Participatory Literacy Education:
A Complex Phenomenon

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the issue of participatory literacy education in the strong sense as learners exercising "active control, responsibility, and reward vis-a-vis some or all of program activities" (Fingeret and Jurmo, 1989, p. 18) in light of a case presentation of a program the author directed. While viewing the participatory ethos as inherently desirable, the article points out the problematic nature of implementing a model when neither the learners, the culture of the program itself, nor the sociocultural forces that influence it are strongly grounded in a participatory democratic ethic. Pragmatic strategies are required, then, that come to terms with current constraints while exploring new opportunities for creative growth. Such a process often requires vigorous staff leadership not over and against the needs and interests of learner participants, but in accordance with them. Participatory efforts may best be realized when they are integrated within such contexts rather than imposed from above as an ideal construct.

> What do we do when the people with whom we work don't show interest in the ideas of dialogical analysis and participatory decision making? (Jurmo, 1985, p. 10).

> First, I think that you have to respond to the group, answering the expectations of the group. Then you must become banking educators at that point. When they ask you to give knowledge as food you have to give it. But by starting this process, you have to begin to challenge them. Even if it means that you have just five minutes, you begin to challenge them about their expectations (Paulo Freire, cited in Jurmo, 1985, p.12).

Introduction

The above quotes point to some of the deeper problematics among those who make the case for learner participation in the strong sense which "in its most active form...the learner has active control, responsibility, and reward vis-a-vis some or all of program activities" (Fingeret and Jurmo, 1989, p. 18). The paradigm contains an important insight; that participation and direct involvement are intrinsically desirable components of learning. In the process of facilitating what Freire (1970, p. 28) refers to as greater "humanization," educators, therefore, need to find ways to make such activity increasingly possible. Yet, other "truths" also abound which limit

the efficacy of the participatory model. Notwithstanding a political culture rooted in the ethos of the American Revolution, a vigorous participatory democracy is clearly "at risk" in the administratively dominated era of the post-industrial society (Curry, 1988). Literacy programs, particularly those institutionally stable, like Literacy Volunteers of America (LVA), are powerfully shaped by an administrative ethos that fosters elitism, hierarchy and the marginalization of the nonreader, despite the development in more recent times, of a progressive instructional program grounded in whole language reading theory, process writing, and collaborative small group learning (Demetrion, 1992). As Freire is well aware, moreover, many literacy learners have internalized dominant values which are not easily dislodged. This points to one of the most troubling dilemmas for the advocates of radical participatory education:

> [A]t a certain point in their existential experience the oppressed feel an irresistible attraction towards the oppressor and his way of life. Sharing this way of life becomes an overpowering aspiration. In their alienation, the oppressed want at any cost to resemble the oppressor, to imitate him, to follow him (Freire, 1970, p. 49).

In this, Freire subscribes to the neo-marxian thesis of "false consciousness," that the oppressed are not aware of their "true" vocation; "humanization" (p. 49).

Yet, such a view reflects those of the educator and not necessarily the literacy learners' own perceptions. However participatory in intent, Freire's purpose is to critically confront the illiterate with "objective reality" (p. 37) and through "dialogue," begin the long transformative path toward liberation and social justice (p. 47). As Myron C. Tuman (1987, p. 152) points out, however, at issue is not how participatory educators might "fulfill their own political agenda but how to enable students to exercise power themselves" in ways that *they* deem appropriate, however limiting it may seem to the literacy educator. Even for participatory literacy educators like Hannah Fingeret and Paul Jurmo, who are less concerned about adherence to neo-marxian political ideology, the issue of direction poses a not easily resolvable dilemma. If adult learners express little interest in exercising "active control" of literacy learning and program

management, then at issue is the extent to which the educator can and should foster an ideology of direct participation.

Part of the difficulty is that the participatory paradigm is grounded in a utopian vision of an "emancipated" pedagogy, reflecting Paulo Freire's founding influence. For the politics of literacy education in the United States, the emancipatory vision fails to adequately reflect the actual historical conditions in which the lives of most literacy students are embedded. Rather than "transformational," in any profound structural sense, the overwhelming majority of adult literacy learners seek more mainstream goals of inclusion. Linda Ziegahn identifies "self-improvement, family responsibilities, diversion, literacy development, community/church involvement, launching economic need, educational advancement, and the urging of others""(Ziegahn, 1992, p. 33) as major sources of adult literacy learning motivation. She (1992) also points to "the desire to understand, see results and apply knowledge, respond to a challenge, and pass on knowledge" (p. 47) as other major objectives. These findings parallel those of Eberle and Robinson (1980) in Vermont and my own study of motivation at the Bob Steele Reading Center (Demetrion, 1994).

A reasonable conclusion that can be drawn from such studies is that the vast majority of adult literacy learners seek learning experiences that have some visible impact on their lives. My personal experience as a literacy program director leads me to believe that learners often seek such knowledge through the direct instruction of a knowledgeable instructor who will teach them how to read and write. At the same time, many learners seek to participate actively in learning, but within a secure instructional and program structure that lends stability to their emerging efforts.

A Reformist Political Culture For Literacy Educators

What is required, therefore, among progressive educators, is more of an appreciation for the historical given, which, as Harvey Graff puts it, "constitutes a series of opening moves rather than a delimiting or enclosing mode" (Graff, 1987, p. 2). An apprehension among radical

educational scholars is that too much of an emphasis on existing reality reinforces the structuralist-functional view of consensual sociologists like Talcott Parsons whereby "the structure and ideology of the dominant society was rendered unproblematic" (Giroux, 1983, p. 73). Yet the emphasis on the historical given also has grounding in the more progressive, pragmatic and neo-pragmatic intellectual traditions grounded in the social thought of William James and John Dewey (Bernstein, 1983, 1986; Rorty, 1979, 1991; Kloppenberg, 1986). The social philosopher Richard J. Bernstein explains core elements of the pragmatic philosophy in his description of Dewey's concept of democracy:

> We are always in *media res*, there are no absolute beginnings or finalities. We are always in the process of being shaped by and shaping our history and our traditions. We are eminently fallible. We never escape from the precariousness and contingency of existence. We become fools of history if we believe we can achieve total control by expert knowledge, or if we think we can collectively impose our wills and completely determine our destinies. Dewey had little patience with those who succumb to a nostalgia or longing for a 'golden era' that had never really existed, or with the type of utopian thinking that seeks to make a total break with existing realities. Both of these modes of thinking all too easily lead to despair. It was not adjustment to the status quo that Dewey advocated, but the constant challenging task of reconstruction (Bernstein, 1986, p. 267).

More simply put, Richard Rorty places the same slant on Dewey's social vision: "Dewey seems to me to have given us the right lead when he viewed pragmatism not as grounding, but as clearing ground for democratic politics" (Rorty, 1991, p. 13).

It is the creativity and "openness" inherent within the pragmatic perspective, grounded in the energies of lived experience out of which a more authentic democratic political culture may be reconstructed than from the neo-marxian or post-modern radicals in their preoccupation wit "deconstruction."   It is within such a reformist framework that a realistic, but transformative adult literacy pedagogy might be based that resonates both with the constraints and the liberating potentialities inherent within the political culture of the United States.   Transformation in this sense does not refer to a fundamental restructuring of prevailing socio-economic relations, which, pragmatically speaking, represents an unrealistic objective for such a stable nation as the

United States. It refers, rather, to the very construction and reconstruction of reality as an ongoing process in the unfolding stream of historical experience and the hope that such an evolutionary program will lead to greater "humanization." There can be, however, no guarantees.

Within a basically stable social structure, in a political culture that contains both oppressive and liberatory components, there remains a largely unexplored region, an infinite space in which to create a more humanized society. It is within such a region, I would argue, a middle ground between the reification of the status quo through functional literacy and the utopian illusion of the "Pedagogy of the Oppressed," that much space remains open for a progressive movement. One grounded in the pragmatic energies of reconstructing the present toward a more enlightened future, within a melioristic, although still largely untapped reform tradition. Such a vision could easily fail as it has so often in the past. As the historian James T. Kloppenberg (1986) puts it, this tradition represents an "Uncertain Victory" for democracy. Nonetheless, the pragmatic, reform tradition, for a nation whose political ideals are grounded in a balanced liberty between freedom and order, may represent, in the words of Abraham Lincoln, its "last best hope." However ambiguous, such an experiment in hope and possibility may be worthy of our deepest efforts, particularly when considering the alternatives in our "postmodern," "post-industrial" society which breeds either so much cynicism or utopian enthusiasm.

These philosophical and political frameworks represent the "deep structures" out of which I operate as the program director for the Bob Steele Reading Center. It is within these contexts that I struggle with the participatory paradigm, defined particularly in the more radical sense of learners or significant others exercising "active control" of major instructional or management components of the program. Instead, I make the case for a more dialectical relationship between structured leadership and the collaborative dynamic in response to the varied needs of an evolving historical process. This literacy program is based in the conservative social climate of Hartford, CT, once known as the insurance capital of the world. Nonetheless, such a dialectical relationship between structure and freedom could be used to negotiate complicated social and

cultural terrain in an attempt to develop a literacy program that moves, however piecemeal, increasingly toward what Freire refers to as humanization and what Dewey refers to as "growth."

The Bob Steele Reading Center: An Overview

The Bob Steele Reading Center opened in Hartford as a program initiated within Literacy Volunteers of America-Connecticut (LVA-CT). It serves as a countermodel to the prevailing LVA paradigm where learner and tutor meet in relative isolation from the literacy program and the community of learners, typically, in the allegedly neutral local of the public library. LVA-CT established the Center on the assumption that a centralized site, housing an abundance of resource materials, staffed by a professional adult educator, would enhance the efficacy of the student-tutor match. In addition, the agency also anticipated that the Center would develop programs like small group and computer-assisted instruction, learner writing booklets and support groups. The early directors of the Center, moreover, envisioned a neighborhood site where learners and ideally, tutors and support staff, would be drawn from the immediate area. At that time, the Center was located at the Moylan Alternative High School, in Hartford's ethnically mixed south-west end. Thus in its most radical vision, the Center would not only establish an innovative instructional program, but would be rooted in the energies of grass roots community activism.

Six years later, much of the Center's innovative *instructional* program has come to fruition. The small group and writing projects grew beyond expectation and serve as the foundation of the learning program. The Center has also undertaken projects in portfolio development, oral history narrations of adult new readers, qualitative evaluation and applied research. These have all emerged through a complex relationship between structured leadership and collaborative participation that has placed the program on the critical, cutting edge of innovative adult literacy education which extends beyond the bounds of this essay to describe at any length. Yet, the Center has proved less effective in implementing a more broadly based *social* environment at least in terms of the more idealistic visions of the learner participatory paradigm. Nonetheless, it

has grown into an effective learning climate within a more restrictive, although stimulating collaborative dynamic in its instructional programming, initiated thus far, by staff and key volunteers, with significant input and "voice" among the learners.

At issue is not whether learners have the right to assume more direct responsibility. Rather, given the *actual* circumstances that have shaped both their perceptions and the Center's history and culture, whether the social and learning environment that encloses the relationships among learners, volunteers and staff contains ample resources to enable learners to assume major leadership responsibilities in instruction and program management. Of concern as well is the *focus* of adult literacy programs. Two primary goals supported both implicitly and explicitly from the learners and tutors are the attempt (a) to satisfy the *learning* needs and interests of the Center's students and (b) to provide meaningful tutoring and project development opportunities among its volunteers. The participatory dynamic represents one means of achieving those aims and in such cases, is deliberately fostered. In many other situations, learners require and ask for direct instruction, which also should be provided.

The Russian psychologist, L.S. Vygotsky refers to a "zone of proximal development" defined as the gap between "actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving" and a higher level of "potential development determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Wertsch, 1991, p. 28). Hannah Fingeret offers an argument which may appear to reject Vygotsky's "zone:"

> ...it is important to recognize that non reading adults are the creators of their own social lives, as imperfect as those lives may appear by middle-class standards. They participate in the ongoing creation and maintenance of the social world in which they live. Their inherent dignity is at the heart of the belief that they are not only able but that it is their right to participate in creating programs that are supposed to serve their interests (Fingeret, 1989, 9).

She draws on the research of Scribner and Cole (1978), to conclude that there is no connection between literacy and "higher order" thinking skills (p. 10).

Fingeret raises core issues about the nature of adult literacy provision and on the face of it, her quest to empower learner dignity, voice and culture, may seem to contradict Vygotsky's "helping" zone. The issue, though, is not whether literacy aptitude represents higher-order thinking, but the needs and interests students have in attaining them. Adult literacy learners often enjoy exploring the intricacies of their own and the cultural experiences of others, and a program would be remiss in not including this as a core component of its instructional offering. Simultaneously, the development of literacy skills and aptitudes they do not possess *also* represents a major source of motivation. Such skills may only be different rather than higher-order, but they represent a difference emerging literacy learners lack which often requires the mediation of direct instruction. Adult literacy learners not only seek to authenticate their culture, as Fingaret points out so well, but they also desire to transcend its limitations (Demetrion, 1994). Sometimes this is accomplished through self-initiative, while at other times it requires the support of more knowledgeable others.

Fingeret and Jurmo slide over the complex interaction between the participatory dynamic and the role of expertise in decision making in their vision of "learners and staff working together as partners" (Fingeret and Jurmo, 1989, p. 3). As a general principle it is sound enough and relatively easy to carry out. The more complex issue raised, though, is precisely *who* makes decisions, *how* they are derived, *who* benefits, *how sound are they* and *who* judges. There are no simple answers to questions. They have to be worked out within the learning community itself. In the ambiguous world of adult literacy provision, ideal solutions are often lacking.

Sometimes, the process by which decisions are made are not necessarily democratic, although they may lead to a more democratic climate. According to Robert Bellah and his colleagues, "Democracy is an ongoing moral quest, not an end state, and we in America need to continue that long process in our society as well" (Bellah, Madson, Sullivan, Swindler and Tipton 1992, p. 20). At issue is how to move increasingly *toward* the democratic vision in ways that can have long term institutional impact, if neither the socio-economic structures upon which the literacy

agencies depend, nor the organizational cultures of the programs, themselves, are well grounded in the participatory ethos.

The tensions at the Bob Steele Reading Center between executive leadership and the collaborative dynamic represent the ambiguous setting of its political culture, where participatory literacy education is viewed as a positive value which sometimes conflicts with the instructional objectives of the program and the broader organizational culture in which the Center is embedded. In this essay, I examine these tensions in two case presentations. The first focuses on the structure and purpose of the Center as it emerged in its first year and the role I played in transforming it from a neighborhood to a centralized site. After a brief description of the program's development, the essay zooms over five years to examine how student support groups fared at the Center. In both of these presentations, the participatory ideal guided initial behavior which required significant pragmatic adjustment in response to the contingencies of actual historical experience.

The Neighborhood Reading Center: An Early Experiment in Participatory Education

The CT branch of the LVA (LVA-CT) established their new program which the agency referred to as a "neighborhood" reading center due to its proximity "to the largest Hispanic community in the city" (Bob Steele Reading Center Files, 1986). What the agency meant by a "neighborhood" center and how the early directors, grounded in the ethic of grass roots community activism, interpreted the mandate was another matter, altogether.

The agency referred to the neighborhood unproblematically as the local of the site and the opportunity it opened to "recruit...specifically up to 50 Hispanic adults who are willing to serve as a pilot group to test the applicability of the Learning Center to their needs for instruction both in English as a Second Language and Basic Reading" (Bob Steele Reading Center File, 1986). In her letter of intent to the Travelers Insurance Company, the executive director of the state agency stated that a part-time supervisor with "a teaching background" would operate the

program and "a full time VISTA Volunteer (would)...serve as an outreach worker to establish and maintain contacts with agencies and organizations which serve potential LV clients" (Bob Steele Reading Center Files, 1986). While this required a relationship with the neighborhood and a specific "recruiting" focus, the executive director stressed the primary importance of establishing a supportive *instructional* program for inner-city students and their essentially, Caucasian, suburban tutors. As LVA-CT's grant application to the Ensworth Foundation put it:

> Literacy Volunteers has long held the concern that many volunteer tutors while trained in a group setting become isolated once the actual tutor/student match begins to work. While many volunteers function extremely well in the one-to-one relationship with minimal supervision and technical assistance, we are aware of many more who need and have asked for more direction and help. It is not practical to provide this help individually as tutors meet with students in a wide variety of locations at varying times of the day. With the establishment of a Learning Center, we will be able to have not only a convenient location for students and tutors to meet, but also provide some real hands-on supervision by a person experienced in tutoring adult illiterates (Bob Steele Reading Center Files 1986).

In short, LVA-CT viewed the Center as a potentially effective *tutoring* site, supportive of the needs of its traditional volunteers, working with a predominantly neighborhood clientele.

The early directors held to a more radical vision of what a "neighborhood" center implied. They sought to draw extensively on community resources even in the decision making of the Center's fundamental direction. They anticipated that much informal power would be exercised by an advisory committee made up largely of community leaders, agency representatives, learners, and tutors, that would garner the respect of the Center's clients. As one of the directors put it, "Upon discovering a strong sense of community which already existed in the area, it was determined that the Reading Center be developed as a neighborhood project, one which would draw *entirely* (emphasis added) on the resources of the community and which would directly respond to the particular needs of the residents" (Bob Steele Reading Center Files, 1987). This represented a view of grass roots democracy in its more radical sense, which the early directors sought to establish.

The directors sought to extend the implications of a "neighborhood" center to what they perceived as its logical outcomes. Yet, the model in its more radical manifestations as complete community ownership contained significant drawbacks. First, it represented an *ideal* in the minds of the directors that in its more utopian dimensions were not well shared among the client population or among agency leaders. Ownership issues seemed uppermost in the mind of the directors who undertook the missionary task of bestowing it upon the community. Yet, "The fact that participation by neighborhood organizations is limited suggests that the Reading Center has not been completely integrated into the community"(Bob Steele Reading Center Files, 1987).

The directors seemed to have been caught in a double bind. Their imagery of an ideal community required them to deny their self-authorship, yet it was *their* perception of a neighborhood center wthat they sought to establish. This is symptomatic of an enduring tension within the participatory ideal that needs to be confronted by its advocates. The directors set the vision for the Center in a collaborative, grass roots ideal that in many respects failed to correspond to neighborhood "realities." Simultaneously, the participatory vision limited personal ownership of assertive leadership that the situation seemed to require. At this incipient stage of the program's evolution, the neighborhood was in no position to direct the Bob Steele Reading Center.

Second, the directors did not take into sufficient account of the manner in which the Reading Center was embedded within the organizational dynamics of Literacy Volunteers of America. While the directors sought a bottom-up, grass roots direction for the Center, the state agency emphasized a more top-down dynamic in terms of tutor training, decision making and accountability. The directors, moreover, felt more comfortable operating out of an experiential management style while LVA-CT was governed more by traditional propriety. Although theoretically reconcilable, conflict surfaced when one of the directors argued that the grass roots organizational model represented a stark contrast to the "superior, antiquated missionary style (of LVA-CT, which) insults those we offer to serve." (Bob Steele Reading Center Files, 1987). The mission of the Center, therefore, became very much an issue, reflecting the divergent cultural

identities of the state agency and the directors: the former, grounded in an administrative ethos, the latter from a community activist perspective. Moreover, establishing an effective *instructional* program remained the prime objective of LVA-CT, while the directors viewed responsiveness to the community a more fundamental concern.

Third, other ownership issues included the tense relationship between LVA-CT and the local affiliate, Literacy Volunteers of Greater Hartford (LVGH) over "control" of the Center. The state agency originally surfaced the reading center concept to the affiliate in the early 1980s, which viewed it as beyond its resources to manage and finance. Nonetheless, the state agency continued to pursue the initiative until funding sources became available in 1986. LVGH experienced considerable ambivalence over the new project. They still lacked resources to manage it, yet a successful center that "belonged" to the state, represented a threat to a hard pressed affiliate inadequately staffed and financed to meet the burgeoning literacy needs of a major Connecticut city. The state office and the local affiliate agreed that LVA-CT would manage and finance the operation, but that tutoring hours would be reported to LVGH. This represented an uneasy understanding that resolved little of the underlying conflict on who had the authority to make LVA policy in Hartford.

In summary, while the Reading Center's directors sought to establish an innovative, participatory grass roots program, complex tensions between LVA-CT and LVGH threatened to waylay such independent efforts that contradicted so many of the cultural assumptions of the LVA organizations. Thus, ownership issues abounded in this complicated triangle that defied simplistic solutions. At issue was not so much obtrusive leadership, but the lack of any coherent direction that would enable a dynamic consensus, representing a new synthesis, to emerge.

A New Reading Center Director

It was within this context that I became the third director of the Bob Steele Reading Center in September 1987, less than one year after its opening. My background included Ph.D. level study

in U.S. History, a three year part-time stint teaching social studies in an adult high school diploma program and management experience in the contract cleaning field.

At that time, I was particularly interested in organizational psychology and the perception of my role at the Center was strongly influenced by Warren Bennis' and Burt Nanus', *Leaders: The Strategies of Taking Charge* (1985). Taking seriously the dynamic counterpoise between individualism and collaboration as a powerful cultural American characteristic, the authors point to "transformational leadership" as a critical component to organizational success. While rejecting top-down authoritarian models, the authors also repudiate the leadership void that is often characteristic in some of the more radical participatory efforts. Mediating between these extremes, they view the transformational leader as "one who commits people to action, who converts followers into leaders, and who may convert leaders into agents of change" (p. 3). Moreover, they reclaim the value of power as "*the basic energy to initiate and sustain action translating intention into reality."* From this view, at issue is not power abuse, "but a serious power blockage" (p. 15). Transformational leaders, according to the authors:

> ...emerge when organizations face new problems and complexities that cannot be solved by unguided evolution. They assume responsibilities for reshaping organizational practices to adapt to environmental changes. They direct organizational changes that build confidence and empower their employees (volunteers) to seek new ways of doing things. They overcome resistance to change by creating visions of the future that evoke confidence and mastery of new organizational practices (p. 18).

In his more recent study, Bennis points to the centrality of the "inner voice" or intuition as "one of the most important lessons of leadership" (Bennis, 1989, p. 35). Specifically, "when we forgo our own thoughts and opinions, they end up coming back to us from the mouths of others. They come back with an alien majesty" (p. 105) that we feel so compelled to deny because of a need to follow the voices of others even when they move against the grain of our own self-perception.

At stake for me was nothing short of vocational calling. I could not have known for certain whether the Reading Center would succeed, but I had the guidance of an inner voice which I felt

compelled to honor even when other, external voices were seeking to push the Center in other various directions. Obedience to this represented my most fundamental operating principle. I trusted its prompting implicitly as the only guide upon which I could ultimately rely. Although at the time, I would not have used Bennis' language, the last thing I could have born was failure *because* I refused to listen, with a consequent alien voice speaking a message that should have been mine.

My quest for self-actualization found common ground with the students, tutors and staff with the LVA agencies in Hartford in a collective effort to build a literacy program that satisfied the needs, interests and aspirations of its diverse constituencies. I interpreted my principle task, therefore, as facilitative management by nurturing conditions and situations that drew upon the potentialities inherent in any given present to expand the Reading Center climate towards a closer approximation of its ideal as an environment which stimulated adult literacy learning (Demetrion, 1991). This pragmatic stance based upon a *new* vision, represented more of a perpetual process than an end state, which gave to the Center its dynamic energy that enabled it to transcend a variety of cultural logjams that otherwise could have limited its growth and endangered its survival.

I was inclined, therefore, to acknowledge my leadership influence, upon which, to a significant extent, I believed the success of the Center rested. I understood the community participatory vision of my predecessors, at least to some extent, yet their ideological passion was not mine. It did not represent a hook upon which *I* could build the Reading Center. Neither was it shared by LVA-CT. My energies moved differently: toward building the tutorial program by drawing on students *throughout* Hartford and facilitating the organizational development of the Center. This was the vision for the center that spoke to *my* "inner voice" and the only one out of which I could have conceivably operated.

Program Development

There is little space in this essay to provide a detailed description of the Center's development, but some commentary is essential in order to support my pragmatic thesis. With the support of LVGH's executive director who supplied students and tutors, I began to lay the foundation for an effective tutoring program. Various colleagues and I began to work systematically with the affiliate director to build up the local agency's total delivery capacity, thereby creating bonds of cordiality between LVGH and the Reading Center. Programmatically, a "critical mass" had been reached at the Center, requiring a permanent site for continued growth. The affiliate also had need for better space, so in 1989, the state and local agencies took on the joint task of seeking resources to merge the Center with the affiliate in a common location. The merger took place in October of that year and the culture wars between the agencies dissolved. The Reading Center director would report to the executive director of LVGH.

With the resolution of this major organizational dilemma, I was able to concentrate more systematically on the instructional development of the program. Within the three years since the merger, student population increased fourfold, with the Center serving about 120 students on a regular basis. Much of the growth has been attributed to the widespread development of the small group tutoring program which evolved out of the transformational energies inherent within the Center's organizational culture (Demetrion, 1991). A milestone was established with the publication of a major anthology*, Welcome To Our World: A Book Of Writings By And For Students and Their Tutors* (Smith, 1991). This is an artfully edited volume, consisting mostly of student writings, compiled over a three year period which is used as a constant stimulus for further writing and reflection. Other projects, including an oral history narration of literacy learners, sponsored by the Connecticut Humanities Council with the support of Trinity College, were also completed, thereby placing the Center on the programmatic cutting-edge within the LVA system within Connecticut and throughout the country.

Implications

This thumbnail sketch of the Center's program fails to do justice to its complex development. Yet, it helps to illuminate core issues for the advocates of participatory literacy education, particularly in its more radical sense of learner "active control" of major program dimensions. Defined simply as working together, the Reading Center's entire history may be viewed as a collaborative effort. Nonetheless, in fundamental ways, my leadership and vision and the specific decisions I have made over a six-year history which has given it a very distinctive orientation have shaped the story of the Bob Steele Reading Center. Through this, the Center has become increasingly complex and organizationally more solid, empowering other voices to emerge to make distinctive contributions of their own. Through such a process of organizational development, a broader sense of leadership may yet unfold, enabling more participatory efforts to emerge.

Advocates of participatory literacy education need to think clearly about the complex relationship between executive leadership and the collaborative dynamic within actual literacy programs that are embedded in concrete and often ambiguous historical conditions, within a political culture, moreover, ambivalently poised between a democratic ethos and an administrative meritocracy. At issue is how to move the present more closely toward the democratic ideal in ways that actually work. Notwithstanding its stunning insight into the relationship between pedagogy and political ideology, the utopian vision of Paulo Freire has bred, alternatively, considerable illusion and cynicism among adult literacy educators in terms of applying his radical views within the United States. This is particularly so in the more stable organizational climate and mainstream oriented adult literacy learner population, characteristic of much of the LVA constituency. Instead, a more *reformist* agenda is required, that mediates a democratic vision within the context of what adult literacy learners actually desire: a program that fosters some combination of personal dignity, social justice and economic welfare. While the participatory dynamic is of crucial concern, progress toward these latter goals represents an even more compelling quest, difficult enough to realize. Attainment toward them may be

facilitated by radical participatory endeavors. On the other hand, decisive leadership may prove more of an instrument.

The Bob Steele Reading Center, embedded within the relatively conservative organizational culture of Literacy Volunteers of America, supported locally by the benevolent corporate community of Hartford, Connecticut, is caught very much within the maelstrom of competing ideologies and power structures. This tension has been internalized within the psyche of its director, who has had much influence in shaping its destiny. It is through the working out of such tensions that I have sought to develop a program that satisfies its primary constituencies, including myself. However ultimately ambiguous are such terms as what Freire refers to as "humanization," and what Abraham Mazlow refers to as "self-actualization," these have lain at the heart of the Reading center vision.

They have evolved within its organizational culture through the creative tension between executive leadership and participatory collaboration. Thus far, the former has prevailed over the latter, although far from completely so. This dynamic could change over time, but would require sustained energies among its volunteer constituencies to assume consistent responsibility for the program. In my view, progress toward such an outcome would best serve the interests of the Center's learners, if it evolved out of a quest to insure programming that satisfied their needs, interests ,and aspirations for literacy learning. This makes more sense than imposing a participatory ideology on learners whether or not they desire or are capable, according to *their own judgment,* of managing it. This issue is explored further in the following case presentation.

Student Support Meetings

In the previous section, I explored the dilemmas inherent in imposing a participatory ideal at the Center at its inception. In this section I examine a similar dynamic several years later, in the brief efforts to establish learner support groups, with the goal of students assuming major responsibility for their operation (Boutwell, 1989). By this time I had read *Participatory Literacy Education* (Fingeret and Jurmo, 1989) and had become familiar with LVA's quest to

highlight learner initiatives at least at the overt, programmatic level through learner support groups and other participatory activity (Reicke, 1993). Nonetheless, there appeared to me, no inherent need nor desire for such groups at the Center, since the collaborative activity in small group tutoring and writing seemed to have satisfied a wide range of needs and interests in the cognitive, emotional and social realms. A sense of community was emerging at the Center with its own particular energy and direction.

Yet, at the prompting of the then executive director of LVA-CT, I contacted an adult literacy learner, unconnected with the LVA network, who was serving as a local literacy advocate. He, in turn, met with some of the Center's informal student leaders, which as a result, a series of learner meetings followed between fall 1990 and spring 1991, led by Derrick Matthews.

The first couple of meetings appeared highly successful, with over twenty learners and several tutors attending, each. The conversation centered on personal and emotional experience on the plight of illiteracy and on the significance of becoming increasingly literate. Discussion also touched on possible projects such as fundraising, learner plays and videos and other possible public relations efforts. While some of the learners felt the need to take the message "beyond these four walls," others clearly wanted to concentrate on developing mutual support at the Center.

The support groups were more experimental than systematically integrated within the Center's program. Initiatives were more opportunity driven, emerging through the creative energies of particular individuals. Moreover, leadership depended upon the charismatic gifts of Derrick, as others did not express a concerted effort in developing a collaborative leadership team. I took a relatively hands-off approach on two grounds. First, I was apprehensive that my pragmatic drive to make things work may have overridden the emerging efforts of the learners. More fundamentally, the task of operating a burgeoning program of over 100 students and twenty small groups made any systematic concentration on the support groups beyond my resources to manage. I focused my limited energies and resources, rather, on developing the *instructional* program, which I viewed as my primary responsibility.

After the first two meetings, the others became more sparsely attended. At issue, however, was more than a diminution of numbers. Despite efforts to organize an agenda, the meetings began to lose much of a pointed focus. Without a pressing need or desire from the learners to go forward, I decided to shelve them, perhaps to be revived under better circumstances. Even without the meetings, however, collaboration and support remained woven into the natural fabric of the learning program through the instructional groups that placed people together in a variety of interesting combinations. Support was also achieved through the relaxed, informal style of the Center, which created a socio-emotional climate for a range of practices and programs that energized learners and tutors, alike (Demetrion, 1991, 1994).

One November Evening

The Scene

After a half-year interlude, my colleague, LVGH outreach coordinator, Steve Bender and I attempted to revamp the meetings, as much of the student population had turned over, particularly since the two "successful" meetings a year earlier. We were also responding to the concern of our supervisor that the support groups were being neglected. In our planning, we generated student interest, but no desire among learners to participate in the planning process. Steve and I, therefore, took an exploratory approach to the anticipated meeting by setting an agenda aimed at a general discussion of the learning process and an open forum to explore whether students desired a regular support group. The meeting was well publicized at the Center, but only a handful of learners attended, three tutors, Steve and myself.

The evening did not appear to bode well. The learners, unaccustomed to the new situation which did not place tutoring at the focal point of attention, congregated among themselves at the head of the table instead of joining the circle we set up to encourage dialogue. Since the staff initiated the meeting without direct input from the learners, I felt obligated to lead the discussion. I felt no relish for the task. The learners had no sense of what their purpose was at the meeting and the tutors wondered as well.   The discussion proceeded in a halting way, across the chasm,

separating learner from tutor. All of us began acting outside our accustomed roles even while striving to make meaning out of this questionable social setting.

The Learning Episode

The conversation hobbled as I attempted to encourage the learners to discuss their experiences as non-readers and the value now of achieving increased literacy. There seemed no particular interest in this nor in the less personal topic of mutually exploring the dynamics of the reading process. Raising the issue of support groups seemed out of the question, given the confusion of the evening. Being at an impasse, I decided, in effect, to turn the meeting into a small group literacy lesson by bringing out *Welcome To Our World*. To facilitate the reading, I asked the tutors to sit next to the students while I, at least initially, led the discussion. In finding our "appropriate" roles, the evening's social dynamics became transformed.

The chosen essays were reflections on past schooling, which, as might be expected, proved negative. The first essay, originally located in the adult literacy magazine, *Voices*, was titled,

"To Past Teachers:"

Why didn't I learn after ten years of school? What is wrong with you people? Are you all crazy? You wasted my time for ten years. I came to school and I still don't know anything. But I know it wasn't my fault. I can learn how to read. The way you teach was very terrible, boring, and stupid. What do you want from me? Did you expect me just to start reading on my own? All you people ever did was to pass me from grade to grade because you did not care. Why don't you all go back to school and this time learn the right way to teach?

One of the Reading Center students responded:

I read your article today. I read it at the American Literacy Volunteers Center in Hartford. I came from a small town in New Brunswick, Canada. I know just how you feel. When I read your article, I felt the same way as you did. I got to third grade and asked my teacher to help me learn my syllables and she told me I should have learned in the 1st grade. She never showed me. Because I was poor, I was put aside in school. The only thing I learned in school was how to fight and defend myself from the principle's straps and rulers. Now I am 43 years old and I'm just starting to read after only 6 months of school. Thank you for your article.

> We are learning to read with these small articles. Now I can read, too.(Smith, 1991, p. 54).

These essays serve as moving testimony to the trauma many adult non-readers have experienced in childhood and to their courage in adulthood in confronting a problem which at least in these two situations, had been accompanied with such shame. These essays point to certain flaws in early schooling, but more broadly, raise critical issues on the dilemmas of individuals caught within social structures that tend toward "normalizing" behavior. They also raise powerful issues of race, class and ethnicity in the maldistribution of educational services.

Those of us within the room possessing a college education, attempted to raise these sociological issues in explaining why Hector and Pat failed to learn how to read in school. Our intent was to de-victimize the non reader and to point toward social and structural causation for a complex problem that has cognitive, affective, cultural, social, economic and political components (Freire, 1970, 1985; Kozol, 1985; Hunter and Harman, 1985; Harman, 1987).

The learners expressed a continuum of views within a broad perspective that placed responsibility on failing to read upon the individual. One learner felt Hector was making excuses, while another, after considerable persuasive arguments by tutors and staff, agreed that responsibility should be shared between Hector and his teachers. None of the learners accepted our "sociological" explanation and maintained their own position with power and clarity. An outside observer might have sensed that the learners won the "debate" since they upheld their position in more convincing ways than us.

This assertion is not simply based on the force of the learners' arguments, but on the acuity of their perceptions. In my view, the socio-structural explanation of illiteracy holds considerable merit, as any reader of the critical scholarship might assume. At the same time, learners are required to work out their own solutions to perplexing dilemmas within the context of *their own* self-perceptions and cultural settings. For *these* learners, several of whom migrated from the West Indies, individual accountability provided a means of assuming direct control over their literacy development. For Hector and Pat, however, it made sense. Naming a structural cause

for *their* illiteracy, provided them with the insight that given supportive conditions, they could in fact, learn to read. The problem was not inside their heads, after all. The learners at the meeting, on the other hand, seemed less inhibited by negative self-esteem and more interested in reinforcing their intrinsic sources of motivation.

Lessons Learned

The debate raises serious questions on the relationship of the neo-marxian concept of "false consciousness" that Freire uses, and the participatory dynamic. If the vast majority of adult literacy learners are more conservative in their life-goals and political orientation than those who teach them, then, particularly from the participatory perspective, at issue is whether such educators, whom Aronowitz and Giroux refers to as "transformative intellectuals" (1985, pp. 23-45), should attempt to shape the consciousness of learners toward *their* political agenda.

What the debate demonstrates as well is the subtle dialectic in action at the Reading Center between executive leadership and more collaborative energies. Once the initial plan faltered, I made a deliberate decision to shift the focus of the meeting. This entailed *no* collaboration, although it represented a highly interactive decision in the sense that I was responding to the failure of the initial plan to meet the needs of anyone. Being thrust into an unaccustomed position, their behavior, the tutors and mine, reverted to role playing. The mood shifted only by bringing the familiar into the setting and transforming a planning session into a literacy lesson. Once the scene shifted to more recognizable ground, vigorous learner participation ensued, reflecting the natural dynamism of the Center's learning environment.

There was much within the situation directed by me, yet students and tutors, alike, left the session intellectually, emotionally and socially charged. Both learners and tutors recognized the debate as a powerful educational experience, initiated by me, but which had a spontaneous direction of its own. This provided considerable scope for participatory learning, not as an end in itself, but as a way of grappling with a significant issue that stimulated all of us in the room.

Conclusion

This essay focuses on the dilemmas of implementing the participatory literacy ideal in its more radical sense of learner "active control" of major instructional and program components within the innovative, but ambiguous political culture that characterizes the Bob Steele Reading Center. While empathetic to that ideal, I have sought another objective for the Center: the establishment of an environment that satisfies a wide range of *literacy* needs, interests and aspirations (Demetrion, 1991, 1994).   Hence, my focus has been on creating an innovative *instructional* program which has required close attunement to the expressed and unexpressed needs and desires of students.

The learning climate, at times, has stimulated intense learner participation, but not always. The quest for direct instruction remains pervasive as well, in helping students move beyond their current literacy abilities.   Working within Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development," therefore, represents a dominant pedagogical strategy at the Center. The pragmatic need, then, as I see it, is to create opportunities for increased participation, while establishing familiar and stable learning structures upon which the neophyte literacy learners can rely.   At least at the Reading Center, this has necessitated a balanced relationship between executive leadership of staff and tutors and the collaborative desires among learners to participate in ways that *they* deem meaningful, however limited, according to the precepts of participatory literacy educators.

The Reading Center program is far from static. The decision making dynamic could shift toward a more participatory mode under certain conditions. Moreover, I could choose to make a major commitment to it as an end onto itself, although I am more inclined to keep my limited energies and resources focused on enhancing the quality of the literacy instructional program.   On this, I share the pedagogical aims of Myron C. Tuman:

> The attainment of true democracy entails not, as Bowles and Gintis suggest, substituting a model of liberated society for the current pedagogical process, even at the cost of making it less democratic, so that it may be better able to produce students whose power of symbolic representation in language and elsewhere are the equal of the teachers, themselves. Gramsci clearly realizes, as American

> radicalism for the most part does not, that if society itself is ever to be changed by people working collectively in their own interests, then students themselves, more than their teachers, need to be transformed. To the extent that literacy has a vital role to play in self-transformation, all students thus need to become fully literate readers and writers of texts, and this attainment must be the primary aim of education (Tuman, 1987, p. 155).

At the Bob Steele Reading Center, we have concentrated our attention on establishing a learning environment that stimulates a quest for literacy among a non- or low-adult reading population. This has been accomplished primarily through innovative projects and programs like small group tutoring, student writing, portfolio development, oral history narrations of adult literacy learners and an applied research project that has drawn extensively on learner insight through short interviews and other ethnographic documentation. Our primary objective has been to construct a permanent literacy program that continuously pushes open plausibility structures in the realm of literacy practices which satisfies a wide range of needs, interests and aspirations of learners within the context of the personal, practical and socio-cultures spheres (Demetrion, 1994). To the extent that the Center is able to realize this broader vision, participatory literacy education may become increasingly incorporated into its operation in ways that authentically grapple with the creative tensions between the legacies of the past and the vistas of a future that perpetually await creation. Yet, democracy is no easy achievement. As Robert Bellah and his colleagues put it:

> ...responsible social participation with an enlightened citizenry that can deal with moral and intellectual complexity, does not come about just from exhortation. It is certainly not enough to implore our fellow citizens to 'get involved.' We must create the institutions that will enable such participation to occur,encourage it, and make it fulfilling as well as demanding (Bellah et.al., 1991, p. 15).

The quest for such institutional solidity in a complex and ambiguous political culture characterizes the driving energy and long term vision of the Bob Steele Reading Center.

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Acknowledgements