH would assume total fiscal responsibility for rent and for the Reading Center manager's salary, with LVA-CT playing a gradually decreasing fiscal role each year.

It was this legitimization, in particular, not only of the Center, but also of LVGH that galvanized both the Center and the affiliate into an imminent expansive mode. During the early 1990s, at the agency-wide level, the Center shifted from that of catalyst to affiliate sustainer that enabled other organizational dimensions, particularly Steve Bender's work to expand into one of the more innovative community-based literacy programs in the state. This, in turn, supported by several grants, provided further legitimization of the affiliate's expansive energies. As a result of these cumulative developments, in 1992 the Board of Directors hired Susan J. Roman as full time Executive Director. Through her 13-year tenure, she spearheaded the transformation of the affiliate in professionalism staff development, funding, board development, and more fundamentally in the shift in the agency's organizational culture from its founding suburban design to a full-scale urban non-profit organization. Synergistically, the growth of LVGH provided the institutional infrastructure for the transformation of the Bob Steele Reading Center described below.

In the affiliate at-large, the Center played a stabilizing role between 1990-1995. However, within its own microhistory history, it experienced its most expansive growth in terms of numbers of students served and in its programmatic achievements in small group tutoring, the creation of three student writing anthologies, in the development of a major oral history project with Trinity College, and in the spawning of formal academic research (mine) that highlighted case-study analysis from the program. The program also spawned two books of student interviews and a collection of tutor essays and interviews which provided material for direct instruction, in-service training sessions for tutors, and as primary documentation for a series of essays that I have published in academic journals and books, which I am drawing upon here in this book.

This essay provides a descriptive overview of the program. At another level, I am seeking to elucidate something of the energy field through which the Reading Center achieved its various transformations. Lest this seem overly "celebratory," I draw out some of the enduring ambiguities in pursuit of the "literacy myth" as well as the evident areas of growth that undergirded the program's motivation and ongoing source of vitality during this period. In this analysis I draw on the powerful sources of energy inherent within the "literacy myth" refracted through Dewey's (1916/1944, 1938/1963) concept of growth.

It is through this “myth” that I constructed the imagery of an adult literacy laboratory/research center as the ultimate focal point, what Dewey refers to as an “ends-in-view” toward which I aimed as a *personal* symbol in shaping the direction of the Bob Steele Reading Center. This directional vision (far from realized) influenced the program as a whole, although not exactly as I envisioned it in my more utopian moments. Throughout my tenure, I was less interested in achievements *per se* than that the created learning climate stimulated maximum growth at each moment in the program’s life in relation to student learning and organizational development. In Dewey’s terms I sought, clearly as an imaginative ideal, the extraction “at each present time” within the various phases of the life cycle of the program, “the full meaning of each present experience” as “the only preparation which in the long run amounts to anything” (Dewey, 1938, p. 49). My desire to stimulate a learning and organizational climate propelled by streams of continuous growth was fortified by my reading of Dewey. On his account:

[T]he ideal of growth results in the conception that education is a constant reorganizing or reconstructing of experience. It has all the time an immediate end, and so far as activity is educative, it reaches that end—the direct transformation of the quality of experience, and in the sense that its chief business of life at every point to make living thus contribute to an enrichment of its own perceptible meaning (Dewey, 1916/1944, p. 76).

The learning climate of the Center during my administration proved more ambiguously shaped than this Deweyan vision. Nonetheless, the vision as an operative ideal provided what seemed like a coherent course of direction that linked my internalization of the “lived experience” of the program with an underlying philosophical rationale that promised the realization of a powerful praxeology. Although I would later realize considerably more tension in this vision than I originally perceived, it nonetheless unleashed creative heuristic energies that sparked the program’s innovations described below. The vision as I conceived it may be summarized thusly:

The essential...idea of education as continuous reconstruction... is that it identifies the end (the result) and the process..... It means that experience as an active process occupies time and its latter period completes its earlier portion; it brings to light connections involved, but hitherto unperceived. The later outcome thus reveals the meaning of the earlier, while the experience as a whole establishes a bent or disposition toward the things possessing the meaning. Every such continuous experience or activity is educative, and all education resides in having such experiences (p. 78).

I am not claiming that “growth” unfolded in any continuous evolutionary way, as the complex relationship between the Center, particularly on my reading of its long-term destination, and the broader goals of LVGH contained at times considerable conflict and often simply a divergence of goals. I wanted to probe the depths of the many “meanings” of the Reading Center experience, through an analysis of the various narrative voices of program participants (students and tutors), for example, while searching for ways to infuse such knowledge back into the core program. It would be through such a

proliferation of insight, I hoped, that the “meaning” of literacy would become articulated and communicated throughout the Reading Center, the affiliate, and the broader LVA network. I realize now, better than at the time the various limitations of such a vision that relied principally upon the elucidation of consciousness, which did not include sufficient attention to the social contexts of the lives of adult literacy learners. This was clearly a non-Deweyan approach that spoke volumes about my own limitations, that, nonetheless was a pathway that drove my energies. Still, even with the limitations, in the “real world” dynamics in which I was enmeshed that vision represented my singular passion by which I felt I could make my most significant impact. I pursued its pathway unrelentingly, at least as an act of imagination, therefore as my internalization of the “literacy myth.” This vision tapped into the belief systems of many students and tutors, which, nonetheless, butted up against various “external” realities. Still, there was something enduring about the power of the “literacy myth” when mediated through Dewey’s concept of growth, which underlied something essential of how the program evolved.

On the broader affiliate front, as LVGH became increasingly sophisticated, as defined by significant agency players, increasing emphasis was placed on legitimacy and accountability expressed in a manner that would satisfy the interests of funders as well as other major social players in the greater Hartford community. This came home to me when a major power broker on the Board of Directors prevented me from pursuing a small grant to support a qualitative assessment project designed to articulate something of the phenomenology of the Reading Center experience. In impeding me, he reasoned that fiscal resources in the city were limited and that the affiliate should tap into granting support in more “primary” areas of need. My apprehension was that unless I found compelling ways to narrate the Center’s story in a manner that evoked something of its unique organizational and learning culture, I feared the program would become absorbed within the normalized ethos of “functional” literacy defined by the market realities of the “post-industrial” economy (Chisman, 1989, 1990). This story, I realized, would play quite well, in a milieu like Hartford, the one time “insurance capitol of the world.” Both this board member and I were operating out of the “literacy myth,” which we interpreted it in some markedly different ways.

The other major center of growth, the neighborhood-based family-community literacy program, also engendered significant organization energy in expanding the social environment of the affiliate to become increasingly responsive to the needs of the African-American and Latino groups in the city, the primary racial and ethnic constituencies of Hartford. This initiative played a major role in the transformation of the affiliate from a suburban ethos to a very conscious urban design, shaped in turn by a quest for greater cultural diversity and programmatic innovation. This, too, was a reflection of the “literacy myth” based on a complementary, but different vision than that which shaped the Reading Center, which focused primarily on pedagogy and the development of a rich body of student narratives.

In the environment that existed in Hartford during the early 1990s my concept of a laboratory/research center proved a hard sell. This was due in part to the limitations of

my own political and interpersonal skills, but more fundamentally, to the persuasiveness of these other critical areas of agency growth that also linked the “literacy myth” with more articulated public voices and aspirations than my phenomenological probing could achieve. The fact that I felt compelled to make explicit my vision of the Reading Center represented a certain literalism that pushed ahead of the potential force field I was attempting to nurture one step at a time. This provided a source of compensation against the ambiguous milieu in which I sought its realization, but did little to help my cause. To be sure, I viewed the vision as an operational ideal rather than an embedded reality, although one in which the energy released would provide the underlying dynamic for the program. By “speaking,” I could claim the authenticity of my voice, which was certainly better than the sometimes autistic ruminations reverberating in my consciousness, which I occasionally experienced. Nonetheless, and this was a pervasive reality, I lacked the power to garner the resources to bring the vision to fruition against the press of more “realistic” and socially evident concerns of my colleagues.

Part of the outcome of such tension was an increasing psychic withdrawal from large aspects of agency-wide activities in order to concentrate energies on probing the depth of the learning experience of the students and tutors, clearly on my limited, but far from unimportant understanding. This enabled me to bring out aspects of the program’s learning culture that would otherwise remain mute, what I viewed as the underbelly of the program’s motivational dynamic. A sense of conflict over these two realities undergirded much of my psychic energies especially in the last few years in the program as the scope of the agency became increasingly sophisticated.

It is useful to keep this broader ambiguous context in mind in assessing the “deep structures” that shaped at least my participation within the Bob Steele Reading Center, a dilemma which has perplexed practitioners throughout the field (Demetrian, 2004, pp. 26-55). That was one reality. The other was the energy that was unleashed at the Bob Steele Reading Center, despite the ambiguity, through such an effort in consciousness probing and the creative transformations of the program’s microhistory that the beckoning image of the laboratory/research center spawned, well beyond the recesses of my imagination.

### **Small Group Tutoring**

With apprehension and hope, the Board of Directors of LVGH in the fall of 1989 anticipated the expansion of the Bob Steele Reading Center housed in its new environment at 56 Arbor Street. As the program manager, I realized I had considerable freedom to operate, but knew I had to deliver some tangible outcomes (particularly program growth) in a relatively short period of time. I was convinced that having our own space created a new force field for program development even as I sensed that the means for it would have to flow from the energies unleashed in the process of daily operations.

The steady supply of potential students coming to our doors became one of the primary vehicles for programmatic growth and transformation. At this transitional time, I

sensed that something like transformative change was required both at the Reading Center and in the still budding small group program in order to achieve a of satisfaction from the affiliate's board of directors that the risk they took was worth the investment. Without that, I reasoned, the centripetal forces of the affiliate's one-to-one decentralized program still carried sufficient organizational momentum, so that anything less than sustained and even exponential growth at the Reading Center, had the potential of shifting the agency's energies back toward the traditional model of one-to-one program delivery. Whether that perception was accurate, I cannot determine, but it was a pressing concern of mine, which I believed required the creation of a force field that would firmly establish the visibility of the Center and its small-group tutoring program in a vital place within the psychic energies of the affiliate leadership.

I pressed the issue by adding significant numbers of students to the program and placing them into our emerging groups. I sought to establish a creative instability at the Center as a means of galvanizing affiliate resources, primarily tutors, but also increasing psychic investment among the program's stakeholders in order to meet the needs of expansive growth. As a result, we created an extensive small group-tutoring program, which in itself marked it as one of the more innovative literacy sites in southern New England and throughout the LVA network. The hubbub of activity at the Center provided considerable confirmation to the key agency stakeholders that they made the appropriate move in going forward with the merger.

The proliferation of small group tutoring enabled us to accommodate a four-fold growth in student population within an eighteen-month period from approximately 30 to 120 students participating on a regular basis. In addition to this program expansion, it was a core expectation that small group tutoring would strengthen instruction by providing students with additional time to study, opportunity to learn from tutors reflecting differing approaches to literacy, and ability for students to collaborate with each other in their learning and to build an informal support network among themselves. As described by one student, "The group lets you share your experiences with other people. You tell the group about your ideas and the group tells you about their experiences, too" (Demetrian and Gruner, 1995, p. 35). According to another student, "You talk to other people and learn something you don't learn one-on-one; sharing life experiences" (p. 44). These bare statements illuminate only a little about the intellectual, emotional, and social substance of the small group-tutoring program that was forming in the early 1990s. They do, however, telegraph something of its dynamic influence on the lives of students in opening up collaborative educational opportunities not particularly accessible in the one-to-one tutoring model.

At the end of the Moylan period in 1989, the program supported two small groups, one in Basic Literacy (BL), the other in English as a Second Language (ESL). It was my intention to expand this component of the program once at Arbor Street, although I had no clear plan in mind specifically how this would happen. I did, however, have faith in the potentiality of the new environment to stimulate opportunities not practically realizable at the Moylan setting. My objective was to wait for and exploit those opportunities that the evolving environment of our new Center opened up.

A key opportunity arose in January 1990 when a tutor asked for an additional assignment. I suggested the development of a Writing Clinic, which we began to expand on Monday evenings with additional tutors. The atmosphere was a bit chaotic for some, but invigorating. We had some good tutors, including a writing specialist who stayed with us for the better part of a year. Still, we were experimenting. Students slipped in and out of the Writing Clinic even as they participated more regularly in the other aspects of the program. This was so, I think because the creative energies the Clinic unleashed pushed students to the edge of their expanding learning experiences and there was no tight pedagogical structure in place to provide stability to the to the always difficult task in adult literacy of learning how to write. While the Writing Clinic proved energizing, its improvisational learning climate may have been difficult for some students, possibly interfering with a greater sense of control over the subject matter that most students (and many tutors) may have needed.

Initially, the lead tutor took an individualized instruction approach, which required considerable work. Eventually, tutors established a regular pattern of instruction that included the use of common material to stimulate writing projects. This model of a commonly shared text, usually selected by the tutor, often with recommendations from me, established at the Writing Clinic, became the prevailing instructional mode of the small group-tutoring program at the Bob Steele Reading Center during my tenure. Through team tutoring, a collaborative atmosphere, and selection, often, of interesting readings on a wide array of themes, this pedagogical format proved highly responsive to the *generalized* literacy needs and aspirations of many students.

Because of the frequent entering and exiting of students and sometimes of tutors, the sharply focused intent of the Writing Clinic gradually faded. The difficulty of writing at the adult basic literacy level requires a major commitment of time and psychic energy among students and tutors, which for us, was not easy to sustain. It is more “natural” to focus on reading and discussion, and include writing as a logical aspect of a given assignment. It is easy, moreover, all too easy, to allow writing opportunities to slip by. Eventually, the sharp focus of the Writing Clinic waned, but only after an experimental 18 months which produced a profusion of student texts particularly through the instructional leadership of a new tutoring team consisting of Sharon Smith and Sheila Lehman. Eventually, this program imperceptibly mutated into our Monday evening advanced basic literacy group.

This Basic Literacy small group-tutoring class continued to feature writing, but no longer as its overarching purpose. By 1991 Teri Fuller joined the Monday group to work with more beginning level students. With Sharon and Sheila facilitating the advanced Monday evening group, two levels of general literacy groups began to emerge in response to the pressing need of student growth. Committed tutors ventured forth with enthusiastic support and enthusiasm from me. We held occasional in-services, but did not provide much formal training in small group tutoring. We relied more on the creativity of the tutors to develop their own innovative teaching approaches and concentrated on identifying other volunteers who were willing to work as group tutors. I

pitched in where needed to take over time slots whenever there was a gap, and to pilot new groups. I also provided continuous support to the group tutors in terms of materials selection and in discussing possible solutions to various learning problems.

Concurrent with the Writing Clinic, opportunity struck again to further develop the small group program in 1990 as Dawn Johnson, a college student, contacted us about taking on a summer internship. I was impressed with her enthusiasm, commitment, and intelligence and suggested she form a family literacy group program on Tuesday evenings. Although developments unfolded differently than Dawn had expected (the group consisted of men instead of young mothers), she demonstrated considerable creativity in establishing a direction that could with a less flexible tutor, have easily become chaotic. After Dawn completed her internship, Judy Pronsky, who remained in her Tuesday evening position for more than five years, took over. Expanding upon Dawn's pioneering efforts, Judy brought considerable stability to the program through her steadfastness, competence, and the phenomenal rapport she developed with the students. Building from a similar experiential framework as Dawn, Judy transformed the specific family focus into a general literacy session that better accommodated the fluidity of the environment. Judy had the beginning level group, which allowed the same students Teri worked with on Monday evenings to attend another night. During Judy's long tenure we introduced team tutoring, which worked better with some tutors than others. Gradually, the permanent structure of the Bob Steele Reading Center's small group tutoring program was coming into focus with general topic oriented groups at different reading ability levels with students cycling through the program in different groups several time a week.

The group-tutoring program became further fleshed out during the academic year 1991-1992. A student who had recently completed his GED expressed how difficult the process of preparation had been. Two other students desired to study for the test, but were not prepared to enter the local Adult Basic Education (ABE) program given their sense of attachment to the Reading Center and still limited literacy skills. After thinking about Danny's difficult experience I decided to initiate what I deliberately referred to as a pre-GED group. I stressed with the students the importance of understanding the requirements of the exam and provided much slow-paced practice in the test taking areas. I emphasized that the purpose of the group was not to prepare students to take the test, but to equip them to enroll in a regular GED program. I worked with the group for several months until Bruce Franklin took over. Eventually several students joined, although attendance lacked sufficient consistency to enable students to build their skills as systematically as they needed in order to effectively enter into a GED program. Bruce characterized the difficulty in the following way:

I haven't actually developed a strategy. I've just tried to respond to ... what conditions there are, as our game plan.... So we don't really have much continuity with our goals. The goal initially was to get ready for these tests, and now I think we're just trying to develop a critical mass: to keep the attentive members involved and to attract other prospective members. And the material itself that

we're supposed to cover, you know, the five different substantive areas, is so far-reaching, that it's hard really to (focus upon).

Bruce stayed with the group for about a year. Soon after he left, the pre-GED preparation group shifted into the Thursday evening advanced Basic Literacy group that became a permanent feature of the program. Thus a general pattern emerged of initially specific topic oriented groups, which gave a symbolic crystallization to the early history of the small group program. These content specific groups transmuted into general literacy groups as an experiential response to the constraints and opportunities of actual conditions. This latter pattern remained in place for several years after I left the program in 1996. This was so, I believe, because students and tutors found considerable value in a flexible, open-entry small group tutoring program which resonated with their own (students and tutors) diffusive, complex goals and life situations, which inhibited a more systematic, topic-centered approach from taking hold.

By 1992 the primary structure of the small group-tutoring program came into place. Both in BL and ESL students were able to cycle through the program three evenings per week either at the beginning, intermediate, or advanced levels. In 1990, the Center also began offering group tutoring on Saturday mornings, thus helping to create the weekly cycle of activity that characterized the Reading Center program for many years.

Ingrid Arrojo who led the Saturday Basic Literacy group tutoring program for three years described a sense of the energy that she both brought to and derived from the Center:

For three years after every Saturday lesson I leave here and I'm exhausted. I go down stairs and sit in my car for ten or fifteen minutes and listen to the radio because I can't drive. But at the same time I'm very energized because half my brain's asleep and the other half's going about 90,000 miles per hour trying to figure out, "Well, this was a great lesson which created a lot of energy. How can I keep that going?" Or, "This lesson did not fly. What can I do next week to rescue this and still get the learning task I want across in a way that's not going to turn people off and put them to sleep?" So I'm constantly thinking about my tutoring (Demetron, 1996, pp. 192-193).

A long time student of the program, Darrell, put it this way about the small-group tutoring program:

I was speaking with the tutors right after we read. They say do we know what we're reading about. And that's opening up a conversation. And, it was working. Some people grasp it very fast, some people, you know, grasp it kind of slow. But it's good for all of us to get to understand, because you need to understand what you read. It's very important (Demetron and Gruner, 1995, p. 67).

The small group-tutoring program emerged first as a response both to organizational need and opportunity that opened up by having a permanent site-based program in a centralized urban setting. Its development stirred a degree of chaotic energy and a few false starts. When I left the Reading Center in 1996, the small groups had become the primary stabilizing force in the program even as we still groped to obtain a more coherent sense of how group tutoring works. That is, we were still experimenting, even as a significant number of tutors had become seasoned practitioners, who took on their assignments with considerable acumen. Implicitly, we “knew” the program worked and became better adept at supporting it even as the need for ongoing development remained continuous.

Although the environment required continual nurturing and refinement, what we had established at the Bob Steele Reading Center was a community of adult literacy learners (students, tutors, and staff) bonded by a powerful sense of purpose and vision. It was through the small group-tutoring program in particular that chords of friendship, mutual respect, and the continual quest for learning were most tightly woven. Small group instruction exists in many adult literacy programs, although more so in ESL than Basic Literacy. Its significance for this essay is that it was created as a new approach out of a broader organizational culture grounded in a tradition of one-to-one tutoring which exerted a powerful pull within LVGH that easily could have marginalized the emerging effort.

Even though the founders of the Center anticipated that group tutoring would emerge at the new site they did not have a clear idea of how this might take place. I have attempted to describe something of its dynamic creation. This included certain activity primarily of an improvisational nature that the Center’s founders and affiliate supporters might not have always assented to, including bringing in some tutors who had not gone through the tutor training workshop. I believed such steps were essential in order to integrate the program within the LVGH organizational culture, as it existed around 1990, which was undergoing extensive change, and to capitalize on the resources that were available. I, for one did not perceive that an evolutionary trajectory from LVA’s one-to-one model contained sufficient dynamic force to reconstruct the environment in a collaborative mode. Nothing short of an organizational “paradigm shift” would do, I reasoned at the time.

Given the normative influence of the traditional one-to-one culture in the agency at large, that ethos could have easily absorbed the work of the Center, which, I believe has happened to many fledging small group tutoring Basic Literacy programs throughout the LVA network. In Hartford it succeeded by establishing a threshold within the existing system which when activated attained the broader organizational legitimization the small-group tutoring program at the Reading Center needed. The Deweyan dynamic of growth articulated so cryptically in the quotation at the head of this essay, energized by the “literacy myth,” represented the enduring force field, which both stabilized and empowered the program. Synergistically the Center’s emerging critical mass played a significant role in facilitating the transformation of the affiliate from a suburban to an urban design, with small group tutoring one of its critical features.

## Student Writing

Student writing at the Reading Center grew out of a similar dynamic that shaped the small group-tutoring program. That, to recall, was a process-oriented learning climate nurtured by a concept of “growth” defined as the enhancement of experience through the exercise of critical intelligence (Dewey, 1916/1944, 1938/1963), mediated by an empathetic interpretation of the “literacy myth.” On this reading, what was fundamental was not so much the achievement of learning outcomes. More critical was the nurturing of a climate that enabled the expansion of critical intelligence to emerge through a “scaffolding paradigm” (Demetrian, 1999) where students and tutors worked together to move through successive stages of learning development as perceived by program participants.

This emphasis on growth is particularly important in adult literacy where sense of “failure” in formal educational settings is pervasive. An outcomes orientation not grounded in this manner places an external standard of achievement both upon the program and upon emerging literacy learners that may not appear realistic within a given time frame, typically within a fiscal year upon which most standards of measurement are based. This is not to deny that easily measurable outcomes are not achievable, whether within a year’s framework or longer, nor that they are not valuable. It is to argue that the more enduring phenomenon is the emergent sense of potentiality within the formation of an adult literacy “life-cycle” (Fingeret and Drennon, 1997), which provides the underlying platform for the development of student capacities.

A parallel with program development may be instructive. During the Moylan period, I sensed the *potentiality* of what a literacy program could become. Yet I also realized that if I attempted to push factors beyond their continuously emergent development at this early stage, a too literal sense of “reality” might have set in. This, I feared could have interfered with what might have been interpreted as an unrealistic claim, given the then “realities” that shaped the program as determined by the leadership of the LVA-CT and LVGH agencies. Working more “internally,” I was seeking both to create and build upon the force field of growth progressively nurtured through the construction of the “literacy myth” as an underlying operational dynamic of the program. In Dewey’s terms this dynamic was “the moving force” (Dewey, 1938/1963, p. 38) or “guiding idea” (Dewey, 1933/1989, p. 203) of my operational strategy. The critical factor was to keep alive the sense of potentiality in the program among its key stakeholders at each and every stage of the program’s development. My methodology was to proceed one step at a time, with an overall, but not highly specific vision in the expectation of creating certain critical masses that would propel the program forward in some visibly pronounced ways. Such a force field of potentiality characterized not only the *modus operandi* of the program as a whole, but also the more specialized effort of fostering student writing.

LVA promotes process writing as an integral aspect of literacy. Its training manual *Tutor* contains a full chapter on the topic (Cheatham, Colvin, and Laminack, 1993, pp. 76-97). Student writing anthologies and magazines, which abound in many

literacy programs often reflect a progressive pedagogy that integrates whole language reading theory, collaborative learning, and process writing. The progressive credo on writing is clearly articulated in *Tutor*, which represents LVA's most formal position on all aspects of Basic Literacy instruction:

ONE OF THE THEMES OF THIS BOOK [original capitalization] is that we view language as a whole, consisting of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, as mediated through thinking. Furthermore, successful teaching programs recognize that the best teaching occurs when these language components are not taught in isolation from each other. Though this chapter is about writing, a great deal of emphasis is given to reading, speaking, and listening as they relate to the writing process (Cheatham, Colvin, and Laminack, 1993, p. 77).

I agree with every aspect of this statement and drew upon this expressed philosophy to promote writing at the program. Even still, the common practice at the Reading Center focused predominantly on reading. This was so, I believe, because writing in adult literacy programs remains problematic and at best, episodic even though it does occur, often, in evocatively rich prose. Writing is inordinately time consuming. It is not something that can be tacked on to the end of a lesson that the student can then complete at home. It requires a major investment of time, sustained concentration, and psychic investment in the process both of the tutor and the students, which invariably cuts into reading time. As one student related to me, "It's *hard*, George. I used to, but I don't write a lot" (Demetrian and Gruner, 1995, p. 56). The challenge of writing in adult literacy settings may, although does not need to set up such a profound ambivalence. Still, it is a common axiom that student satisfaction requires a felt sense of success within each learning session. Engaging in the flow of reading by covering a set volume of text provides the illusion of completion, if writing is not integrated as a core curriculum component with satisfactory modes of scaffolding built in to enable students to progress.

Regardless of the content of the lesson, this sense of moving forward is a very powerful source of motivation, achieved most readily through sustained reading process which needs to remain a staple for any school based modeled literacy program such as the Bob Steele Reading Center. As that same student put it, "The most important" thing "is the reading":

No matter what it [the content] is, it's the reading. I like to do the spelling. Spelling is one of my problems. As long as I can read, I think I can learn to spell (p. 56).

As anyone may discern who has first hand knowledge of volunteer adult literacy programs, this is a representative statement that requires much probing if it is going to be explored in any depth (Fingeret and Danin, 1991, Demetrian, 1994). Any overlay of a writing program, therefore, needs to respect the importance that students attribute to *reading* as a centerpiece around which to include additional instructional components. This is not a contradiction of the preceding statement from *Tutor* that focuses on the integration of the language components in the support of process writing. It is to argue

that the on-going implementation of writing requires more nuanced attention to the constraints and opportunities inherent within particular programs than any training manual can provide. To state the argument directly, it takes a steely-nerved commitment among staff, tutors, and students to writing to overcome the many entropic forces that can easily derail the best of efforts and intentions that sustained attention to this area requires.

At the Reading Center we were able to encourage writing through various concentrated efforts, which *temporarily* raised the threshold among significant numbers of students and tutors to include it as an integral part of instruction. To sustain such intensity requires focused managerial attention as well as pedagogical concentration that we did not maintain at a consistently high level, notwithstanding the creation of three substantial anthologies of student writing from 1990-1995. Writing did become an important part of the program, but only *vigorously* promoted while constructing writing anthologies or when tutors or students were available who had a special affinity for it. Competing demands shifted energies elsewhere and the difficulty of writing at this level was always a potentially destabilizing factor.

When I began at the Center in 1987, I possessed only a limited *formal* knowledge of process writing but instinctively sensed its critical potential function in an adult literacy setting. I gradually nurtured writing among students and tutors while at the Moylan setting in the late 1980s, realizing it needed to fit within the culture of the program if it was going to “work.” I did so by encouraging occasional efforts at writing, then sharing those few pieces with other students and tutors, in part, as a stimulus to encourage additional writing efforts. I never attempted to force the issue, nor wanted to interfere in the more primary work of students spending the bulk of their time on learning to read. Nonetheless, I sensed that if students learned to “crack the code” of writing, that would serve as an undeniable source of renewal which would carry the learning process into a new threshold.

In facilitating this objective, I identified my task as making its possibility visible to students and tutors, and then promoting the writing that had been completed throughout the program. I was convinced that writing represented an important, although a often a neglected dimension of adult literacy education. Yet, I was only able to move forward by feeling my way through the process step-by-step, building on opportunities whenever and however they opened-up. In short, I was motivated by an appreciation of the importance of writing in adult literacy education, but was also aware of the difficult challenges an effective writing pedagogy program imposed.

At the time of the move to Arbor Street in 1989, only a few student essays had been completed, but the new location (our own space) proved more conducive to student writing in providing a more ample environment for program experimentation. The formation of the Writing Clinic played a major, early role in the fusion of the program’s organizational and pedagogical dynamics, where a core of tutors and a large group of fluctuating students first took on the task of writing as a deliberate, central process of instruction.

Many of the essays in LVGH's first anthology, *Welcome to Our World* (Smith, 1991) were generated from these Monday evening sessions. With variations, a common strategy emerged. The first hour of instruction focused on reading and discussion of interesting texts, with the second hour devoted to the actual process of writing. I remain convinced that this integrated philosophy of learning stimulates the best overall approach to writing (Cheatham, Colvin and Laminack, 1993, pp. 77-99). Yet this necessitates considerable discipline and consistency among students and tutors since it is easy to slide by the thorny task of writing, to satisfy more immediate longings stimulated by successful reading and discussion sessions.

Because of the unpredictability of student attendance and my desire to complete a collection of student essays leading to a book, I encouraged tutors to labor diligently with students to finish writing assignments within single sessions. My concern was that otherwise much of the fruits of such efforts, namely, the emergent written texts would get buried underneath an interminable process of partially completed "texts under construction." I respect the openness of the writing process and recognize that much of the efforts in creating texts are not meant necessarily to come to completion in a finalized publishable format (Cheatham, Colvin, and Laminack, 1993, p. 97). Yet I also realized the critical *organizational* role of closure that key projects played in such settings as our new experimental Center. Unless something tangible emerged like a book of student writings, the legitimacy of promoting writing as a significant instructional goal could have easily waned among students, tutors, and LVGH staff. Much of the writing that came out of this environment were early draft efforts. Even still, many pieces did express a richness and complexity of thought that represented, to use a Deweyan term, a "consummation" of experience of a distinctively aesthetic quality, as expressed in *Proud to be a Nurse's Aide*:

The other day a friend asked me what I did for a living. I said I am a male nurse's aide in the hospital and nursing home. The person made a face and said, "Oh Lord, I would not do that for all the money in the world."

A lot of people think it is an awful job. Well, believe it or not, there is something special about this job. People depend on me. I not only care for them, I care about them. You see I like what I do.

My work is the kind that many sons and daughters can't or won't do. Somebody has to take care of the sick and old.

It takes a special person to do the work I do, and we are special people. I am proud of my work and proud that I care (Smith, 1991, p. 75).

The artistry of this essay enabled the author to examine his experience in a new light. Thus in writing, at least temporarily, this student re-invented himself toward a more positive self-image about the value of his work. That resembles what Dewey refers to as a "consummation" or an apotheosis of experience, which on his reading is synonymous with the aesthetics of art. The essay also had a visible impact on groups of

students and with tutors whenever I drew on it to exemplify the depth of expression that adult literacy students often evoke through their “simple” prose.

While adult literacy writing does not always reach such a “consummatory” climax, wherein on Dewey’s (1934/1988) reading, experience is transformed into art, many times it does. When such a phenomenon is experienced, the writer however seemingly novice, experiences an aesthetic transformation that often plays a significant role in the enhancement of self-perception. A profoundly collaborative learning climate, a substantial body of work, a growing confidence among students and tutors about the feasibility of writing, and a model of instruction that fostered reading, discussion, and writing ensued from these early efforts.

Whatever one makes of the enduring quality of the written texts produced in our program, in the “inner life” of the Bob Steele Reading Center this first anthology, in particular, propelled a creative transformation that not only legitimized writing as an on-going instructional practice. It also provided enhanced visibility and support for the Center among major affiliate stakeholders when we handed copies of *Welcome to Our World* to members of the agency’s board of directors. Many students and tutors caught on to the enthusiasm that was sparking the program and sensed that something important was taking place with the expansion of the small-group tutoring program and our first collection of student narratives. I consciously nurtured this expansive organizational energy, which was driven by a broader dynamic of bringing the program toward its “ultimate” destination as I was beginning to envision it toward a regional adult literacy laboratory/research center as a logical progression of its “consummatory” growth. Student writing became a critical vehicle in its pursuit as well as an important value in its own right.

In 1990, LVGH received a grant from the Connecticut Department of Education to publish a book of student writings. Notwithstanding the growing body of work and the institutionalization of the Writing Clinic, the production of such a text remained a daunting task. At the time, we were not working with computers. We also lacked an editor to transform our many essays stuffed into folders into an attractive monograph. Affiliate resources proved scarce for this seemingly routine process, but the grant forced us to resolve these issues and to turn what seemed like an endless process into a finished product.

Fortunately for the program, Sharon W. Smith discovered the Bob Steele Reading Center. Sharon taught courses in literature at Saint Joseph College in West Hartford, and had recently come back from an academically oriented conference on literacy sponsored by the Modern Language Association (MLA), bursting with ideas that perhaps could be implemented within an adult literacy context. I agreed that the issues she had been addressing were similar to the ones we faced and looked forward to her participation in the program. She plunged into the area of writing and soon became the general editor of our student collection of essays. Thus, another critical moment came to pass at the Reading Center that opened up new space in the life of the program, a moment for which

Sharon and I were clearly waiting, but could not have anticipated in advance of our meeting.

As a result of Sharon's editorial leadership, *Welcome to Our World: A Book of Writings by And for Students and Their Tutors* was completed in 1991. Many people among the LVGH community read this text, which also provided a stimulus for additional student writing. The Hartford Courant printed 1000 copies for our use. The stories in the book served as the focal point of many creative tutoring hours. It is an artifact of the program's cultural history. It also speaks volumes about the poignancy of the life experiences of adult learners, in their courageous trek toward literacy. If the long effort in writing that preceded its publication had not been undertaken, *despite* the difficulty of the task, this canonical text would not have been created and the Reading Center vision could very well have "stabilized" with small group tutoring.

Despite, or perhaps because of the difficulty of writing, the student narratives that ensued at the Bob Steele Reading Center spoke to a profoundness of experience and artistry that without the effort to produce the text would have been lost to the program. While I could draw from many of the texts in *Welcome to Our World* consider the poignancy of following passage, which is a tribute not only to the author, but also to her tutor who provided access to doors of knowledge that otherwise would have remained closed:

*Just Life*

My name is Laverne. This is my story. I want to sit down and think about this story I'm going to tell you. Playing in the streets was a game but it was life for me. Some people wouldn't understand that. But first, I would like to ask you, "Do you know how it feels to live in the streets?" I'm trying to tell you something about myself, but I have not learned how to do that. But, I'm a thinker.

I want to tell you about a man I knew. His name was Joe. He was my first teacher. But don't forget, I'm a thinker. Joe didn't teach me about the books. He was teaching me about life. He told me that I had to learn to read if I wanted something in life. I know that you can understand that.

In writing this, I don't want to sell you a dream, but I want you to know how good it feels to read a book and to understand it. It's like a first love (Smith, 1991, p. 56).

Laverne's essay is indicative of the power of poetic expression that pervades the pages of *Welcome To Our World*.

Notwithstanding the production of *Welcome to Our World*, the facilitation of student writing had never proven easy. It requires sustained attention among students, tutors, and staff and easily got subordinated to other important tasks. It remained subsidiary to the work of the vast majority of students who were motivated more by the

dynamic flow of continuous reading that provided a sense of moving forward and completion. Still, the writing at LVGH, canonized in the publication of two more recent texts, *Voices From Around the World: Essays and Reflections By Hartford's Newest Residents* (Demetrian and Lestz, 1995) and a second volume of *Welcome to Our World* (Demetrian, 1995), flourished. A critical mass of sorts was achieved where writing was viewed as a legitimate and at times, highly desirable activity among students and tutors. Thus, the struggle to promote writing continued throughout the time frame covered in this study. Even for those who chose not to write, LVGH's student generated texts provided a literature rich base to explore literacy as a meaning-making phenomenon grounded in a range of life experiences to which adult new readers resonated with a high degree of empathy. Establishing such a learning climate was an important component of the Reading Center model, enabling the metaphor of literacy to resonate throughout its created products.

### **The Oral History Project**

The creation of oral history texts that LVGH developed in collaboration with Trinity College of Hartford through a Connecticut Humanities Council (CHC) grant was, arguably, the most important single project during the first decade of the Bob Steele Reading Center. These texts consist of two types of books. The first is a one volume abridged collection of ten life histories for the intermediate literacy student (Smith, Ball, Demetrian, and Michelson, 1993). The second is a two-volume set consisting of thirteen unabridged oral histories for the general reader including advanced literacy student (Lestz, Demetrian, and Smith, 1994). They cover broad life themes spanning the life cycle of LVGH Basic Literacy students, culminating in the decision to enter the program. A stimulating introduction and conclusion by a professional historian framed the advanced text while the abridged text's introduction, written by Sharon Smith, who was a Ph.D. student in Reading, Writing, and Literacy at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, focuses on pedagogy. For the purposes of this essay, I emphasize the *evolution* of the project in order to disclose something of the force field that enabled it to emerge within the context of our organizational culture, although by way of passing it will not be possible to avoid mention of its content.

In its broad contours this project followed similar evolutionary trajectories of the organization development of the Center, the small group-tutoring program, and the program's various writing projects. That is, an idea was nurtured within the context of what seemed plausible within the opportunity structures of the program in the early 1990s. Prospects for its development were pursued until time and circumstances enabled the project to come to fruition in the creation of polished oral history texts.

In this case, the process began with a call to our office from the Executive Director of the Hartford Consortium of Higher Education. The Consortium had been struggling with the thorny problem of attempting to address the complex issue of poverty in Hartford. Its leadership came to the conclusion that area colleges could make their most significant impact by concentrating on adult urban education. I was invited to speak to the Consortium Council. Largely through the initiatives of history Professor Michael

Lestz from Trinity College, Eddie Perez, a former Hartford community organizer, also at Trinity as a student outreach coordinator (and future mayor of Hartford), and myself, a series of meetings were held that consisted of broad discussions between the college constituency and the city's literacy and adult education agencies.

Several projects came out of these meetings, but the collection of oral history narratives between LVGH and Trinity College proved the most durable of them. The project had its immediate origins with a suggestion by Michael at one of the planning meetings between literacy providers and representatives of the Consortium, although at a more fundamental level flowed from the relationship he and I had established with each other. I was motivated by a powerful imagery of what the college community might represent in a potential crystallization of the Reading Center's long range vision. Michael was propelled by the prospect of the colleges having a vital impact on such an "invisible" issue as adult literacy. That, in turn, was buttressed by a personal sense of awe as Michael encountered adult literacy students directly for the first time in which he was struck both with how limited their literacy skills were and the poetic expression of their speech in narrating their own stories.

I was aware of the many roadblocks that could impede a sustained relationship between adult literacy providers and the Consortium as neither adult literacy nor adult education were part of the established curriculum of the city's private colleges, which made up the Consortium. In the stated Consortium interest in literacy I felt I had a tiger by the tail. I held on tight for the ride wherever it might lead, doing everything I could to extract a sizable good from the relationship for our program.

Cognizant of my precarious status, representing at best a marginal literacy program counting for little in the political culture of higher education among Hartford's private colleges, I "settled" for something within the span of my control. The oral history project in collaboration with Michael and Sharon contained a compelling path-breaking potential, worthy, I thought, of considerable investment of time and energy to create. These finished texts have served as an inestimable resource for instruction, tutor training, and broader agency-wide consciousness-raising about the issue of adult literacy. They also provide the genesis for a penetrating cultural history of adult literacy in an urban context. While electrifying in its imaginative scope, the prospect of bringing the project to fruition was daunting. Nonetheless, the work began in 1992.

Mike began working on an oral history composition with Derrick Matthews, a student highly committed to his own educational development and the long-range vision of the Reading Center. Their evolving text served as a framework for other histories under construction. These initial taped interviews conducted by volunteers, required considerable time from inception to completion of a finished transcription. A danger at this early stage was that the process required so much time that it very well could have become aborted, considering the many other compelling issues agency stakeholders faced. Beyond its inherent substantial value, I envisioned the project as a critical link in the long-range vision that I had constructed and very much an embodiment of Center's

“consummatory” aesthetics. Consequently, the “moving force” of my own desire compelled me to keep the project flowing.

Fortunately, Abul (“Artie”) Rahman, a graduate student in economics at the University of Hartford, was able to contribute a large amount of time to the project. As a result of his efforts, three substantial interviews were completed. His work, combined with the other interviews underway, enabled us to turn merely an idea into a viable project, which nonetheless required sustained effort to bring it to fruition. To put this in formal terms, the force field of potentiality flowing from the Reading Center’s organizational and learning culture provided sufficient scaffolding during this early period to enable the project to move to its next stages of stabilization.

Within a year Michael obtained a \$10,000 grant from the Connecticut Humanities Council (CHC) for Trinity College and LVGH to collaborate on the oral history project. This provided financial resources to enable he and Sharon Smith to more formally participate as oral historian specialist and managing editor respectively and legitimized my role as project manager.

The CHC grant required us to refine the project and to develop effective strategies of implementation. This resulted in two simultaneous tracks of development. Throughout the 1992-1993 academic year, Sharon oversaw the development of *Life Stories By and For New Readers*. Two volunteer tutors, Evelyn Ball, Gail Michelson, and I assisted Sharon in transforming raw transcripts into polished narratives. What made this process particularly complex is that we created an abridged text that required considerable selectivity of content. We met numerous times, field tested various drafts, and shifted our editorial focus, partly in response to feedback from students and tutors who suggested a more standardized, “readable” prose.

We initially intended to keep the language as intact as possible with little or no editorial “intrusion” that might “sanitize” the texts. Since our major goal, however, was to create a *readable* text for new readers while maintaining the authenticity of the original interviews, we made certain, relatively minor adjustments in syntax and occasionally reconstructed the order of taped interviews to develop coherent, continuous narratives. This entailed an unavoidable fictive element. As we acknowledged in the introduction:

[O]ral narratives cannot simply and directly be transposed into written form. Rather, they need to be “translated” which inevitably calls for a certain degree of interpretation. Try as they might, interviewers and editors who collaborate with learners to create texts like these can never be invisible or anonymous (Smith, Ball, Demetron, and Michelson, 1993, p. v).

Notwithstanding this inevitable need to “translate,” we sought to create an “authentic” narrative text accessible to intermediate level adult literacy students. We worked with the narrators as much as possible in the various editorial revisions, although most “trusted” our judgment and were more interested in the final product.

Professor Lestz took the lead in the development of the full-scale narrative project through a seminar course at Trinity College on oral history methodology. Lestz prepared his students well with a reading list that included Theodore Rosengaten's *All God's Dangers* (1989), Studs Terkel's *Working* (1972), and several other widely read oral histories. Lestz also assigned literature on adult literacy and held one seminar session at the Reading Center. A real effort was made in this project to foster an interdisciplinary climate among the fields of history, composition theory, and adult literacy.

Six advanced undergraduates and graduate students took the course and each completed an oral history from initial transcript to finished narrative with a student from LVGH. Their work makes up a major portion of "*Reading the World: Life Narratives By Adult New Readers*, two volumes (Lestz, Demetron, and Smith, 1994).

Lestz's course played a major role in the expansion of the project and in the stimulation of the interactive educative environment that made it possible to successfully complete. Two of the narrators, Derrick Matthews and Douglas Taylor, and I, gave talks at the seminar that provided Lestz's students with a "felt" reality based sense of what the lives of the narrators were about. One of the seminar students captured something about the unique genre of oral history, which he appended as a headnote to the student's biography he had been assigned. After wondering about the relationship between "traditional historical methodologies" and the subjective experiences of the narrator, this seminar member had discovered that "An awakening had occurred the moment that Clarence began to speak, that we are all participants in the flow of what we call history. It is inescapable since, in the final analysis, history is synonymous with the totality of human experience" (Lestz, Demetron, and Smith, 1994, p. 98, Volume II). Pushing this observation further, one might speculate on how such an interdisciplinary project could lay some groundwork for the expansion of what is considered canonical in such a traditional academic discipline as history, which, in turn, could enrich adult literacy studies as well. This is gist for further development that I cannot expand on here, but illustrates that the full import of this project has yet to be extracted.

The seminar students carried out their assignments masterfully. In all cases, the Trinity group and the participating LVGH students "connected." Along with the narratives they composed with their dialogue partners, the Trinity group took the lead in constructing highly illuminating headnotes that integrated key personal experiences of the narrators within the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which their lives have been embedded. Consider the blending of the personal and socio-historical described by S.P. Browning in his introduction to one of the narratives:

Walter...was repeatedly pulled out of school during the first and second grades until he left school for good. While his mother ordered him out, it is likely that she did so on the orders of the landowner. [Nicholas] Lemann [1991, p. 18] writes about the Mississippi delta, "the planter could and did shut down the schools whenever there was work to be done in the fields." His lack of schooling *may* account for Walter's often twisted sentence structure which, when combined

with a Southern accent, makes his words particularly difficult to understand (Lestz, Demetrion, and Smith, 1994, p. 56, Volume II).

“*Reading the World*” has been drawn upon extensively by advanced literacy learners at LVGH and enabled all of us connected to the affiliate to obtain a richer appreciation of the life experiences, intelligence, and at times heart-wrenching struggles that many adult new readers have endured. Many examples that illuminate the poignancy of the text could be drawn upon, but consider Walter's own account of his harrowing upbringing:

You see, my momma married again. He [Walter's step-father] didn't want me to come to his house. I must have been eighteen to nineteen years old [when I left]. So I left there and moved and didn't go back. I slipped back there [occasionally]. I was about eighteen years old as far as I can remember. And, uh, then I stayed in this woods, found a big old log. I cleaned the log out to make sure there was nothing in it. After I got through cleaning out the big log, I built me a big old campfire..., then I turned around and got me a blanket. I slipped it off from my house. Took the blanket and wrapped myself up in the blanket....and slid down the log..... I stayed in there long until, uh, about daylight.... Then I went down to see what they have...to find, to get me something hot to drink. It didn't make no difference at that time: brew, home brew, wine, I didn't care. All I wanted was the feeling out of me (Lestz, Demetrion, and Smith, 1994, p. 59, Volume II).

While it remains all too easy for those of us who work with adult literacy learners to slip into our perception of them as “simply students,” this anthology offers another vision. Their struggles when reflected against ours (those who teach them how to read and write), speak both to our common humanity and to the vast injustices that characterize the social, economic, educational and racial experiences between this culture's middle and underclass. That this anthology has served as text for adult literacy learners, represents an effort, small though may be, to establish at least certain chords of empathy between groups of people who often know little about each other's social worlds. However pervasive student generated texts may be at least within progressive literacy programs, it is doubtful that there are more than a few texts of such poignancy and depth as *Life Stories* and “*Reading the World*.” These texts not only emerged out of the organizational and learning climate of the Bob Steele Reading Center. They also contributed significantly to its cultural depth. Just as importantly they pointed toward a potential that seems always a bit beyond the then current horizon in the continual probing of the meanings of literacy among *all* the stakeholders who are absorbed by the phenomenon of adult literacy education.

### **The Program and its Projects**

I had exerted a strong project focus at the Bob Steele Reading Center throughout the eight years of my tenure, in no small measure in pursuit of the trajectory of my own “growth.” However “narcissistic” (Lasch, 1978; Leinberger and Tucker, 1991), this impetus tapped into certain creative energies unleashed via what I would like to refer to

as a more benign interpretation of the “literacy myth” than that articulated by historian Harvey Graff (1979) in the construction of program’s expansion during these eight years. In the projects on student writing, the creation oral history narratives, and in the collection of transcribed learning interviews of students and tutors my objective was as much to mirror a prototype of what a literacy program could become as it was to meet a particular on-site need. This prototype remained latent in the sense that anything like the “full” implications of such a model proved beyond our purview as well as any perceived mandate from the LVGH organizational leadership level. In this respect, an ambiguity accompanied much of our project focus, notwithstanding the expansive work we did accomplish, which did not easily gel with concrete operational needs or stated organizational objectives in which projects were perceived as something “extra.”

Some of the agency staff argued that my intense project focus interfered with the more desirable good of competent daily operational management, which I should have concentrated on more than I did. I did not ignore this, but such work did not galvanize my most consuming interests in the latter years. Moreover, I did think the project work on writing, the oral histories, and the student learning interviews was of crucial significance which, without the focused attention paid to them, would not likely have been attended to, including the preservation of the historical memory of this period in the program’s life. Still, I experienced the sting of the accuracy of the criticism in that I utilized the project focus at least in part, as a form of compensation against my own perceived inadequacy in attempting to manage the more routine administrative responsibilities of the program. In this tension between my felt inadequacies and what might loosely be referred to as my “genius,” the following passage from the neo-orthodox theologian Reinhold Niebuhr spoke compellingly to my existential situation in 1995-1996:

The ambition of man to be something is always partly prompted by the fear of meaninglessness which threatens him by reason of the contingent character of his existence. His creativity is therefore always corrupted by some effort to overcome contingency by raising precisely what is contingent to absolute and unlimited dimensions. This effort, though universal, cannot be regarded as normative. It is always destructive. Yet obviously the destructive aspect of anxiety is so intimately involved in the creative aspects that there is no possibility of making a simple separation between them. The two are inextricably bound together by reason of man being anxious both to realize his unlimited possibilities and to overcome and to hide the dependent and contingent character of his existence (Niebuhr, cited in Rasmussen, 1991, pp. 140-141).

Throughout my attempt to embrace the “literacy myth” via the Deweyan vision of “growth” I was aware of this Niebuhrian anxiety. Through the formation of the small-group tutoring program, I was able to sublimate this tension by focusing on the Center’s profoundly collaborative learning environment. Once the group tutoring program stabilized, the social energy which fostered and sustained it did not transfer over, at least to anything like the same degree, into project work where much of the creative edge of my psychic energies were increasingly moving, *in part*, as a compensatory escape valve against the growing complexity of daily management activities. This may have been due

to the limitations of my own pedagogical acumen and organizational negotiating skills in not being more effectively able to make the linkages between program operations and project work as to anything inherently in conflict between the two. Nonetheless, the tension between my personal vision and the articulated public goals of the broader agency and the more dominant features of its organizational culture had a certain ineradicable-like quality to it that extended well beyond my personality attribute limitations. With the Reading Center's stability achieved through the small group tutoring program, its cutting edge distinction was seemingly becoming diffused, as more visible entrepreneurial energies became exerted in the realm of community outreach programming, and in the general growth of the agency's staffing, funding sources, and board development. My pursuit of projects was partially motivated to keeping the Center's distinctive pedagogical environment at the core of the affiliate's collective consciousness and also to make inroads in the "field" which I hoped would strike a responsive chord "back home." That which was in tension was my vision of the Reading Center as a laboratory/research center and the more normalized objectives of the organizational leadership to stabilize the on-site programming, which required a much more detailed focus on daily operational management than what I was able to easily provide.

Discussion beyond my personal angst also bears merit. We have examined the Center's work in student writing and in the creation of oral history narratives. Volunteers also contributed to other projects in the areas of program evaluation, portfolio construction, the development of an experiential counseling and referral program, and in the creation of a book of learning interviews of students at the Reading Center (Demetrian, 1996). This work was largely accomplished by college interns, which enabled the program to extend its focus toward some of the more cutting edge innovations in the field, even as certain projects did not achieve overwhelming success. All of this activity helped to move at least certain aspects of the program toward the "consummation," on my reading, of its vision as a regional and national laboratory/research center through the Deweyan imagery out of which I was operating to establish a first-rate progressive adult literacy center in the conservative milieu of Hartford, Connecticut. However, that "end-in-view" remained far from realized. It stemmed all too much from the meandering of my solipsistic imagination, which I nonetheless viewed as a "live option," but far from sufficiently grounded in the pedagogical and organizational climates of daily operations and the broader agency leadership vision.

Notwithstanding the limitations, what is important is not so much a realized end, but the processes unleashed in the creation of a viable learning environment for students and tutors. This program had struggled valiantly, although not always successfully in the areas of portfolio construction, qualitative assessment, and in the linkage of educational development with social services support. It achieved more success in the creation of its various in-house manuscripts that provided tangible, consumable products, which students and tutors could and often did incorporate into their lessons, as evident following representative student statement on the value of student-generated narratives:

It motivates you, you know? It makes you want to keep going and you feel that some way you're going to learn something for yourself. Sometimes you don't think you can learn until you see other people do it. So that motivates you a little bit. Well, a lot, I might say, a lot (Demetrian and Gruner, 1995, p. 60).

Whatever its limitations in achieving organizational-wide visibility, this imaginative vision of the Reading Center as an adult literacy laboratory/research was the "moving force" in my own practice that grounded the direction as well as my own case-study research. In terms of research, such sites as the Reading Center can provide not only rich ethnographic material for academic scholars, although that remains important itself and largely untapped throughout much of the field. An in-depth exploration of sites like the Center by *practitioners* could also contribute toward a reconstruction of theory wherein site-based experience becomes the interpretive vehicle of new ideas rather than merely an exemplification of existing concepts canonized by the academy (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1993). By 1996 such a potential was a far cry from any such realization although our prototypical efforts have left a roadmap for others to build upon (Lestz, Demetrian, and Smith, 1994; Demetrian, 1994; Demetrian and Gruner, 1995).

The challenge for any laboratory/research center engaged in daily programming is to simultaneously encourage sustained intellectual activity while also paying close attention to the dynamics of the daily learning environment for the purpose of improving practice. This is a tall order, in that scholarship and practice do not necessarily always converge even as a quest for their joining needs to be a prevailing objective in such an environment. Moreover, it is theoretically possible to establish such an environment, notwithstanding the ambiguities that we had not been able to untangle in our limited effort. Such work would require a strong commitment to practice and academic scholarship in a setting where the distance between them is often very difficult to cross.

However, the grounds to establish such work would require highly nuanced attention and sustained commitment over some reasonable period of time to the laboratory/research model. Given the persistence of such tensions even in the best of conditions, much would have been required to establish a Dewey-like laboratory/research center that I envisioned. In such an environment it would be as inappropriate to give short shrift to theoretical work for the sake of immediate gains in practice, as it would be to shun the daily work at the Center for the sake of constructing, perhaps, some grand theoretical design. Both theorists and practitioners need to pursue the logical trajectories of their reasoning even as they search for common ground in the quest to build new praxeological space. This is the fundamental challenge of teacher research at its best with one leg in academic scholarship and the other in the daily exigencies of ongoing practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993), which such an environment would foster if well designed and effectively run.

These tensional points, the resolution of which during my tenure remained very much "in process," achieved a certain symbolic poignancy in the relationship between the on-going tutoring program and its special projects. There was a complex relationship between them that seemed both synergistic and persistently in conflict. All of the

student-generated material for the Center's projects emerged directly from its learning climate, whether through the instructional program or in interview sessions with students and tutors. Much of it, in turn, particularly the various anthologies, was integrated back into the program, which stimulated many literacy lessons. On a certain operative level, there appeared a dynamic relationship between the core program and the Center's projects, simulative of the imagery of the laboratory/research center model.

Yet this was not quite the case even though there was more than a grain of truth in it. For there remained considerable tension, along with a certain degree of creativity between on the one hand, the very desirable goal of program stability, and on the other hand, the innovative work of project stimulation. It is easy to overstate this since in fact new stimuli continued to invigorate the core work as new students and tutors entered into the small group-tutoring program. The tutors invariably brought various innovations to the work which imperceptively altered the learning climate, along with a wide range of problems about student learning for which they sought resolution (Demetrios, 1999). Likewise, the cumulative impact of the shifting goals and abilities of the students was the stimulus for much of their own creative learning, as were their persisting barriers that proved highly difficult, and in all too many cases, practically impossible to resolve. Notwithstanding the similarities, the differences were important, as projects, at least during their construction stages at the Reading Center, only involved small numbers of students, which were only occasionally drawn on to buttress the ongoing instructional program. Yet their completion still required a great deal of commitment and psychic energy, which sometimes took away from my concentration from the on-going work of the program.

Even with this persisting dilemma, personally witnessing twenty students simultaneously at work with LVGH's then latest book of writings demonstrated the potency of certain projects to stimulate the entire program. Given the initial project focus of the small-group tutoring program, the relationship between the Center's staple programs and various projects proved anything but straightforward.

In analyzing our history between 1990-1996 a sort of tension between the quest for program stabilization and project innovation seemed pervasive, notwithstanding certain moments of fusion, experienced most directly in tutoring and in-service training sessions, and for me, in the writing of academic essays that included a strong case study component based on experience gleaned at the Reading Center. This tension between the program and its projects corresponded symbolically to the practical/theoretical dichotomy mentioned above, although the relationship between practice and theory and the staple programs and its projects need not remain sharply polarized, nor always was at the Bob Steele Reading Center.

Further advancement toward the laboratory/research concept in any program would require a resolution of some of these tensions identified at the Bob Steele Reading setting that would need to reconcile the needs of practice, research, and theory construction. To deny its possibility is to assume that reality is closed. To assume that it can be easily accomplished is to fly in the face of much history, but not of history yet to

be written as the present and future invariably becomes transmuted into the past. The development of such centers, if well designed and operated could go a long way in contributing to important knowledge construction that could be of much value to students, instructors, program developers and designers, and academic scholars. We made some initial stabs in this direction at the Bob Steele Reading Center, notwithstanding the ever-distant gap between the vision and the reality in which the quest for the ideal helped give shape to the actuality of what we became.

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