

A Scaffolding Paradigm: Small Group Tutoring at the Bob Steele Reading Center 1990-1995

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ABSTRACT

This essay juxtaposes a participatory model of small group instruction developed at Literacy Volunteers of America (LVA) in light of the field experiences of one particular program within a local LVA affiliate. The author identifies much congruence between them in their mutual embrace of whole language reading theory, a common understanding of education as a process, and the importance that both the national literacy organization and the local program attribute to collaborative learning, broadly defined. A singular major difference is that the LVA training manual lays major emphasis on student initiative in shaping the learning environment while the local program is premised more on John Dewey's concept of growth as the *enhancement* of experience through the exercise of critical intelligence. This field-based model draws upon both "teacherly" and participatory modes of education. It, in turn, is premised on a scaffolding framework of learning where the tutor serves as a critical bridge between the students' existing literacy aptitudes and what they can accomplish, to use a Vygotskian phrase, "in collaboration with more capable peers." The essay takes a broad approach to scaffolding in interpreting the instructional program and its organizational climate.

[The zone of proximal development is] the distance between the actual developmental level [of students] as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined by problem solving...in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky, cited in Gaffney and Anderson, 1991, p. 184).

[Growth] is essentially the ability to learn from experience; the power to retain from one experience something which is of avail in coping with the difficulties of a later situation. This means power to modify actions on the basis of the results of prior experiences, the power to *develop dispositions* (original emphasis) (Dewey, 1916, p. 44).

Overview

This study focuses on the Basic Literacy small group tutoring program between 1990-1995 at the Bob Steele Reading Center which is one of the major programs of Literacy Volunteers of Greater Hartford (LVGH). Initially, one-to-one based, the Center's small group tutoring program developed out of its own indigenous energies at the same time that the national agency, Literacy Volunteers of America (LVA), began to emphasize collaborative learning

(Cheatham and Lawson, 1990; Cheatham, Colvin, and Laminack, 1993; Demetrion, 1997a).

Given LVA's tradition of one-to-one tutoring, the theoretical shift to collaborative small group tutoring signaled a major pedagogical change which included an embrace of whole language reading theory and process writing as part of a broader transformation from an essentially psycholinguistic to a sociolinguistic interpretation of literacy. As the authors state it in **Small Group Tutoring (SGT)**:

A whole school of thought contends that we learn from each other, from our interactions with each other and with our environments. We can refine our thinking only as we discuss with others, as we read what others have written, or as we listen to what others say. This collaborative learning sees all people as social beings and learning as a social event (Cheatham and Lawson, 1990, p. 4).

Notwithstanding a broad compatibility between the philosophy of small group tutoring articulated by LVA and the Hartford-based Reading Center, a crucial distinction marks the two. In **SGT**, "there is no 'teacher' to give easy answers [as] each participant becomes a teacher for the others and each participant [including the teacher] learns from the other members of the group" (Cheatham and Lawson, 1990, p. 5). Moreover, "you [the tutor or 'facilitator'] are *insisting* (emphasis added) that they take responsibility for their own learning; you are shifting the authority from you to them" (p. 11). This model is contrasted with a "traditional" view of education, which partially characterizes the Reading Center vision, where authority centers and flows downward from the instructor to the student.

Elsa Auerbach (1992, p. 11) comments that "the danger of setting up such a contrast is that it creates a kind of polarization that may not correspond to the lived experiences of practitioners. [Rather, m]ost programs are neither purely traditional nor purely participatory, but draw on elements of each and lie somewhere on a continuum between the two extremes." A similar observation may be implied in the work of Jane Vella (1994, p. 12) who clearly operates out of a collaborative mode in defining adult "learners as *subjects* (original emphasis) of their own learning." At the same time, "the teacher must distinguish between a consultative voice (a suggestion) and a deliberative voice (a decision)....At times they [students] offer suggestions; at

times they make decisions" (p. 12). When to favor one or the other is based on the following criteria: "As far as possible, they make *decisions* (emphasis added) on what and how they will learn" (p. 13), but at the same time are not left to dangle if help is required.

It is the argument of this essay that a discerning teacher is one capable of determining the critical edge of a student's learning capacity for self-directed learning at any given time and can decide when assistance is needed to facilitate further learning. Such a mediating view is sometimes referred to as "scaffolding" which characterized the predominant instructional practice of the small group tutoring program at the Bob Steele Reading Center during the period under study. Similar dynamics applied to the Center's programmatic and organizational development, the effectiveness of which required a creative balance between initiatives and directions stemming from program participants [students, tutors, and other volunteers] and those determined by staff (Demetrian, 1993, 1997a).

The Scaffolding Model at the Bob Steele Reading Center: Similarities and Differences With SGT

Group learning at the Center was a far cry from a "banking" model, where all authority stemmed from the teacher with students as passive recipients of inert knowledge (Freire, 1970). It included critical student feedback through body language, vigorous discussion, and opportunity to dissent. Students made their views known in varying ways, so in that sense the program was participatory. Students, in turn, expected tutors to assume a strong "teacherly" role as long as that authenticated what they wanted and felt they needed. The program was highly interactive, then, in that it fostered strong emotional, social, and intellectual ties among students and tutors. As one student put it in describing the subtle interrelationships among affective, social, and cognitive development:

In a group, they [tutors] help because they tell you. They'll bring something in for you to read and everybody gets a chance to read and if there's a word you stumble over a little bit, they'll put it on the board and break it out for you.

[Students in a group] are supportive. If you are reading and you don't know a word, the guy next to you will help you out with it. We help each other. If you don't know a word, before the tutor gives the word he waits to see if anyone else around the table knows the word first (Johnson, Bender, and Demetron, 1996, pp. 93-94).

Despite the differences between the Reading Center and the model of instruction articulated in **SGT**, there were crucial similarities in a sociolinguistic emphasis on group learning as depicted in the following comment by a Reading Center student:

When you're in a group, it's different from one-on-one. If you don't know something, somebody else in the group will help you without the teacher. If the person doesn't know something sometime, you help the person out. For me, I know the words and say, I feel good in myself, in my insides I feel nice. I'm giving my own self praise, I say, "you know the word and you help somebody out." Somebody else helped me out and I still appreciate it 'cause I didn't know. You can't learn to read by yourself. You don't know when you're making a mistake. You have to have somebody else there to correct you (p. 109).

Many students expressed a similar viewpoint.

Even in more skill oriented sessions, tutors provided ample opportunity for discussion, a hallmark of the small group tutoring program at the Center (Demetron, 1993). In that sense, the Hartford-based program proved highly collaborative. Another student put it this way:

I like the group because we discuss what happened to us. During all the time some of us didn't learn what we should have been learning at school. A group gives you a sense that you can talk about it among the people because they know what you're going through themselves. The people who don't know how you feel, you can tell them and they can understand (Demetron and Gruner, 1995, p. 11).

These sentiments could have been extracted from the pages of **SGT**.

Yet in this program's particular mix of innovative and traditional pedagogies, most students viewed the guiding hand of the tutor as a primary means of their own development. As one student so eloquently put it:

I define a good tutor as being interested in the people they're working with, the students. I find that when she's [sic] serious and puts all her might into her teaching from her own heart, because she wants you to get ahead no matter who you are or what color you are, she's there for you. We've got some good tutors here that is strengthening us, like the lady right there...and the other two who work here with us. I could look into their eyes and see they really want us to know how to read because they want to feel they made a difference to us, too. You see what I'm saying? It's good for them and it's good for us. I

like it because they can see, "I done something for this dude. I didn't come here and waste my time when I teach." I like the strength they put into us and try to make us know how to read. In the long run, no matter how old I get, you can come back and say, Hey, she did work with me. She tried her best. And if I didn't get nothing out of the program, I said, it's only my fault. That's a good tutor (Johnson, Bender, and Demetron, 1996, p. 18).

Advocates of participatory literacy education might view this perception as overly dependent on the tutor. Yet given the historical development of this particular program in the gradual shift from a one-to-one to a small group setting that both students and tutors viewed as "school," however benign (Demetron, 1997a), a tutor-led learning environment played a significant role in enabling the small group program to move "forward" in ways that made sense to participants. This bridge-building linkage, commonly referred to as a scaffolding model of learning, was formally articulated by the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky 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 under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (cited in Gaffney and Anderson, 1991, p. 184).

In this essay and throughout much of my research on the Reading Center, I have linked such a model with the concept of growth articulated by John Dewey (Demetron, 1997b, 1997c, 1998), as the "development of individuals to their utmost of their potentialities" (cited in Archambault, 1964, p. 12). For Dewey, growth is the enhancement of experience through the exercise of critical intelligence which requires that "every experience lives on in further experiences. Hence, the central problem of an education based on experience is to select the kind of present experiences that live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences" (Dewey, 1938, pp. 27-28).

It was not that such a Vygotskian-Deweyan learning climate was systematically worked out within the instructional program of the Bob Steele Reading, although it began to shape my thinking on both pedagogy and organizational development at a fairly early stage (Demetron, 1993). Rather, its trajectory represented a prevailing "theory-in-use" that shaped the practices and attitudes of many students and tutors. Through case study material of several tutor-led

groups, I will provide examples of such theories-in-use to demonstrate how an implicit scaffolding approach was linked to specific program contextual factors, including the perceived needs of students. In the conclusion I will extend the probe into these factors to argue for the legitimacy of the scaffolding methodology, particularly as linked to the Deweyan concept of growth, given student needs, tutor expectations, and other program factors at the Bob Steele Reading Center.

Dawn: A Program Pioneer

Dawn served as a group tutor at an early phase in the small group tutoring program's history in 1991 and played a pioneering role in its development. She was a college junior and called me to explore prospects of a summer internship. I viewed her offer as an opportunity to build the small group tutoring program since that was my primary organizational objective at the time and only two groups existed. In part, because I felt we needed a specific context focus to the groups to stimulate interest, and also, since I thought Dawn needed an internship that was sharply definable like our then recently developed Writing Clinic, I suggested she pioneer a family literacy group.

There was hope on my part that such a group could emerge, but would not likely resemble what Dawn had in mind as she thought about "family literacy." As she envisioned it, the program would consist mostly of young women with small children and would focus on childrearing issues and the reading of children's stories. Moreover, she expected that the program would be in place when she began.

I did not intend to mislead her, as I hoped also that a family literacy group of some type would emerge. Yet possessing "local knowledge" I "knew" that developments would probably not unfold in the manner she expected. First, we would have to drum up interest in her Tuesday evening sessions without a long interval between promise and delivery at a time when small group tutoring was not the norm, but just beginning to take off. I could help, but my time and talents were limited. Dawn had to play the major role in promoting her program by phoning a

list of students and sitting in at the Monday evening Writing Clinic to recruit additional students and learn the culture. There existed no program in place for her to plug into. The group gelled because of Dawn's flexibility, determination, strong interactive skills, and her willingness to extend personal invitations to students. Without someone like Dawn in charge, the fleeting project could have fallen apart before it got off ground. I based my hope for success on the platform we had already lain with small group tutoring on providing sufficient scaffolding for someone to further construct the program who could grasp the potentiality of what was not yet there.

Dawn's six weekly sessions revealed much to her. First, most of the students were men with children of varying ages, very much interested in family issues. Second, she loosened up on her prearranged curriculum and began "going with the flow," which included broad based discussion that often veered beyond the specific reading material. For those tutors prepared for it, that kind of improvisation sometimes leads to valuable discovery learning. Dawn provided an example of this:

...one evening we began talking about an African folk tale, and we wound up discussing the economic, societal and political aspects of Puerto Rico and Jamaica. This talk boosted the self-esteem of two students, who each grew up in these countries [sic] (Demetron, 1997d, p. 172).

Third, she found a book, **Stages in Adult Life** (Charuhas, 1982), which stimulated the students' interests by focusing on developmental issues that adults face throughout the life span. This text provided the group with a tool to probe into issues related to communication and conflict resolution at home and elsewhere that the students faced. As Dawn put it, "I noticed that there was a better response the nights we discussed adult issues" than reading children's literature. In summary Dawn concluded that:

Students would like more reading about issues directly relating to them. One student would prefer more reading about family matters, such as communication with a spouse or children. Most students agreed that they enjoyed the **Life Stages** story the best, but they'd also like a combination of things.... One student suggested that we should have guest speakers about the homeless, housing, AIDS, and CPR (Demetron, 1997d, pp. 173-174).

Dawn also suggested that the groups be separated into beginning and advanced reading ability levels which eventually came into place as a staple part of the program in part due to the organizational structure she provided in setting up the Tuesday evening program and bolstering our weekly offering of small group tutoring. Many of the topics she initiated with her group, moreover, remained an on-going focus of the entire program. "Family literacy" has made up a critical component of the Reading Center's instructional program, but it is "family literacy" *broadly* conceived and only in conjunction with a wide range of other issues. A similar trajectory characterized the evolution of the Writing Clinic. The highly specific focus ultimately waned as the Clinic evolved into a general advanced group, but student writing remained a prevailing topic at the Reading Center (Demetron, 1997a).

Through her flexibility and willingness to chart out new directions, Dawn embodied the entrepreneurial spirit of the Bob Steele Reading Center, helping to shape its organizational climate and pedagogical focus. In various essays, I have argued that this "spirit" was congruent with Dewey's concept of "growth." Dewey defines growth in a variety of ways that link the enhancement of experience with its continuous evolution toward definable purposes. The Deweyan aphorism which in my mind has most characterized the organizational growth of the Reading Center is the following:

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

The development of the Reading Center from a fledging program to a major small group tutoring site characterized also by a profusion of student generated texts and other innovations, required what I have referred to elsewhere as the Crossing of Critical Thresholds (Demetron, 1997a) at key opportunity movements as the primary mechanism for program expansion. The growth of the Center's small group tutoring program represented the *central* transformation of the program. Dawn entered in at a very early stage during the shift from an essentially one-to-

one to a predominantly small group program and played a pivotal organizational and pedagogical role in its transformation.

Ingrid: Exploring the Boundaries of Structure and Freedom

In the Spring of 1990, I initiated a Saturday tutorial session to further expand the small group program. A variety of tutors participated as we experimented with a range of group clusterings in response to need, opportunity, and the preferences of the volunteers. As various students and tutors entered and exited the Saturday program, I would work with whatever groups needed a tutor. Attendance remained fluid. Sometimes students flooded the Saturday program which required incredible scrambling by tutors to make the session work. This climate energized certain tutors and frustrated others. Attendance remained unpredictable, although typically a core of regulars participated. However confusing this seemed to some of the student and tutor participants, moving "forward," I thought, required an embrace of the chaos as a necessary means of finding the order within it in the effort to create a dynamic small group tutoring program within a broader organizational and agency culture whose pedagogical framework remained premised on one-to-one tutoring (Demetrian 1997a).

The Saturday program achieved an important stability once Ingrid took over as the main tutor in late 1990, a position she held for three years. She drew upon the innovative and somewhat chaotic energies unleashed in this emerging program for her own intellectual and emotional sustenance and gave back to her students every ounce of energy and support she experienced. As she expressed it:

My experience at the Reading Center has been a tremendous growth experience, a tremendous confidence booster. When you have a lesson that works, that *really works*, that is wonderful. Remember when I came here, I was coming from an experience that was difficult and very depleting and very dangerous to my self-confidence [a negative student teaching experience]. So coming here and having such success and such energy going between myself and my students was just the most empowering, uplifting experience. It really has been unbelievably powerful (Demetrian, 1997d, p. 193).

In this sense, the sustained work of establishing the small group tutoring program provided the organizational climate that enabled someone like Ingrid to plug into and take the program to newer levels of development. The Saturday success, in turn, further institutionalized the small group tutoring program as part of an overarching paradigmatic shift away from the psycholinguistic emphasis of one-to-one tutoring toward a more sociolinguistic, collaborative learning climate.

In an interview, Ingrid articulated keen insight on the learning environment we were attempting to create. She felt that the life issues adult literacy learners faced should become an integral part of the preparation of tutors in training. This would include a "reminder" that "these are students who have lives that are happening to them and very often need to take time away from their tutoring to deal with whatever crisis is happening in their lives." Given her training as a social worker, Ingrid remained attentive to the many real-life dilemmas among those who enter programs like the Reading Center face and how it affects their ability to learn, to concentrate, and even to attend the program (Quigley, 1997).

For Ingrid, an in-service session for group tutors proved memorable in the development of her career as a small group tutor. Unlike many tutor-led sessions, several tutors took on specific teaching assignments. Kim provided a scintillating lesson on the use of maps combined with several handouts which required students to manipulate various pieces of information that necessitated the utilization of some intricate reasoning ability. This impressed Ingrid and she and Kim began to meet weekly to plan out their tutoring sessions, even though their groups consisted of students at different levels of reading ability.

One of the major issues with which they struggled was the endemic turnover of students and the lack of continuity in the lessons from one group to the next. As a response, and in consultation with me they came up with the "unit format." They chose several major topics for the year, such as geography, African-American culture and history, and reading the newspaper. They developed three-to-five two hour lessons for each unit, although in practice, they sometimes ran beyond the allotted sessions. They would implement the same unit

simultaneously, even though Kim worked with advanced beginning readers and Ingrid had a more mixed group, consisting primarily of advanced readers.

Through their tutoring sessions and weekly meetings, both Ingrid and Kim experienced a resurgence of energy to meet the new challenges. Many of the lessons based on the unit format went well as the synergy unleashed created a sense of novelty that initially proved invigorating. Yet problems did eventually ensue. Structure and stability were what they sought in response to a *perceived* problem of lack of continuity from one lesson to the next. Through this attention to coherent subject matter, they could stimulate the kind of continuity in growth that Dewey linked with the expansion of experience. Yet, attendance fluctuation persisted. Moreover, both students and tutors experienced boredom, particularly during the newspaper unit because the topic had been covered for too long and lost its sharpness of purpose. As Ingrid described it:

I wanted to show them that the newspaper can be used as a resource besides just getting the news. I think we accomplished that, but I didn't know when to stop. I was so into it that I didn't know when to lay off. The biggest limitation was the attendance. It's very difficult to teach a sequential, structured, step-by-step system if you have people who show up for a week or two, stop coming and return again while new people are being put into the group (Demetrion, 1997d p. 191).

When Ingrid and Kim first implemented the unit format, it helped to recharge both themselves and their students. It gave both students and tutors a sense of a new start. Yet once the freshness wore off, the unit format in itself could not resolve the social dynamics in the lives of students that impeded regular attendance of all group members in all or even most of the sessions. What made the Reading Center's learning environment work for so many was the informal, open entry/open exit policy which enabled emerging adult readers to negotiate their participation through the complicated circumstances of their lives. In such a setting, it is often more effective to provide self-contained lessons that can be completed in a single session, even though, on occasion, material can be fruitfully carried over several sessions.

Ingrid learned that through a discovery process in collaboration with Kim. The effort to build an instructional framework through the unit format butted up against an organizational

culture built by students, tutors, and staff, supportive of an open entry/open exit policy that could not be transcended through any controlling set of pedagogical assumptions. Rather, it was by linking the instructional program to a somewhat fluid, but supportive social environment which served as an underlying institutional scaffold at the Bob Steele Reading Center. Learning happened most often and effectively at the Reading Center through the quality of individual tutoring sessions and their accumulated impact as students weekly cycled through the program working with various constellations of students and tutors which the group tutoring program stimulated. Through a combination of individual and small group tutoring, students could undertake up to eight hours of instruction per week as opposed to the traditional two within LVA's one-to-one model.

Ingrid's effort to impose increased structure was an experiment aimed to enhance the quality of the learning environment. The relationship between structure and fluidity was indirectly worked out between Ingrid and her students as both negotiated the interaction within the organizational context of the Reading Center. As the tutor, Ingrid led the sessions and planned a curriculum. Students responded favorably to much of this, but at the same time, imposed certain directions on her teaching. Both taught and both learned in a variety of ways. Both had their own areas of expertise. This subtle dialectic characterized the collaborative ideal of the program. The emphasis was not on students taking the initiative as in the participatory model, but students and tutors *together* negotiating the learning environment in a mutual search for greater knowledge and approaches to learning that "worked". Often tutors "led" the sessions as expected by the vast majority of participants, but students had their own ways of leading, too. This was a scaffolding model of instruction and programmatic development with considerable participatory input by students.

Suzanne and Jennifer: A Dynamic Duo

The Thursday evening advanced group which Suzanne and Jennifer eventually partnered for over two years was originally formed as a pre-GED offering which lasted for over a year.

Due to lack of consistency in attendance which made systematic work in the content areas of the GED test virtually impossible, the weekly session was eventually transformed into a general advanced literacy group. With its improvisational, informal emphasis and open entry/open exit policy, the Reading Center culture could not support such a tightly-focused thematic group for long periods of time.

As the GED group was initiated in response to the stated needs of several students, once they moved on, its distinctive purpose became blurred. By initially focusing around specific topics, such as writing, family literacy, and pre-GED preparation, the small group tutoring program achieved a degree of symbolic significance that initially provided a sharper sense of clarity than could ultimately be sustained. Such a focus served a supportive function in heightening the legitimacy of the small group program in its early history. Yet such a content driven focus proved unworkable in the open entry/open exit atmosphere of the program and was, in fact, an impediment to the momentum it helped create in fostering a more improvisationally fluid selection of topics often chosen by the tutors, but with significant student input. The tutor of the GED group, Bruce, pointed out some of the problems he encountered to which other content focused group tutors could identify:

I think it's pretty difficult to expect incremental improvements given our format. I don't know how you'd improve the format or how you'd address that situation. Because you know when you think in terms of what these students are hoping to accomplish, they're trying to prepare for a test that high school students have been working at on a full-time basis And then if you miss a week or two . . . you lose track. It's sort of like training for a running event. You need to train regularly and intensively to improve, whereas if you just train an hour in a month, you're not going to get into shape (transcribed interview).

This offering did help a few students move toward their GED, but that did not become the main impetus of its work. Although not as anticipated, Bruce stabilized this Thursday evening component of the program upon which Suzanne and Jennifer built.

As young careerist college graduate suburbanites who worked in downtown Hartford, Suzanne and Jennifer proved to be a highly compatible team. They brought to their assignment

an intriguing blend of improvisation and quest for structure that meshed nicely with the needs of students and with the broader culture of the Reading Center. They shared a similar view of literacy as "meaning making" which depended for success not only on relevant content, but on refined skill building even for the advanced students that made up their group. As Suzanne explained it:

I think there's a lot of interest that we've more recently begun to address, about grammar and spelling, things that we initially shied away from because the training is like, "The whole language approach, don't get specific." But I think with an advanced group, sometimes it's good to get specific because they're good on a general level, they know how it [reading in general] works, but they need some finer detail and are interested in it (Demetron, 1997d, p. 215).

Related to this "skill" approach was Jennifer's quest for an overarching methodology beyond anything she learned in tutor training or by direct experience at the Reading Center:

In anything that you learn, maybe there's five essential building blocks. As you master each of the five, you learn how to tie them together. I'm not really sure we know what those five, or however many there are (p. 225).

Notwithstanding this methodological quest and commitment to skill building, they stressed the stimulation of content learning through empathetic cognitive probing and establishing an enthusiastic collaborative environment. They punctuated their tutoring with a strong experiential focus that depended on immediate feedback from the group. They were vivacious and engaging which in itself added much to the quality of their tutoring in establishing a stimulating learning environment. Their creativity emerged by maintaining a vital tension between their improvisational intuition, their dynamic give and take with students, and their quest for a more precise methodological direction to instruction.

In important ways, they imbibed the collaborative, wholistic, methodology of SGT despite their sense of certain shortcomings in LVA's more recent instructional philosophy in their insistence on skill work and quest for methodological precision. Consider the range of topics they explored with their group:

We've done quite a bit of history in terms of American history, civil rights, some general black history. We're doing quite a bit of fiction, everything from fables to contemporary fiction. And then, current events--we've done several things on some contemporary social issues. We've discussed the gang violence in Hartford, and we've done a couple of things with crime in general, which everyone's been really interested in because everybody's got opinions on that and they love to discuss it (p. 213).

In no sense did they impose these topics upon students, but sought dialogue with them, in part, gauging success by the responses and reactions that ensued, but also challenging students toward greater clarity in their verbal and written expression.

In their quest for "Whole Language Plus" (Cazden, 1992), they expressed certain reservations about uncritically embracing what they perceived as the new doctrine from Syracuse. Like the other group tutors, they assumed a more "teacherly" approach to instruction than that advocated in **SGT** where "there is no 'teacher' to give easy answers" (Cheatham and Lawson, 1990, p. 5). It was not that Suzanne and Jennifer became "banking" teachers where the educator's "task is to 'fill' the students with the content of his narration -- contents which are detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them significance" (Freire, 1970, p. 57). Rather, Suzanne and Jennifer exhibited a profound respect for "scaffolding" (a term that they would not have likely known, but a concept they would have easily understood) as an intermediary pedagogy between the "banking" model and the participatory ethos in the strong sense, where direction comes from the group. In the scaffolding model, the teacher serves as a bridge, in order to facilitate new learning students could not achieve "by independent problem solving."

I have argued elsewhere, in such "mainstream" programs like the Bob Steele Reading Center where a stream of traditional and innovative pedagogies intermingle, that such scaffolding serves as an important source of *enablement*, that draws on principles of participatory and traditional approaches to teaching (Demetrian, 1996). With the former, the scaffolding model builds upon student knowledge, interest, and experience. With the latter, it assumes a strong leadership role for the teacher, but only as it moves *within* the grain of student interest and current learning capacity. It was in search for such scaffolding that Suzanne's and Jennifer's

quest for enhanced methodology makes sense, not in contradiction to the improvisational focus of their tutoring, but to more effectively shape and discipline it.

This dynamic becomes clear in their discussion of student writing. Commenting on one student's dilemma, Suzanne observed, "When we've been writing with him, he comes up with profound thoughts in the midst of disorganization" (Demetron, 1997d, p. 218). Pondering the deficiencies of another student, Jennifer commented "that in all of his writing, it seems to be all related to his own personal experiences and they're all sensationalistic" (p. 221).

Despite a profusion of student essays created at the Reading Center, writing in adult literacy remains difficult where pieces emerge sometimes only after the most laborious of efforts (Demetron, 1997a). Part of the challenge is to help students build on their innate talents and to press toward further development in ways that enable them to construct a writing history. With some minor, but notable exceptions, this had proven beyond the scope of the program between 1990-1995.

Yet their group did write. "[T]he most success was creative writing or on issues people feel strong about" (Demetron, 1997d, p. 216). They found particularly effective, story starters which students completed. Such bridging as this provided an important stimulus. The challenge, however, in nurturing a sustained commitment to writing, is to link such a supportive framework to compelling areas of interest that build upon more than temporary stimulation. This requires a powerful commitment to "the writing process," including a need to help students identify convincing reasons to engage in such difficult and time consuming work.

Suzanne and Jennifer viewed organization and structure as anything but straight-forward. With one student, they identified such a need as essential, while for another, any such "imposition" of discipline would deter his creative process. Jennifer and Suzanne agreed that the recursive stages articulated in **SGT** wherein discussion, reading and writing intertwine, make good general sense, even though the application of such a "process" remains highly idiosyncratic.

The tension between such inner creativity and the ability to compose good standard prose was summarized in the "debate" between Suzanne and Jennifer on whether one particular student

was one of the best writers in the group. Suzanne argued for the positive due to his provocative ideas. In writing about those who sat-in at lunch counters in the South during the 1960s, this individual could state that "these people were the foundation of the civil rights movement" (p. 222). As Suzanne put it, "those were words that came out of *his* [emphasis added] mouth" (ibid.) Despite the problems this student had with spoken and written grammar, "the thoughts that he wants to write down and can get down, I think are fantastic" (ibid.) Jennifer took a more skeptical stance. She acknowledged his "unbelievable comprehension of the material," but argued that "he struggles in getting those thoughts down in a manner that I would not call better writing than some other students" (p. 223). That is, "he still doesn't have a more advanced ability to record" his insightful thoughts, "in a way that's effective for somebody who's reading it" (ibid.) Suzanne agreed, but argued that this student was not *comparatively* lacking in those areas, so that for her, his keen mind carried more weight in her determination of his writing ability. "He has a lot up there, and he really wants to get it down. He has some concepts that he wants to get down" (ibid).

As indicated by this debate, Jennifer emphasized structure and skill building more than Suzanne who focused more strongly on the centrality of "meaning making." Notwithstanding this important difference they worked well as a team. They could appreciate the value in each other's position which they viewed more on a continuum than as a polarity. They also shared a common socio-cultural background which enabled them to derive a certain sense and value in their work at the Reading Center which resonated well with their students and the culture of the program. Thus, despite differences in emphasis, they shared a broad compatibility in developing a program based on wholistic learning, skill based activities, and participatory literacy education.

While the tutors never "resolved" the sometimes conflicting drives between improvisational learning and the quest for specific methodologies, it led to some stimulating learning sessions. Jennifer and Suzanne built an instructional program firmly rooted in the life experience and knowledge base of their students while also helping them with more disciplined

skill building activities and in opening up new areas of understanding. Their work together stemmed from certain theories-in-use reflective of a scaffolding paradigm in the Deweyan vein.

Conclusion

Both the text, **Small Group Tutoring** and the Hartford-based program represented efforts to create an alternative to the psycholinguistic model of literacy pervasive throughout much of the history of the parent organization, LVA and the local affiliate, LVGH. Thus, there was much in common between the underlying tenets of **SGT** and the group tutoring program developed at the Reading Center, including a strong emphasis on whole language theory, a respect for process, and collaborative learning, broadly conceived. The single compelling difference was the focus in **SGT** on students initiating their own learning, compared to the more "teacherly" approach at the Reading Center grounded, however, in a "scaffolding" rather than a "banking" model of education. This paralleled an organizational support system at the Reading Center that balanced staff leadership with significant participatory input (Demetrian, 1993).

This scaffolding paradigm was anything but top-down. Rather, students and tutors negotiated their relationship to the program through various means of communication in the effort to establish a mutually satisfactory learning environment. Typically, tutors took the initiative in setting the instructional program and staff took the lead in the broader realm of program development in response to the requests, implicit and explicit of the vast majority of program participants. Within the structure provided by such leadership, many students and tutors found a supportive environment to expand the range of their own learning and creativity. Thus, the Deweyan edge of "growth" as the *enhancement* of experience through critical reflection, provided an underlying motivation that a scaffolding *methodology* brought out. Throughout this essay, I have suggested how this scaffolding paradigm was negotiated among students, tutors, and staff at the Reading Center. A broader contextual analysis of the tutor groups discussed in this essay will bring further clarity to this scaffolding model.

The dynamic between Dawn and I stemmed from a need on my part to build the small group tutoring program and her need for a meaningful internship that drew upon her experience and knowledge base. "Family literacy" served as a symbol that helped both of us establish what we both needed. As the program director I possessed the local knowledge to discern what was required on site to take full advantage of what Dawn had to offer to move the program forward. Yet, unless I perceived considerable receptivity on her part I could not and would not have moved in the direction I did with her. Her enthusiasm and commitment to the project turned the potentiality of what she had to offer into the reality that it became. She made a vital contribution to the small group tutoring program at an early stage in its inception based in part on my decision to push this dimension of the Reading Center program and to draw her in for that purpose.

Part of the skill Dawn brought was her ability to negotiate with her students. She clearly had a vision of family literacy that underwent substantial modification in response to the demographic makeup of her group and the pedagogical expectations of her students. Dawn's perception of family literacy was shaped by a certain reading of the normative literature and media representation of the field. The students, mostly men, possessed their own reading of the world shaped by their experience at the Reading Center and their own personal histories. The students expected Dawn to lead in the formal sense of the term. Yet they, too, taught Dawn from the exigencies of their own experience and the motivational energies that drove their participation. Dawn's ability to "go with the flow," to say nothing of her engaging style and enthusiasm contributed significantly to the efficacy of her teaching. My ability to discern this capacity within Dawn, in turn, provided her with the opportunity to make such a contribution which also expanded her own experiential and knowledge base. Through the scaffolding paradigm, "growth" took place in a variety of ways at the Reading Center as a result of Dawn's internship.

When Ingrid completed the LVA tutor training workshop, the workshop leader recommended that she not be matched because of the tentativeness and self-doubt Ingrid expressed about her competency as a tutor. Reflecting on my own experience, I sensed that an

aspect of the problem may have been due to the internalization of a set of expectations Ingrid may have had based on an excessively individualistic ethos of self-reliance, reflective of a normative understanding of teaching gleaned through the public classroom. I later learned from Ingrid that her then recent "negative" student teaching experience reinforced such perceptions. In speaking with Ingrid, I sensed that her "insecurity" would be greatly modified by assurances of support on my part and that, in fact, she exhibited considerable enthusiasm and hope that a tutoring assignment at the Reading Center would afford her an opportunity utilize her creativity. Through a successful tutoring experience, she hoped to reconstruct a more positive image of herself as a teacher.

Ingrid's experience was not unlike those of many students in our program who felt similarly marred in a traditional schooling setting. My underlying motivation as a program director was to create a different image of a learning environment than mainstream schooling where creative energies among historically marginalized students, volunteer tutors, and myself could flourish, utilizing whatever methods and approaches as required. Once I discerned that Ingrid possessed the motivation and the creativity to take on a group tutoring assignment if sufficient support was provided, I felt she fit the bill sufficiently to take over the Saturday program. Besides, I needed a tutor for the group and I was willing to take a calculated risk that I expected would pan out if we could create for her a sufficient comfort zone of safety.

Ingrid's three year stint in that position made a significant contribution to the small group tutoring program. The emerging program provided her with an opportunity to develop her skills and transform a negative self-image. In turn, her commitment, energy, and knowledge bolstered the capacity of the program at a pivotal stage in its development. With the Saturday session in place the weekly cycle of the small group tutoring program became firmly established.

Although the unit format did not succeed as Ingrid and Kim had hoped, the improvisational climate of the Reading Center encouraged such experiments which were essential to move the program forward. Almost from its inception, I desired to turn the Reading Center into a literacy laboratory/research center, a vision which shaped the trajectory of my

planning, however distant the gap between the then given reality and the ultimate destination. I viewed the ability to transform pedagogical and programmatic experiments into stable program components as a critical factor in moving a traditional one-to-one LVA tutoring program to the ideal that I constructed even as I acknowledged that some experiments needed to remain localized while stabilizing the more normative aspects of the program.

The small group tutoring program was very much in process. We had some hope initially on building content-driven groups, but the open-entry/open-exit policy and the underlying programmatic assumptions that reinforced it, made problematical such a level of structure. I had similar concerns with the unit format, but wanted to encourage Ingrid and Kim in their experiment. The unit format, moreover, was not without success as it did lend focus to their sessions and for a time provided a potent source of redirection for their work. Perhaps with more support to Ingrid and Kim from me, the experiment might have proven more successful.

Suzanne and Jennifer joined the Center as the small group program was in full swing and contributed significantly to its stabilization. It was their combination of seeking the potential for literacy learning among their students, their capacity to relate to them, and their appreciation of the social dynamics of the site-based small group tutoring program that made them such an excellent fit with the culture of the Center.

They pressed against the boundaries of the Center's core pedagogical assumptions in search for transformative breakthroughs in student learning. They certainly pressed against my own capacity to provide them with direction. I encouraged them to discover answers to their questions through their own continual reflection and experimentation as they were more directly engaged with student learning than was I. They wanted more than that from me which I was unable to supply. I was as much caught up as they were in the experimental climate of the Center and could not bring an expert's frame of reference to the instructional program except to probe their own experiential and knowledge base as deeply as I could with critical questions in hope that the effort would bring out a "perspective transformation" in their teaching.

Despite the lack of clarity I was unable to bring, they persevered. Both Suzanne and Jennifer exerted a profoundly interactive learning relationship with their students and both adopted a "teacherly" role within a scaffolding model of bringing students to the edge of their current learning capacity and then providing direct instruction to move them along a continuum of enhanced learning that they would not have mastered on their own. Within these contexts and without creating an oversimplified polarity, the single compelling difference was that Suzanne embraced a more improvisational interpretation of learning while Jennifer viewed enhanced structure as a major missing ingredient in the program's repertoire of instructional strategies.

In essence, Suzanne believed that the road to enhanced learning lie within the learners, themselves, with the teacher's primary task to facilitate a process of enhanced "meaning making." By pushing the boundaries of their own frames of reference and current knowledge base, further learning would ensue through discovery processes. For Jennifer, learning was more embedded within systems and specific methodologies that needed to be mastered whether those be "writing skills," rules of grammar, or step-by step logical analysis of a problem or the specific sequencing of unlocking a learning process. It is important to reiterate that neither Suzanne nor Jennifer polarized these distinctive approaches, but with different emphases, viewed them as critical aspects on a continuum of learning.

Both approaches required the tutor to mediate "the distance between the actual developmental level [of students] as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined by problem solving...in collaboration with more capable peers" (cited in Gaffney and Anderson, 1991, p. 184). Working out more creative models of instruction between discovery and structured learning in such environments as the Reading Center may be an important next step in moving the field forward.

Whatever particular relationships between these forms of learning may apply in given specific contexts, it is the argument of this essay that a scaffolding methodology holds much value as a mediating pedagogy between a radical participatory ethic where "there is no teacher," and a traditional "banking" approach where knowledge is deposited by the expert in passive and

receptive minds. The emphasis on a Deweyan notion of growth, moreover, as the enhancement of experience through the exercise of critical reflection may serve as a mediating educational objective between the radical critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire to transform society in fundamental ways and the more stabilizing objective of certain schools of functional literacy that tend to slot individuals to meet the perceived needs of the postindustrial economy. Deweyan pragmatism remains perpetually open in the process of working from present constraints and opportunities to future hopes and aspirations. As indicated throughout the essay, the scaffolding paradigm as methodology and Deweyan growth as objective have important implications for program development and instruction in the field of adult literacy education.

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