

A Critical Pedagogy of the Mainstream

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The essay links adult literacy learning within 'mainstream' programs to a personal philosophy of self-actualization, a scaffolding pedagogy, and the quest for inclusion into the main fabric of American economic, cultural and social life. These, in turn, are interpreted as important components undergirding John Dewey's concept of growth in its application to adult literacy, the philosophical premise which frames this essay. They are viewed less as a limiting factor than as a doorway that meets important needs, interests, and aspirations of students. The essay builds on the developmental social theory of Myron C. Tuman which shares close affinities with John Dewey's concept of growth.

Not change itself but the spirit of renewal and reform, so important for literacy, guarantees the continuation of freedom of democratic institutions—the liberating power of literacy comes only in the recognition of the contingent nature of social institutions, not in their necessary abolition (Tuman, 1987, p. 164).

I have previously discussed John Dewey's concept of growth as the enhancement of experience through the exercise of critical intelligence, which I have linked to a quest for inclusiveness, as the primary pedagogical space accessible to adult literacy learners in mainstream programs like Literacy Volunteers of America (LVA), Laubauch Literacy Action (LLA), and in state-mandated ABE programs (Demetrian, 1994, 1997, a, 1997, b). In this essay, I attempt to further flesh out this Deweyan space by identifying some of its undergirding as it applies to adult literacy in the centrality of a personal philosophy of self-actualization, a scaffolding pedagogy, and the quest for inclusion into the main fabric of American cultural and social life. The essay concludes by linking the case-study material with the developmental cultural and social theory of Myron C. Tuman who draws on a framework established by Jean Piaget to structure his view of social change. Although Tuman never cites him, his developmentalism shares close affinities with Dewey's concept of growth.

Self-Actualization as a Form of Humanization

For Paulo Freire (1970), *humanization* represents the underlying goal for a politics of literacy by linking personal and collective consciousness to the transformation of oppressive social conditions which is never fully achieved within history. While I share Freire's emphasis on "process," I view with considerable skepticism much applicability of his notion of liberation in the context of literacy programs in mainstream settings within the United States (Demetron, 1997, a).

Rather, among students who participate in such programs, the quest for "self-actualization" is a much more central value than any cultural politics of emancipation as articulated in the Freirian perspective. Radical critical educators may decry an emphasis on literacy education that equates empowerment with "the process of appreciating and loving oneself" (Freire and Macedo, 1987, p. 152). I maintain that such a goal is of inestimable value for those who have been marginalized. Given the importance of self-actualization within the culture of the United States, moreover, any sense of realism requires a strong linkage between such a value and literacy education.

The "myth" of self-actualization is one of the most potent beliefs that motivate adult new readers in the United States and represents almost a "foundational" precondition for any broader pedagogy of humanization. This is not to deny the value that adult literacy learners place on enhancing community, nor the desire to speak out and act on critical public issues that effect their lives. Self-actualization is not synonymous with the self in "splendid isolation." Still, identity among such learners, with exceptions, remains profoundly individualistic, requiring literacy to make sense to the self as constructed if it is to be embraced (Fingeret and Danin, 1991; Lestz, Demetron, and Smith, 1994).

Such an individualistic sense of self (however socially mediated) is pervasive in much of the student-generated literature published through adult literacy centers. Throughout this genre, one of the major identified purposes for program participation is to "have a better life,"

expressed in countless ways. While stating this, one of the most compelling reasons why students attribute to self-actualization such importance is because they believe it will provide them with more effective abilities to interact with others in various public and social ways. Such a notion of the self, far less a reflection of “false consciousness” than an acute “reading” of pervasive cultural, social, and psychological “realities” of our times, is the primary interpretive force field out of which adult literacy learners in mainstream programs go forward into personal and social being.

Consider Ed, an African-American in his mid-thirties. Ed has worked at the same menial job for years and had been asked to leave a literacy program in Hartford, Connecticut. Ed attended regularly, but failed to make sufficient progress based upon the set standards of that program. When he came to the program I managed for a number of years, the Bob Steele Reading Center, a local program under the auspices of Literacy Volunteers of Greater Hartford (LVGH), he reluctantly participated in the group tutoring, but initially stopped attending the groups as soon as he was assigned an individual tutor. (Eventually Ed returned to the small groups after much work with his individual tutor). When Ed joined our program his reading ability was virtually nil. Yet after much work with his tutor he was able to read passages in a student-generated oral history text (Smith, Ball, Demetron, and Michelson, 1993) with some ease. This in itself is an important accomplishment for Ed in providing him with concrete evidence that he can in fact learn to read, upon which his previous experience cast considerable doubt within himself. Moreover, by reading such texts, he vicariously engages the community of his peers which reinforces the message that he very much desires to hear that “we are not alone” (not Ed's quote).

A primary objective of Ed in taking part in our program is to attain “functional literacy;” to work on “what I need now, like filling out applications, stuff like that” (Demetron and Gruner, 1995, p. 60). With the help of his tutor he has learned to fill out money orders and pay his rent and insurance. He drives, but has difficulty with signs and limits his driving to known areas for that reason. His broader objective is to sufficiently develop his literacy skills to

increase his independence. He related some incidents where people took advantage of his inability to read which resulted in considerable financial loss. What Ed feels most is being trapped within situations over which he has no control. As he put it:

I thought about it, but you're not comfortable with it. You know you have limitations to what you can do....So, I'm stuck. It's not like I can go out there and get a job doing something else because I don't have the ability for it. So you have to settle for what you can get, most of the time (Demetron and Gruner, 1995, 63).

The limitations that Ed has experienced in not being able to read and write also effect his relationships with others. He is ashamed to ask help from his girlfriend. Moreover, certain co-workers equated Ed's "handicap" with those experiencing mental retardation. While Ed rejected the characterization, the cumulative message that he has received, along with the actual limitations that illiteracy in a highly literate society imposes has taken its toll on Ed's self-image. Ed's need for increased self-actualization to bolster a precarious self-esteem is perhaps nowhere more poignantly stated than in the following sentence: "I live by myself, so I have to be motivated because I don't have anybody to do anything for me" (Demetron and Gruner, 1995, p. 64).

While Ed's need for self-concern is rightly acute, it is not simply solipsist. Rather, Ed draws on the community of learners at the Reading Center for considerable support and identity even though at, least initially, he felt uncomfortable working in a small group context. His comments on reading about the experiences of other students are telling:

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 (Demetron and Gruner, 1995, p. 60).

Thus, Ed draws on the community of learners in the privacy of his tutoring sessions to help support his own effort and to demonstrate for himself that he is far from alone in his struggle. His primary goals are to enhance his self-esteem and the coping skills to function more satisfactorily in a society that in many ways overwhelms him. For Ed, literacy is a potential vehicle of self-actualization that may provide him with tools to re-invent his life without which

he feels stuck; at least, this is his hope. While these purposes seem primarily individualistic, as Ed becomes increasingly literate, he intends to engage the social arena in a more satisfactory manner, which he did, in part, by reconnecting with the small group instructional program.

This is development rather than cultural revolution or structural transformation and it is a slow process. Not all students are at the same place, of course. Yet the building up of the self is a dominant concern among many emerging adult readers and represents important work for the establishment of “A Critical Pedagogy of the Mainstream.”

Dialogue, Participation, and Scaffolding

In recent years, LVA has made a major commitment to participatory literacy education (Cheatham and Lawson, 1990; Cheatham, Colvin, and Laminack, 1993; Reicke, 1993). This philosophy, based on the assumption that learners should play a significant role in determining the content of the instructional program, accompanied an embrace by LVA of whole language reading theory, process writing, and collaborative learning. Cumulatively, this represented a major transformation in LVA’s understanding of adult literacy education in the agency’s perception of the “illiterate,” from that of an unfortunate, somewhat isolated individual (Colvin, 1983) to the “nonreader,” enmeshed in networks of communities where they play contributory roles in the exchange of knowledge and services (Cheatham and Lawson, 1990). Images of “charity,” “benevolence” and “mission” prevailed in the earlier view in a perception of illiteracy shaped by images of “healing,” and “down-trodden people struggling for survival.” (Colvin, 1983, p. 3).

A “basic skill,” functional-survival pedagogy, pervasive throughout much of LV’s brief history, reinforced the agency’s “missionary” perception of illiteracy. With the publication of the Basic Reading manual, *Tutor*, sixth edition, (Colvin and Root, 1987), the agency began to embrace a whole a language philosophy. Yet in the sixth edition of *Tutor*, the basic skill eclecticism articulated by Jane H. Root prevailed, with whole language reading theory grafted into the text only in certain isolated sections.

The transformation came with the publication of *Small Group Tutoring: A Collaborative Approach for Literacy Instruction (SGT)* (Cheatham and Lawson, 1990). **SGT** followed on the heels of *Participatory Literacy Education* (Fingeret and Jurmo, 1989) and was powerfully influenced by it. These texts in turn are cast under the shadow of Paulo Freire's founding legacy, although without the radical political emphasis of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. What these latter texts take from Freire is his critique of “banking” education and the need for a counter pedagogy grounded in the experiences and language of learners particularly in a collaborative context.

This view is cogently argued by the authors of *SGT*. They maintain that the small group setting stimulates a climate of shared authority which enhances “critical thinking and all other language processes—listening, speaking, thinking, reading and writing. The group empowers the learners, helping them realize that through their experiences in living, loving, working, they have much to offer” (Cheatham and Lawson, 1990, p. 55). Based upon this progressive pedagogy, “there is no ‘teacher’ to give easy answers. [Rather] each participant becomes a teacher for the others and each participant [including the tutor] learns from the other members of the group” (Cheatham and Lawson, 1990, p. 5). This view is premised on the belief of Fingeret and Jurmo that “learner[s] ha[ve] active control, responsibility, and reward vis a vis some or all program activities” (Fingeret and Jurmo, 1989, p. 18), particularly instruction, where, ideally, learners select the content and participate vigorously in a critical evaluation of it.

There is much in this progressive vision which has characterized literacy instruction at the Bob Steele Reading Center. Small group tutoring is pervasive. The groups consist of lively learning exchanges. Instructional materials often focus on topics that students find stimulating. Students, for the most part, feel connected with the learning process, with each other, and the tutors.

Yet there are also significant differences between the Hartford experience and the ideals established by the more radical advocates of participatory literacy education. The single most important difference is that in the vast majority of cases students do not express a strong preference in the choice of instructional material. It is not that they are uninterested in the

instructional content as they will telegraph their views through body language and the discussion that accompanies, particularly, small group tutoring. It is, rather, that content in itself generally is less important than the desire to engage in a learning *process* that students *themselves* deem meaningful. This process includes a felt sense of confidence that they can learn and are making progress in ways, both direct and indirect, that has important consequences for their lives. More colloquially, adult literacy students desire to be “heard” throughout their learning experience rather than necessarily or typically desiring to take the initiative in selecting the instructional material. This is so, in part, because they are less interested in the principles of participatory literacy education than in obtaining the skills, aptitudes, and competencies that will provide them with increased power in “real world” settings.

This is not to argue that students assume a position of passivity. Sometimes students take an active role in content selection. Often they respond to choices which typically provide more of a meaningful structure than the question, “what do you want to read?” or the comment, “you decide.” On occasion, students do in fact, choose the material. Moreover, students who have specific, pressing needs such as obtaining a driver's license or citizenship are more emphatic in requesting that their literacy lessons focus on these objectives.

Yet overwhelmingly so, at least in our experience in Hartford, students expect that tutors will take on that responsibility. This is so, I believe, because of the symbolic and somewhat diffusive value most students place on literacy that links its attainment with inclusiveness within the mainstream of American society. On this reading, specific instructional content is less important than obtaining the global competency of literacy which they believe is most effectively attained through the knowledgeable guide of a more experienced reader. That is, adult literacy students at the Bob Steele Reading Center intuitively adhere to the very commonsense assumption of the “zone of proximal development” articulated by the Russian psychologist V.I. Vygotsky defined as “The distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined by problem solving...in collaboration with more capable peers” (Gaffney and Anderson, 1991, p. 184).

Such competency pertains only to reading and writing ability. There is nothing within this position to assume that the experienced reader is more intelligent or knowledgeable than the nonreader. Neither is there an assumption that literacy is a “higher order” cognitive function than “orality,” although I would argue that literacy can open new learning opportunities that often are not accessible exclusively through oral discourse. This view simply assumes that the literate person is more experienced in reading and writing than the nonreader and can draw upon that experience to help the novice to obtain skills that he or she desires. The apprenticeship notion would pertain to any learning situation.

Vygotsky’s zone represents intermediary space between participatory literacy education in its more radical phases and what has been dubbed as “banking education” where deposits of knowledge are placed into “deficient” minds (Auerbach, 1992). It serves as a prevailing instructional strategy for “A Critical Pedagogy of the Mainstream” in resonating with what many students explicitly state that they want from adult literacy education. With the participatory educators, advocates of this view maintain that student involvement in the learning process requires strategies and approaches that tap into intrinsic desires and interests. With the more traditional educators this view argues that teachers often know more about much of the content of instruction and certainly more about reading and writing, and that such knowledge is important to facilitate effective learning which students desire to obtain.

Vygotsky’s zone, moreover, is a flexible standard. As students increase their mastery, teachers can play an increasingly supportive role in encouraging the development of autonomy and collaboration among the community of learners. Yet, if Dewey’s notion of growth has any merit, the need to *transcend* current experience typically requires “more knowledgeable others,” yet in ways that resonate powerfully with the intrinsic drives, aspirations, and autonomous development of learners.

More than half a century ago Dewey spoke to the challenge which still tends to polarize “progressive” and “traditional” educators of our day. Substitute the terms experienced and

inexperienced reader for the “mature person” and “immature person” (and Dewey was speaking of education for children) for a historical analogue to the current argument:

When external authority is rejected, the problem becomes that of finding the factors of control that are inherent within experience. When external authority is rejected, it does not follow that all authority should be rejected, but rather that there is need to search for a more effective source of authority. Because the older education imposed the knowledge, methods, and rules upon the young, it does not follow, except on the basis of the extreme *Either-Or* philosophy, that the knowledge and skill of the mature person has no directive value for the experience of the immature. On the contrary, basing education on personal experience may mean more multiplied and more intimate contacts between the mature and immature than ever existed in the traditional school, and consequently more, rather than less guidance by others. The problem then, is: how can these contacts be established without violating the principle of learning through personal experience. The solution of this problem requires a well thought-out philosophy of the social factors that operate in the constitution of individual experience (Dewey, 1938, p. 21).

In adult literacy education in the 1990s we are still struggling with the issues Dewey identified in the 1930s. “A Critical Pedagogy of the Mainstream” requires attentiveness to Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development" as an aspect of Deweyan growth even as it draws deeply on learner experience for instructional content and fosters participatory approaches, often in highly structured learning environments.

A case presentation may be useful. Consider Linnie, a senior African-American woman born and raised in the American South. In an interview on her learning experience Allison Gruner asked her what she liked to read about. Her response on the face of it seems extremely passive:

Whatever the tutors usually offer to us. They usually make the decisions about what we need. And I don't like to fight that at all, because, see, anytime that you waste your time as a volunteer and come in here to teach me, then I feel that I can afford to read whatever literature you put before me and not make my own choice because I can make my choice at home (Demetrian and Gruner, 1995, p. 79).

In a group discussion, Linnie elaborated further. She made an analogy between a student coming to the program and a guest invited to dinner, mentioning how rude it would be for the guest to tell the host what to cook.

There is much in Linnie's response that is enactive of the hierarchical and racial society in which she grew up and an uncanny resemblance between her and the hospital workers that Sheryl Greenwood Gowen studied in her workplace literacy analysis that took place in the South (Gowen, 1992, pp. 47-72). Yet it is clear as the interview with Linnie indicates that there is more in her response than mere passivity. First, a structural analysis of the interview provides important clues that Linnie has much to say in her engaged dialogue with Allison.

Second, she articulates preferences and is therefore far from passive, even in her role as a student. When Allison asked if she liked to read from *Life Stories* (a collection of student oral histories), Linnie quipped, "Sometimes it's OK, but I don't want to stay in there all the time" (Demetron and Gruner, 1995, p. 80). When asked to elaborate, she offered the following:

...I think that after we read this person's story, and that person's story, then we should rest and go into something else. Yeah, I don't think we should stay in that yellow book (*Welcome To Our World*) and red book (*Life Stories By and For New Readers*). You know, it's all right to pick up a story and read something about how they got started. That's good, so that's encouraging to you. But I don't want to just stay there, because there's other things that we need to learn, too (Demetron and Gruner, 1995, p. 80).

Third, Linnie expressed no reticence in confronting me after a year from her initial interview when we had still not found her an individual tutor. She brought a potential student to the program, then challenged me with her own situation where I was able to respond by inviting her to participate in our small group tutoring program.

Fourth, through her emerging literacy, Linnie began to publicly articulate her own voice, thereby contributing to the emerging student-centered curriculum that our program had begun to construct. The following language experience story dictated to her tutor, although long, merits our full attention as it illuminates the social milieu of Linnie's upbringing and her quest for dignity and voice in an oppressive historical setting:

Separation of Black and White

We was brought up that we couldn't drink out of the same dipper as the white did. They had a separate thing for us to drink out of. Neither could we eat at the same table that they ate at. Always a separation. We couldn't go in a front door. We always had to go in the back. We couldn't ride in the front of the bus. If we went in the front of a restaurant,

they wouldn't serve [us]. We were in the Greyhound bus. We stopped to eat. They wouldn't serve us because we came in the front door. That's when I realized what was going on between black and white.

When I moved from the country to the city, I experienced it more because the whites wanted us to say “yessir” and “yes maam” and if we didn't say it, they was ready to do something to us and say, “That's not the way you talk to us. Who was your mommy and daddy?” They would talk to my grandfather and tell him to teach us how to talk to them.

On the jobs in the fields, we never could say how we really felt. It was almost like prison to me. Anytime you are not free to live and speak and say what you think, it's just like a prison to me. I felt it was like slavery every time here in America. They would always say, “Gather them up and send them back to Africa.” But we were raised in America, not in Africa. I had a hard time dealing with that one. Not knowing how to read, we never had the same privileges. We only had the privilege to say and do what they wanted us to say and do.

In '48, I went to Tampa, Florida to live. We used to get the bus to go to our job. A group of black women. And we always had to go to the back, no matter who was on there. We rode the bus with this lady; she was a “maximum woman,” big and husky and strong like a man. She didn't back off nobody. One morning we go on the bus. The bus man said, “In the back!” She said to me, “Sit down, don't go in the back!” He said, “Well, I'm not driving today.” She said, “Well, we'll just sit here all day long, too. And don't get up because I will throw YOU off this bus. And you better not put your hand on none of us!” The bus driver took us to work and that started us to sitting anywhere we wanted. I got a lot of courage from her because she stood up for what she believed in. It takes stuff like that to make a black person, any person, to stand up and take notice. She was my inspiration (Demetron, 1995, pp. 57-58).

Whether or not the tutor selects the material for instruction is less important to Linnie than that through literacy she is profoundly “heard” in ways that *she* deems authentic. Thus, her initial response in the interview is reflective of a far from passive stance. Far more important than who selects instructional content is the growth and development that Linnie has experienced through the program.

With Linnie as with so many of the students at the Bob Steele Reading Center, active participation and various scaffolding support systems, (instructional, emotional, and social) interact synergistically to facilitate adult literacy learning. Such bridging is not a crutch, but a powerful means of enablement when it is connected to self-defined and to-be-discovered needs, interests, and aspirations of students who seek through literacy, aesthetic, personal, practical, and

cultural enhancement. Such a “developmental” instructional philosophy represents an important component for “A Critical Pedagogy of the Mainstream.”

The Quest For Inclusion

In the introduction to one of the oral history narratives produced LVGH, I wrote the following: “Through literacy, sobriety, motherhood, and her faith in God, Brenda is seeking to construct a mature adult identity out of a teenage experience that had caused her much pain” (Lestz, Demetron, and Smith, 1994, p. 9 vol. II). I chose those words for two reasons. First, I believe they faithfully represented the life experience that Brenda described in her story at least to the extent that anyone can actually understand what another person undergoes. Second, I meant to address leftist intellectuals and social activists who might interpret Brenda's understanding of her current situation as a form of “false consciousness” whereby the “oppressed” lack sufficient information to accurately “read the world.”

On the latter point, I share with the left the position that Brenda's teenage plight was very much circumscribed by forces perhaps beyond her knowledge and considerably beyond her control. Yet this is not to argue that she had no *personal* power nor that she has none now, as she seeks to reconstruct her life. Still, poverty, racism, a failing school system, peer pressure, and the endemic drug world have exacerbated psychological, economic, social, and cultural inequities between inner-city and suburban standards of living and life experience. Had she grown up in the next town, in wealthy West Hartford, it is difficult to imagine that Brenda's teenage experience would not have been radically different. Born into the ghetto environment of the Charter Oak Housing Project, it is fair to argue that Brenda has been victimized by a socio-economic system that distributes resources in a markedly unequal manner. It is also likely that such structural inequality will not significantly change soon in the profoundly non-radical nation of the United States. Whether we like it or not, the basic structural redistribution of power will remain more or less what it is now at least in its broad contours.

This is not to rule out the possibility of *reform* as characterized by the efforts of the Civil Rights and Women's Movements of the 1960s, for example. These and other infusions of reform energies can be highly significant for local communities and individual lives in opening up doors of possibility that may have seemed formerly closed. Yet historically, such movements have been accompanied by much ambivalence as reformers have moved back and forth from a quest for structural transformation to a desire for greater inclusion in the mainstream for themselves and the oppressed groups they represent. It is this reformist space, I contend, *within* capitalism, which in its broad countours, represents the horizon of possibility, the furthest “realistic,” potential avenue accessible for change in such a middle class nation as the United States. It is within such a horizon that “A Critical Pedagogy of the Mainstream” can operate and out of which Brenda needs and desires to make sense of the opportunities available to her in the emerging formation of a satisfying adult identity.

On this interpretation, her aspirations represent more of an incisive “reading of the world” than any manifestation of false consciousness. Themes of the social solidarity of the “oppressed”, “emancipatory” pedagogy, and “resistance” to hegemonic conformity are pervasive among radical literacy educators. Yet the *reality* among so many people like Brenda is that a community that would have enabled her to develop such a political social identity was virtually nonexistent in the environment in which she grew up in the 1960s and 1970s and certainly not within her “thought-world” at the time.

Moreover, in her case, support systems that would have enabled her simply to endure a ghetto existence relatively unscathed also proved thin. Consequently, she internalized and acted out the more “pathological” aspects of the inner city scene; pregnancy in ninth grade, dropping out of school, alcohol and drug abuse. Perhaps some would label this activity as “resistance,” and they would have a point. The problem is that there were no organized social movements with which she could have identified that would have enabled Brenda to reinterpret her behavior as a form of “legitimate” protest against the forces that were “oppressing” her.

In stating this, I am not arguing that Brenda has or must enact a sterile identity of conformity to the “hegemonic” status quo. Rather, I am rejecting such a polarity between “oppressive” and “emancipatory” forces that remains pervasive among the radical, critical school, notwithstanding a certain protestation to the contrary. In its stead, I am making a case for a richer, more complex, and ambiguous sense of identity that encompasses both the desire for inclusion into the American mainstream and resistance against some of its more pernicious consequences. More strongly, I maintain that in the present circumstances of her life, Brenda has little choice but to develop her identity in social conditions that are far from fair. I do not deny the need to change such social conditions, but in the “real world” circumstances that both she as a literacy student and I as a program manager were in, we had more immediate pressing issues with which to deal.

On my reading, what Brenda desires most is to be profoundly legitimized based upon her emerging self-identity as an adult seeking resources to assume the responsibilities that life itself demands of her. At the center of this is her need to be an effective, responsible, and loving parent to her two children. Given the “negative” self-image of her teenage years and the “pathology” of so much of inner-city life in Hartford, one of the poorest per capita areas in the nation, this is no mean task. To accomplish this, she needs both to sustain a positive self-image and to obtain the “external” resources to establish the kind of life that she desires for herself and her children. The tools that she has drawn upon are her support groups, which include Cocaine Anonymous meetings, the Bob Steele Reading Center, her church, and “born-again” Christian identity.

The role of the literacy program in this is twofold. It establishes a supportive socio-emotional community upon which Brenda draws and contributes. It also helps her to develop the cognitive resources to interact more effectively with the social environments that she engages and would like to enter.

More concretely, through our literacy program, she learned to read the Bible with increasing skill, developed her general competency with reading and writing, and has taken

initial steps to attain a nurse's aide certificate (Demetrian and Gruner, 1995, pp. 5-10). On her own, she reads her Cocaine Anonymous materials more effectively. She reads mail and pays bills independently which she had previously not been able, and material sent home from her child's school.

Such growth, in turn, encourages Brenda to take more risks in social environments that previously she would have avoided. She recounts her public reading of portions of her Narcotics Anonymous book, *How it Works*. She also took a major leap forward at church by joining the choir. She has spoken to groups of prospective tutors, sharing her story and encouraging them to become involved. She was one of the key participants in the Reading Center's small group tutoring program who had contributed significantly toward building community at our site. Thus with Brenda as with so many other emerging adult literacy learners, cognitive, social, and emotional development become entwined. Commenting on the value she attributes to LVGH's published oral history narratives, she offers the following observation:

...that's their life history. That's them. A lot of people (I'm talking about myself) don't want people to know about their past. But when you live up to your past there's nothing to be ashamed of (Demetrian and Gruner, 1995, p. 9).

This observation signifies a profound "perspective transformation" (Mezirow, 1994) in Brenda's self-perception which pertains not only to her self-development in "splendid isolation," but to her quest to build community with significant others within and beyond the literacy program. Through her "paradigm shift," Brenda has integrated practical, aesthetic, cultural, and personal development within a "middle-ground" context between the "normalizing" implications of functional literacy in conformity to an oppressive status quo and the quest for cultural revolution and radical social transformation proposed by the advocates of radical, critical pedagogy.

Developmental Socio-Cultural Theory, Literacy and the Political Culture of Reform

Like Ed and Linnie, Brenda's development at the Bob Steele Reading Center may be fruitfully viewed as "growth" in enhancing her capacity to master the varied challenges of her life in a broad quest for inclusiveness into the American mainstream. I maintain that this dimension of Dewey's educational philosophy represents one of the most expansive "horizon of possibility" accessible for such programs as LVA, LLA and ABE centers within the United States.

Dewey's concept of "growth" represents a profoundly American aspiration that could maintain in creative tension a deep respect for socio-cultural pluralism while coming to terms as well with an overwhelming quest among learners to assimilate within the American mainstream. Of course, reasonable opportunities for the attainment of growth need to be realizable if such a mediating pedagogy is to obtain substantial force within the contemporary literacy community. I am not suggesting that such a Deweyan consensus is on the horizon, but that it represents a vision that *could* lend a certain coherence to the field.

Myron C. Tuman does not frame his developmental theory through the prism of Dewey's philosophy of growth, but there are notable convergences which may shed further light on the articulation of a "constructivist," reformist theory of literacy. Drawing upon the work of psychologist Jean Piaget, Tuman constructs a developmental theory of literacy based upon the psychological, social, and cultural tensions residing between the forces of "*accommodation*-wherein we alter ourselves so that we conform to the demands of the world" and to "the principle of *assimilation*-wherein we attempt to change the world either in thought or in reality to conform to our wishes" (Tuman, 1987, p. 79). What is important for Tuman is not so much an "equilibrium," but a "progressive deepening of both assimilation and accommodation" (p. 80).

Growth, then, requires a coming to terms with both by making accommodation "increasingly deliberate" and assimilation "increasingly constructive" (p. 80). Tuman's more compelling issue is:

...whether within a *specific historical context* (emphasis added) one action represents the progressive efforts of an individual or a group to free themselves from the constraints of

the given by making their accommodations more deliberate [in the sense of consciously internalizing certain aspects of the normative world] and their assimilations more constructive [by committing to real rather than to fanciful change and paying whatever price is required to achieve it] (p. 103).

It is precisely this understanding of history as an ongoing stream of human action and thought, at the nexus of what can and cannot be changed as determined by historical actors, themselves, that a “progressive” interpretation of the politics of literacy within the United States might best be grasped.

At the heart of Tuman's pedagogical/political project is a definition of literacy as the ability to comprehend and to create texts. Specifically:

Reading and writing must become practical activities that develop direct connections between, on the one hand, the necessarily theoretical experience of reading and writing texts and, on the other hand, the arousal and fulfillment of the student's own practical goals (p. 161).

Tuman (1987, p. 161) goes on to state that educators “need to worry less about the content of what we teach and more about the complex structure of motives that compel students to see any specific lesson, or their entire education, as serving some long-range developmental need.” Literacy as the act of comprehending and creating meaningful texts, needs to become incorporated into a broader cultural quest to make accommodations more deliberate and assimilation more constructive as identified by learners themselves. This, on Tuman’s reading is the basis for assuring progress and for fostering a “spirit of renewal and reform” (p. 164).

Tuman emphasizes the symbolic importance of literacy as the ability “to redescribe the world.” Such redescription even as it contributes to the deepening of accommodative internalizations of normative, what he calls *synecdotal* (everyday) experience, also plays a role in challenging those assumptions. Literacy then, “requires of both readers and writers the negotiation of meanings that rise above, transcend, or in some sense cross expectations based upon ordinary social experience” (p. 17).

This is the basis for Tuman's challenge of "the revisionist critique" of literacy. He is particularly concerned about "the populist strain" (p. 123) which conflates literacy (as the ability to comprehend and create texts) with the assumption that all language practices, orality as well as literacy are of equal value. What particularly concerns him is the privileging of the synecdotal subculture (the everyday world) of those with limited literacy by revisionist scholars at the expense of fostering among such groups an ability to challenge and redescribe their world on their own terms in ways *through* literacy that would lead to progress on the accommodative/assimilative developmental axis as it is worked out within time.

Tuman identifies a somewhat solicitous concern among certain revisionists against an "imposition" of literacy as a form of cultural imperialism. His targets are Harvey Graff, Silvia Scribner and Michael Cole, and William Labov all of whom have written incisively on various oral subcultures of illiterate groups. Tuman shares much with these revisionists. Like them he is critical of the dominating influence of formal schooling in uncritically reproducing a status quo that in many ways acts against the best interests of these subcultures.

Still, Tuman differs from the revisionists in significant ways. While he accepts much of Harvey Graff's analysis, for example, he chides the historian for conflating "schooling" with literacy as the ability to comprehend and create texts. He saves his strongest salvos for Labov, and Scribner and Cole for romanticizing the synecdotal world of those living within oral subcultures at the expense of drawing upon literacy as a means of enabling those within them to transcend the normative pulls of those environments which constrain even as they enhance in other ways what Freire refers to as "humanization," what Dewey defines as "growth," and what Tuman calls "development." Tuman comments upon the use of literacy itself by the revisionists to select isolated oral expressions of their subjects as a rhetorical strategy to support their political/pedagogical agenda. Thus, comments Tuman on one poignant passage in Labov's analysis of a teenage gang member, Larry's powerful "nonstandard" use of verbal English:

The anecdote has had an impact on language education not because Larry uttered the words but because Labov skillfully used them as a compelling example to support his point in a written text (p. 127).

Tuman wants to afford that same right to emerging literacy learners themselves even if it results in the individual challenging the normative assumptions of his or her subculture. This is so not because Tuman disrespects those subcultures, but because in a complex, pluralistic society, such subcultures are in transition and in dynamic relationship with other cultures. What is important then, is not so much the preservation of certain subcultural practices and values as a “universal matrix frozen forever in time” (p. 133), but the ability of individuals, groups, and subcultures to reconstruct their cultures in ways that lead to self-defined “progress.” As Tuman puts it:

The spirit that leads us to remake ourselves and our readers in our own literate activity is the spirit of culture; while we may dread contaminating others with our culture, we should never act directly for others, shielding them as if it were from our world. We can study others as if they were natural objects, but ultimately our common humanity insists that their value to us as objects must never surpass their value to us [and to themselves] as subjects capable of acting for themselves and of studying us just as we study them. If people must [or choose to] change to meet this condition, if they must lose something of what we had valued so highly in them originally -- quite simply, if they must become more like us -- then so be it, for at the same time, in our very act of understanding, we are becoming more like them (p. 137).

This is particularly so if people themselves choose to undergo such transformation in the process of becoming increasingly literate through the comprehension and creation of meaningful texts.

Again, this is so, because it is in no small part, through the development of the symbolic imagination in “theoretical-practical” activity that “progress” toward humanization is attained. This is particularly the case in a recalcitrant milieu where social reproduction and inequality are not typically transformed by radical political confrontation. In such a setting Tuman argues, literacy education has a limited, but important role to play. Its primary function, he maintains is to help students develop their capacity to comprehend and create meaningful texts rather than to transform schools into “training grounds” in support of political agendas of either the right or the left. It is not that Tuman is against political action, but he does not believe that is the province of

schools, a perpetual temptation of structural-functionalists to turn literacy programs into mechanisms of social reproduction and of the proponents of radical, critical pedagogy who desire to transform schools into seats of “resistance” and “counterhegemonic” activity.

What Tuman refers to as development and what Dewey calls growth is not inevitable as there is little evidence to support an upward "progressive" spiral shaping the direction of human history. Such an impetus, rather, represents in my view an interpretative framework grounded in enduring symbolic discourses embedded within the culture of the United States.

Much recent scholarship has focused on “deconstructing” various aspects of “American exceptionalism” (that America has a unique history different from those of other countries), particularly the notion of "progress" in its secular and religious variants (Noble, 1985; Ross, 1991). Such skepticism has worked as a healthy antidote to nineteenth-century interpretations of American history that linked “progress” to various forms of cultural and geographical imperialism such as the doctrine of Manifest Destiny. On the other hand, such an excessive debunking by new left scholars has led more to cultural fragmentation rather than to any reconstruction of a viable American political culture and an underlying cynicism about prospects for the future.

In my view, there is now more of a need to reconstruct certain aspects of the classical American political tradition as one of the most viable ways possible of working through some of the intransigent accommodative/assimilative tensions characterized by Tuman. Particularly perplexing is the simultaneous obdurateness of stable social structures that reinforce gross inequality and the incredible openness in America, mythical or otherwise, that allows much scope for psychic, cultural, and social development. Given such a paradox which reinforces profound ambivalences at the very heart of American life regardless of race, ethnicity, and class distinction, what is required, I believe, are more inclusive readings on such classical American values as individualism, opportunity, pluralism, equality, and fairness. These values need to be integrated within the contexts of gender, racial, ethnic, and class identification in order to move forward toward a more inclusive society. Such core values may regain legitimacy, therefore, to

the extent that rhetoric and substance become increasingly synonymous by creating greater opportunities for marginalized social groups to play significant roles in mainstream institutions and settings, in order to progressively humanize them, and to reap the benefits thereof for themselves and for the public good (Demetrian, 1997, b). This middle ground, or the broadening of democratic capitalism, would be reinforced by an adult literacy curriculum that encourages learners to integrate personal, practical, aesthetic, and cultural knowledge for the purpose of strengthening the symbolic imagination as a form of praxis in the deepening of accommodative internalizations and constructive assimilations as they are experienced within the stream of time. Such growth would represent progress and would provide the intellectual underpinning for “A Critical Pedagogy of the Mainstream.”

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