

A Yankee Individualist in Dialogue and Confrontation with the Progressive Literacy Left
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Abstract

In the summer of 1998, two colleagues and I signed up for the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) Teacher Research Project on Learner Motivation, Retention, and Persistence. That project proved problematic, although highly significant for me from the beginning of my participation. Several factors intersected that created this “problem.” These included my understanding of teacher research, which differed somewhat from the facilitator’s and the impracticality of my initial topic. Lack of any compelling attachment to the NCSALL project was the underlying motivational issue that limited my participation. This essay mirrors the initial NCSALL objective through an autobiographical study of one adult learner’s struggle with motivation, persistence, and retention through the course of the project.

Learners, as consumers of service, directly or indirectly assess the cost-benefit ratio of their program participation every time they attend or do not attend classes/tutoring sessions. They judge whether the program is (1) meeting their expectations (realistic or unrealistic as their expectations may be); (2) helping them learn, or (3) helping them attain a better quality of life. When the costs of participation outweigh the benefits, [formal, or institutional] education loses its priority in their lives (Tracy-Mumford, 1994, p.4).

It became obvious that in each of the novels and short stories, the protagonist’s resistance to school was more than just a rejection of school. It was a positive quest for freedom that each protagonist undertook with absolute conviction and, in some cases, with risk to reputation and even to life. In their eyes, resistance to school meant a determination to stay true to the beliefs and values of their own culture, their own race, or their religious heritage. Instead of conforming to what they saw as the spurious values promoted by schooling, they resisted authority as they saw it. The protagonists were seeking to gain the liberty to follow a culture, value system, or lifestyle that they held to be superior to that of school (Quigley, 1997, p. 201).

Throughout my adult life, I have persistently linked intellectual development with my on-going quest for personal identity. Without the formal and informal study of history, social theory, psychology, and religious studies, particularly, as profound pathways to my life-project search for meaning, in all likelihood, I would have merely personalized “adjustment” issues without a vivid regard for their varied contexts. Circuitously or directly, much of my intellectual activity has resonated with a desire either to probe into a deeply rooted personal issue or to make an effective connection between an object of study and my own subjective experience. This propensity has served as an inner guide to keep research areas stimulating and relevant. At times this has meshed well with the challenges and requirements of formal academic institutions, although my relationship to them has proven characteristically problematical (Demetrios, 1995, pp. 94-95).

Inside/Outside: Teacher Research and Knowledge

My understanding of teacher research stems from Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993), *Inside/Outside: Teacher Research and Knowledge*. The primary assumption that drives my understanding of this emerging field is the claim by the authors that:

The unique feature of the questions that prompt teacher research is that they emanate from neither theory nor practice alone but from critical reflection on the two (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1993, p. 15).

The authors privilege neither theory nor practice, but point out the importance of their intersection in the resolution of problems or in the explanation of the ways in which students learn as discerned by teachers, themselves, regardless of their academic background. Cochran-Smith and Lytle do not necessarily equate theory with academic insight, but neither do they preclude it. Thus, they pitch a wide tent under the rubric of teacher research even as they clearly differentiate it from formal academic research. Consequently, teacher research *could* be represented as academic research, depending on the background of the practitioner and the purpose of the project.

The authors identify a key factor that separates teacher research from traditional academic research on teaching. University research on teaching:

Generally emerg[es] from study in a discipline (or multiple disciplines) and/or analysis of theoretical and empirical literatures; referenced to the major work in some area(s) of the field (p. 12).

Teacher research:

Generally emerg[es] from problems of practice: felt discrepancies between intention and reality, theory/research and practice; reflective and referenced to the immediate context (p. 12).

This definition is correlated with the methodological quest for “systematic and intentional inquiry” (p. 7) by practitioners rather than a more academic demand for anything so formal, for example, as “triangulation,” which *could*, although does not necessarily need, to be incorporated into teacher research. Rather, the authors desire to leave scope for more inclusive methodologies that resonate with the backgrounds of teacher researchers through the general guiding principle of “systematic, intentional inquiry.” As Shirley P. Brown, one of the teacher researchers who contributed to *Inside/Outside* put it, quoting Berthoff (1987), teachers “do not [necessarily] need new information. We need to think about the information we have. We need to interpret that information and in turn interpret our interpretations” (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1993, p 250). This essay is an effort in such an exercise.

The educational philosopher John Dewey, argued similarly:

Fewer subjects and fewer facts and more responsibility for thinking the material of those subjects and facts through to realize what they involve would give better results. To carry something through to completion is the real meaning of thoroughness, and power to carry a thing through to its end or conclusion is dependent upon the existence of the attitude of intellectual responsibility (Dewey, cited in Archambault, 1964, p. 227).

Other than the core principle of the intersection of theory (not necessarily academic) and practice in the identification of problems or issues raised by teacher themselves through the methodological principle of “systematic, intentional inquiry,” Cochran-Smith and Lytle do not place extensive definitional restrictions on what counts as teacher research. As illustrated in *Inside/Outside*,

such openness provides considerable space for a wide plurality of expressions of this emerging genre, from the highly subjective reflections to more formal articulations of teacher research that share close affinities with academic research.

My own expression of teacher research consists of a blending of the highly personal with the academic, clearly, a “blurred genre,” to use the term of anthropologist Clifford Geertz, a place where I have found my “voice.” Much of my struggle with the NCSALL Practitioner Research Staff Development project, particularly after my initial topic dissolved (discussed in the next two sections) revolved around the conflict between my understanding of teacher research and what I perceived as the facilitator’s expectations, based on a more “data” driven conception grounded in a social science model. The facilitator hoped that I could move outside the zone of my comfort level, as she was defining that, and “muck around with real data.” Without problematizing the matter of what counts as “data,” to what I would include the data of inner consciousness, that was a direction I had no particular inclination to move into as a useful end in itself. It was not that I was unconcerned with “data,” but that I was more interested in identifying a problem or issue to probe that I would find intrinsically worth investigating, which would then lead me to draw on whatever methodologies, modes of analysis, and critical reflection that would shed light on the topic at hand.

I have previously written much about my experience as a practitioner through a strong theoretical lens. My published essays, several of them based on my own teaching or program management experience, have emerged after a certain passage of time that has enabled me to obtain a more holistic grasp of my subject matter through a combination of critical analysis and theoretical framing of the relevant data under investigation. I muck around with data daily as a practitioner and subject much of it to critical scrutiny within the logic of practice in the effort to work out specific problems or programmatic directions as seemingly viable within the contexts out of which I operate. However, little of what I do on a daily basis in my workplace rises for me to the level of what I would refer to as research, practitioner-focused or otherwise. In this role I operate out of a different motivational and rhetorical dynamic than when engaged in what I view as disciplined-based scholarship, which contains a strong theoretical focus grounded in formal academic discourse even if the topic matter is the analysis of my own practice and experiential probing. No doubt, this is a limitation of my own self-perception. Nonetheless, it is an inevitable starting point out of which I am required to operate if I am to make sense of my own experience, even as I achieve a degree of transcendence through the autobiographical genre, which nonetheless remains problematic on a number of counts.

For my own practice of teacher research, I have drawn extensively on the pragmatic philosophy of John Dewey to interpret the phenomenon of adult literacy, initially at the Bob Steele Reading Center, a site-based, LVA small group tutoring program, in Hartford, CT where I served as its program manager for eight years. In coming to terms with the experience of the Reading Center, I had always drawn in part on academic knowledge, particularly social philosophy and educational theory to think through what I observed and attempted to establish on site. There was nothing new in this approach for me as I had always attempted to interpret my life-experience either through academic or theological reflections, as indicated in some of the essays in my *Passages Through the Stream of Time* (Demetron, 1995) which can be accessed at (<http://www.ctconfucc.org/resources/theology/>).

When I read *Inside/Outside: Teacher Research and Knowledge*, a revelation of sorts took place that what I had been attempting to do in interfacing academic insight with experiential learning, had a name. Cochran-Smith and Lytle did not invent the field of teacher research, but their work was a landmark text in bringing its importance to the fore for adult literacy education. Their intent was to bring legitimacy both to the critical practice and theoretical understanding of classroom teachers on par with university professors and to chart out a framework for the development of this rather emergent sub-field of educational research. The authors make a subtle point that:

We are not arguing that teacher research ought to occupy a privileged position in relation to research on teaching. Rather, we are suggesting the exploration of the issues that divide research on teaching and teacher research may help raise critical questions about the nature of knowledge for teaching and hence enhance research for both communities (p. 22).

The exploration of this intersection within the context of specific field-based issues has been the consuming passion of my professional writing on adult literacy education. I am not arguing that my particular brand of teacher research should define the field. I do assert the claim that my more theoretical essays published in the *Adult Basic Education Journal* and elsewhere, as well as this historical essay of my trajectory through the NCSALL Teacher Research Project on Motivation, Retention, and Persistence in 1998-1999, be acknowledged by the teacher research community as among its forms through which I attempt to address key issues of varying relevance to this emerging genre of educational scholarship.

The Context: Signing Up for the NCSALL Teacher Research Project on Motivation, Retention, and Persistence

At the time of the NCSALL project I worked as the Executive Director of the Literacy Volunteers of America-Connecticut River East (LVA-CRE), a program that served approximately 100 students in Basic Literacy and English for Speakers of Other Languages through volunteer tutors in one-to-one and small group instructional settings. A special feature of the LVA-CRE program was the availability of the Larson Community Center located in the low-income residential community of Mayberry Village in East Hartford. Staff supported site-based tutoring enabled our program to extend beyond the traditional one-to-one LVA model where students and tutors meet as isolated dyads in various decentralized settings with little or no direct connection with the program. The Larson Center provided a climate to enable our agency to develop innovative programming in small group instruction and curriculum revitalization through on-site support of staff. I sought to realize something of the “full potential” of this learning site through the creation of an environment somewhat analogous to what we developed in Hartford at the Bob Steele Reading Center in the early 1990s.

In that program we established an extensive small group tutoring program that also featured the creation of student anthologies of writing, oral histories, and an experimental college intern program (<http://www.nald.ca/fulltext/George/crossing/page1.htm>). For reasons that extend beyond this essay the environments were not sufficiently analogous to simply appropriate the reading center model in the East Hartford program, which remained predominantly a one-to-one tutoring program. However, it was

feasible to establish some level of small group tutoring and collaborative learning projects at the Larson Center, which also housed our administrative office.

For several years LVA-CRE had been a beneficiary of a federal grant that covered approximately one-quarter of the agency's annual budget and paid for the rent of the Larson Center. Through 1998, these grants were not particularly competitive. That changed for the fiscal year 1998-1999 as only five of the fifteen applicants received the \$25,000 grants. In order to be competitive I felt compelled to write a strong proposal. Historically, LVA-CRE's granted project included a pronounced community outreach focus that I maintained in the new proposal. Most of the grant proposals would include such initiatives, so I figured the community focus in-itself would not make us competitive. The curriculum initiative that I developed which drew upon the National Institute for Literacy's Equipped for the Future (EFF) project and the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS) mandated by our state Bureau of Career and Adult Education, could, I reasoned, provide us with the competitive edge to obtain a grant that our agency needed in order to cover rent and part of the salary for a second staff person.

As spelled out in the grant proposal, we would draw on both frameworks to develop an instructional program piloted in three LVA small groups and two Adult Basic Education (including one ESL) classrooms. Since each framework provided considerable scope for individual adaptation, I thought the merged curriculum would allow for considerable flexibility in response to the contingencies of our local context.

We placed an instructor-training component into the grant proposal that included participation in the NCSALL Staff Development project. I did not possess a fully clear understanding of how the NCSALL project would add value to the project. The NCSALL Project was geared toward assessing divergent approaches to staff development through a topical focus on learner motivation, retention, and persistence; issues that were important to our program, but not necessarily what we needed to concentrate on most to realize our own project goals. I figured at the least, participation in the NCSALL project would lend legitimacy to our grant application and that much could come out of it that might benefit our instructors, which would, in any event, *indirectly* impact on the project.

I would participate in the teacher research track because of my interest in that emerging field stemming from Cochran-Smith and Lytle's (1993) *Inside/Outside*, and would focus my participation on the overall project management of the grant. My reach extended beyond my grasp in linking our local project to the NCSALL initiative. However, I did desire to complete a teacher research project of significant proportions in my own inimitable style, merging experience and academic insight that would mirror and bring out some of the subtler implications of our local curriculum project.

I learned about NCSALL while working as Director of Materials Development at LVA national in 1996 and 1997 and was pleased that an adult literacy think tank was associated with the Harvard School of Education. Given the prestige and scholarly heritage of that beacon light of liberal humanism, my hope was that the new research focus would prove anything but pedestrian in forging a creative intellectual environment for the emerging field of adult literacy studies. Specifically, I hoped it would

push linkages between academic insight and experiential learning that had not developed to the degree that I did not, at that time, perceive at the National Center for Adult Literacy (NCAL). I could visualize how the NCSALL Staff Development Project on Learner Motivation, Retention, and Persistence could benefit our local EFF/CASAS project, but only if the latter were sufficiently developed, which I suspected would not likely be the case within the time frame of the NCSALL project. We could only accomplish so much within one year and perhaps only lay the groundwork for the kind of comprehensive curriculum and assessment system that properly should take several years of development.

Still, I wanted to make the connection with the NCSALL project. I thought the linkage would buttress the marketability of the grant proposal whether or not it would enhance the project. I also wanted to strengthen our institutional ties with the Adult Training and Development Network (ATDN) that sponsored the NCSALL Staff Development Project. Moreover, I thought that the instructors I sent to participate, and I, would gain something from the connection with the NCSALL project that could have significant spillover on our local project. It remained unclear in my mind how this might all unfold. So much seemed uncertain. Still, I saw little to lose and much to gain in drawing on the NCSALL initiative for our own local project.

The CASAS/EFF Project

Notwithstanding certain conceptual differences between CASAS “competencies” based on the mastery of literacy “tasks” and EFF Content Standards embedded within the context of literacy “practices,” our planning team, which consisted of the East Hartford ABE program facilitator, a staff member of ATDN, and I, created our own local framework. This included a specific content focus that highlighted five general topics drawn from EFF and CASAS supported by a compendium of instructional materials. We then created a model for a lesson plan that included linking the materials content to one or more of the four purposes of adult education identified by EFF (access, voice, independent action, bridge to the future, Stein, 1997, p. 7), critical thinking, effective communication, and basic literacy skill development. With that general framework set, we would encourage instructors also to draw on the EFF Common Activities, Generative Skills, and Knowledge Domains, but assumed that such appropriation of the more subtle aspects of the EFF framework would be a slow work that would take the full year or more to work out. Finally, we developed a student interest survey based on the core topics of what we initially referred to, as an “integrated life-skills curriculum.”

Through staff development training, handouts, and intensive one-to-one coaching with instructors, we hoped by the end of the project year to have developed a well-crafted pilot model that we could refine in following years. During the fall of 1998, when the NCSALL teacher research project began, I felt our local project was simply in too incipient a form to bring to fruition in a formal study within an academic year. Various problems surfaced that I did not feel I could resolve or even adequately come to terms with within the context of a teacher research essay.

For one thing, the cooperating ABE director, less concerned about curriculum issues, per se, was convinced that we would only recruit students if we called the ABE class to be held at the Larson

Center, a pre-GED group. Although his program facilitator served on our planning team, the Director never grasped what we were attempting to create, nor based on my relationship with him, would have any interest in an EFF-based curriculum focus without a sea change in his own thinking. In fact, he instructed the ABE teacher to set up the classroom according to the subject categories of the GED so that math would be taught on Monday, social studies and science on Tuesday, and reading and writing on Wednesdays.

The teacher, hired by the ABE director, but assigned to our project, did not want to get caught into a conflict between the ABE director, who hired her, and me. Moreover, having a strong affinity for highly structured materials like the GED prep book, she did not at first seem to understand the life-skills curriculum we had developed even with the perhaps too voluminous instructional materials we made available. When stuck, she perpetually taught to her strength, which was math, a subject that had little bearing within our project objective except as it might be contextualized within the various topics of workplace, family, health, and civic education that gave shape to what came to be our *Life Application Curriculum Framework*. I spent several sessions with her going over various handouts on the project we created, including the two thick notebooks of supplementary instructional materials that supported the curriculum focus. I taught the class on several occasions, which she observed.

She conceptually grasped what I was aiming at, but felt that her more “traditional” teaching style could not readily assimilate a dialogical and highly content focused approach that I felt was required in order to effectively implement the curriculum. Her reliance on math became more and more pervasive as the semester wore on, although she did occasionally draw on the curriculum focus we had laid out in the manuals. I experienced considerable frustration, but kept working with her the best I could, given the time constraints of being a part time (31 hrs per week) executive director with a multitude of responsibilities beyond the responsibilities of the project at hand.

By the time that I began my participation in the NCSALL project, I felt that our local project was in too loose of a shape to focus on for a formal teacher research investigation. In attempting to work through the project, I would exert considerable thought, much of it grappling with its various contradictions particularly in the embedding of its theoretical focus within the practice of a volunteer tutoring program where neither systematic nor theoretical elegance were prominent features. Many tutors desired ever more effective ways of teaching, but whatever solution proffered would need to be relatively simple, often with as much as possible laid out for them. My more pressing objective was to salvage the project and to bring it into some type of resolution by the end of the academic year. My ultimate resolution was to forgo complex design and provide instead, a stimulating compendium of instructional materials that embedded many of the principles that we had developed, within them. Those materials were ultimately housed on the CREC/ATDN website (removed after being located there for about two years) and downloaded by program personnel throughout the United States.

For the immediate task at hand, I did not want to add an additional encumbrance that I felt the NCSALL focus would require. This may have been in part due to my understanding of the gape between critical practice and teacher research. While the two are often linked, I encounter many situations that call for critical practice and hence, reflection. Most of those situations I do not take to the

level of what I would refer to as research, which, on my interpretation requires additional distancing that may or may not prove efficacious for the resolution or understanding of the particular problem at hand. At some time, I thought, perhaps I would formally evaluate this project to a level that I would call research. The 1998-1999 academic year was not that time. My objective was more immediate, to create a degree of order with the curriculum project out of a set of factors that seemed overwhelming. Under the circumstances I did not then possess any clear idea of what a teacher research project based on the grant would look like, nor much of a concrete sense of what value it would serve.

With the CASAS/EFF curriculum “dead” as a teacher research project, the very purpose of my enrollment in the NCSALL initiative was under danger of unravelling. I might find another topic, but without a strong motivational impetus driving me, I felt that would only be engaging in an exercise. Such “grasping at straws” was something I did not particularly need. I summarized my concerns about the particular project focus to our NCSALL facilitator:

From: GDEMETRION Date: Tue, 15 Dec 1998: Re: A Project

The biggest dilemma here is how foreign the EFF concept is to the expectations of our ABE instructors who have been hired to implement the curriculum as part of our housing grant. The distance between the curriculum frameworks I've been trying to implement and the reality of the classroom are vast, I don't know what we have in terms of a [local] project to say anything of a practitioner inquiry project.

My challenge right now seems to...bear down and provide some really pronounced structure, which violates so many canons of participatory literacy education. Without that, though, the ABE instructors are reverting to workbooks and math. The fundamental issue is to provide enough of a bridge to instructors that they have something consistent to work with. They're not going to prepare and whatever we can provide has to be within their framework to easily assimilate. And then I have the deadline of the grants and our credibility and future funding prospects are really on the line here.

So the only way that I can see it is to actually select the material for the ABE teachers - package it nicely and embed EFF principles in it. Remember, the alternative in CT is not a participatory/student-centered focus, but workbooks, fueled by a basic skills pedagogical assumption. Seen from Yankeeland, EFF is pretty progressive even as the literacy left remains skeptical - a skepticism I share to some degree.

So somehow the inquiry project needs to revolve around the creation and utilization of the materials. Instead of being restrictive, such scaffolding in Yankeetown provides the necessary bridging to enable particularly ABE teachers trained in traditional methodologies and assumptions of the public classroom teacher, the freedom and security to branch out into new areas.

Anecdote

I did some modeling teaching for one of the instructors. Her comments were “I see what you're doing and I know what you want me to do, but I don't know how to do it.” The “it” was to stimulate some rather provocative discussion out of instructional material that might be viewed as somewhat banal.

So, I've got my work cut out for me, right, and the first priority is to get the job done. Only when I feel I've made some headway there, does developing a practitioner inquiry project out of this slippery beast make sense.

Searching for a New Project

With no obvious project in mind, I began to question the viability of my participation in the practitioner inquiry group. I had a full plate of interests and potential research projects that did not necessarily fit in with the set objectives of the NCSALL project. For my participation to be personally viable, the NCSALL framework would need to fit into *my* broader research agenda. What did not make sense was to search for a project "on-site" simply in order to formally meet the requirements laid out by the NCSALL coordinators and designers that did not consume me, as did the topic described below.

I had worked at Literacy Volunteers of America (LVA) national for about 20 months as Director of Materials Development in the Field Services Department. That position proved highly problematical both for my self and the LVA organization. In November 1997, my position was eliminated. There was much about that experience that I wanted to probe once I attained sufficient distance and time. It was not on my immediate calendar to tackle such a topic, but I viewed it as a long-range possibility. The experience at LVA permeated my then current work in East Hartford as a perpetual subtext, which in some fashion or another, I would need to come to terms. With the disintegration of the CASAS/EFF project, the prospect of writing about the LVA experience opened up to the wellsprings of my imagination as a nearer- rather than longer-term project. I had no doubt that it represented a valid teacher research project based on Cochran-Smith's definition of the genre, although it had much less directly to do with the themes of learner motivation, retention, and persistence as defined by the NCSALL project planners. It also had little bearing on teaching, but much to do with the politics of literacy over the relationship between power and knowledge, particularly as manifested in an institutional context. As I put it to our NCSALL facilitator:

By Jove, I think I've got it. I was at LVA national as Director of Materials Development for 20 months, from March 96-Nov. 97. That was one incredible experience [of personally engaging] the cultural politics of the national organization as a microcosm[ic study] of the broader politics of literacy in the USA.

It is in the spirit of Cochran-Smith and Lytle in their category of teacher-research essays that I would like to do my project: an intense autobiographical essay about my experience at LVA national as part of a broader autobiographical narrative that I've constructed which will remain incomplete unless I include a "Syracuse" chapter.

I wrote a similar essay about my job as program manager at the Bob Steele Reading Center in Hartford called "Crossing Critical Thresholds at the Bob Steele Reading Center: Transforming Potentiality Into Actuality" (<http://www.nald.ca/fulltext/George/crossing/page1.htm>). No doubt, mine is an idiosyncratic voice, but virtually everything I've written on literacy is a form of teacher-research, particularly given the liberality of definition proposed by Cochran-Smith and Lytle. The proposed essay would traverse considerable psychic and social space and would be something that I could finish in the six-month framework of this project.

What does this have to do with Motivation, Retention, and Persistence? A lot indirectly I suppose, but that would certainly have to be teased out of the proposed essay. On the other hand, the project would have everything to do with teacher-research.

So that's what I purpose for my project. So, what thinkest thou?

Clearly, my proposal did diverge from the site-based project focus on learner motivation, retention, and persistence as set up by NCSALL. Still, perhaps it was not so counter to the agency's broader objective of gaining "an understanding of how and why adult basic practitioners and programs change as a result of their participation in staff development." The issue for me was whether there would be the flexibility in the NCSALL project to enable me to follow the trajectory of my own thinking, or whether its set design needed to be maintained, regardless of whether I was motivated by it or not. No doubt, I was moving beyond the parameters and operative assumptions of the facilitator, who, after consulting with the project coordinators, preferred me to "muck around with real data" while staying focused on some aspect of my current situation. The facilitator and I carried on an e-mail dialogue/debate of sorts. The following, which merges several of our e-mail discussions, represents the gist of her concerns as well as those of mine:

To: gdemetrion@juno.com
Date: Wed, 18 Nov 1998 10:56:16 EST
Subject: Re: A Project

George,

Here are some comments (for what they are worth) to your responses [NCSALL facilitator]:

How might doing this project change your practice? [NCSALL facilitator]

Part of the question is: what is my practice; local administrator, consultant, contributor to NLA liststerv, academic writer in the field? [G.D.]

We were hoping for *teacher* but barring that, I think administrator will do nicely. [NCSALL facilitator]

To summarize [some of the key issues the proposed essay would explore]:

- Who gets hired for chief positions in our literacy organizations?
- Who makes the selection, how; and whose interests are served and represented in the decision?
- Why and what does it matter whether or not our agency chiefs have significant pedagogical knowledge? What is lost and gained as a result?
- Is it possible and what would it take for a more critical democratic review of the selection process?
- What counts as knowledge and power within our major literacy agencies?
- Who is empowered and who is marginalized as a result? [G.D.]

These are great questions. Would you want to use these to frame your *research*? [NCSALL facilitator]

I'll have to work on that. I may use the Bain Study [a report on a consultative project on LVA completed in 1993] and LVA's Strategic Plan for the immediate focus of this project. There is a lot there; key documents for LVA in the 90s. What these documents say, their relationship to one another and how they have been interpreted by key others is an important issue that without my study will be neglected for years if ever looked at all. I would have to sharpen a specific research question or two around them. [G.D.]

This is fine for LVA, but I really don't think it would be of interest to our research group. [NCSALL facilitator]

Is there a way I can persuade you to stretch beyond your preferred processing style to include a bit of hands-on-direct-practice-mucking-around? [NCSALL facilitator]

George, when I say direct-practice, I'm referring to working with students - either on the program level or classroom level. We've already established that that's not where you are right now, and that is fine. But I would like to encourage you to look at something of your own (administrative) practice in this process. My concern is that this piece you are doing not become too academic. Not that academic is *bad* - it just that this is billed as practitioner research. It's about reflection/action on practice. [NCSALL facilitator]

And, or course, how does it relate to LMRP? (Learner Motivation, Retention, Persistence) [NCSALL facilitator]

The proposed LVA project was obviously not within the framework of the NCSALL project coordinators' expectations, although it did represent an important focus area I wanted to look into. Once the CASAS/EFF project fizzled, I began to view some aspect of my odyssey at LVA, related both to the politics of literacy at LVA and the social psychology of one practitioner researcher, as a worthy undertaking. Such a historical reconstruction, grounded in personal experience, appeared to me more psychologically compelling, at the least, as an imaginative construct, than mucking around for a new project at LVA-CRE. It is not that I viewed my work in the local arena unimportant, but given my then current research interests, I had no sense of real motivation to add one more thing to my plate, which did not particularly interest me as *research*.

With much reluctance, I agreed to try to work within the constraints of the NCSALL project, but my heart was not in it. In fact, during the time frame of the NCSALL project, I did complete an unpublished essay titled, "Career Passages at LVA: Seeking Influence in Field Services" (Demetron, 1999a). As indicated by the abstract (below), I viewed the essay as a legitimate piece of teacher research.

Abstract

The author reflects on critical factors that underlie his career shift from program manager of a local LVA affiliate to a position of Director of Materials Development at the national office. The personal narrative is laced with critical observations on the LVA network at the affiliate, state agency, and national organizational level. As autobiography, the author acknowledges important limitations related to "objectivity," but in the spirit of practitioner inquiry, the research design is grounded in a certain "systematic and intentional, inquiry" (Cochran-Smith and Lytle,

1993, p. 7) which has its own intrinsic integrity. As such, this essay reflects an “emic view that is different from that of an outside observer, even if that observer assumes an ethnographic stance and spends considerable time in the classroom” (p. 18). From such an “emic” (insider’s) perspective, the author seeks to disclose certain important aspects on the relationship between knowledge, organizational development, and the quest for legitimization within a national adult literacy network as well as something of the social psychology of an individual practitioner researcher.

Whether or not the NCSALL planners viewed the proposal as a form of “legitimate teacher research,” regardless as to whether it fit the parameters of the LMRP construct, was uncertain. Given the facilitator’s “data-driven” interpretation of the genre, I had my doubts.

In addition the data issue, I believe there were at least two reasons why the project team viewed this topic as not appropriate to the NCSALL initiative; the apparent lack of relevance to learner motivation, retention, and persistence, and the historical focus which the NCSALL planners and facilitator perceived as not germane to my “here and now.” I grant the self-evident logic of such reasoning. Nonetheless, it is axiomatic that teacher research is often accompanied by unintended consequences in which “teaching moments” open up new areas of learning that perhaps are worth encouraging, however much they may stray from any proposed research agenda. I had a general motive to write such an essay on my LVA experience at some given time, in which the quest for a NCSALL generated teacher research topic prompted an immediate stimulus, at the least as an imaginative potentiality. While historical in focus, the proposed essay represented a profound mucking around with the data that had comprised the organizational culture of LVA at the local, state, and national level as well as that of my personal psychology.

Since this was the type of work that *did* motivate me, the NCSALL reluctance to accept such a proposal reinforced my alienation from the project even as I was also pulled to it especially in our discussions and readings that informed our several sessions in which we met as a teacher research group. I might hunt for an acceptable project, but was not inspired by the methodological framework of the NCSALL initiative. For me it seemed more of an imposition than a source of empowerment once I faced the reality that my original idea for a project was unrealistic and given the underlying dynamic of the “real” reason I was participating in the project.

Nonetheless, I acknowledged the credibility of the NCSALL argument that the proposed undertaking was outside the main pathways from the agency’s stated purposes. Even still, while stretching the matter, a case could reasonably be made that the topic I wanted to write on was legitimately grounded within the project’s broad framework of exploring the intricacies of adult learner motivation (in this case, my own). Moreover, although historical, the proposed essay was also highly personal, and therefore, far from distancing that the facilitator feared. Since without the impetus of the NCSALL project, I would not have written “Career Passages at LVA” as soon as I did, or perhaps ever, a question emerges on how an agency does remain open to “teaching moments” however and whenever they arise.

In addition to the “Career Passages at LVA” essay, I also experienced another unintended impact as a result of participating in the NCSALL teacher researcher project. Initially, our NCSALL group discussed the possibility of a joint project on assessment with a critical eye toward the politics and pedagogy CT Bureau of Career and Adult Education’s embrace of CASAS. That train of thought did not pan out as a group project. Yet, it was a topic to which I had given much thought which I ultimately addressed in a significant revision of an essay I had unsuccessfully written for publication several years previously which, was finally accepted (Demetrian, 1999b). I may have gotten to that revision in any event, although, although that essay was also not on my near-term agenda. At the least, the NCSALL project pushed my thinking on the essay forward which led that winter to the successful revision—hence, another unintended consequence.

By December 1998, I had dropped my initial project and had written what I viewed as two potentially publishable essays that that were partially stimulated by my participation in the NCSALL project. Yet I did not have a viable topic that compelled much interest for me that would simultaneously satisfy the NCSALL facilitator project planners. The facilitator continued to encourage me to move outside my comfort zone and muck around with real data within the context of my then current practice. I saw merit in what she was saying, but did not find it viable since I lacked a compelling topic. More fundamentally, I had my own, not fully formed agenda.

I came close to abandoning the project on several occasions, but did not want to lose face or jeopardize my relationship with NCSALL or ATDN. Moreover, I felt obligated by the grant to stick it out, as it was not only I, but also two other grant participating colleagues who signed on for the NCSALL training. I also developed a personal bond with the NCSALL facilitator that I did not want to impair. Yet I needed a sufficient sense of stability in my own programmatic situation before I could seriously tackle a viable on-site research project. So much of my on-site work dynamics seemed so much in flux that I could not get hold of what I would call a local “real time” teacher research project that would be worth the time to undertake the effort. Still, I gave it one more try.

David

I began to tutor David in October 1998, a man about my age (at the time, 50) who had been institutionalized at the Southberry Training School as a youth and obtained employment through the Easter Seals of Greater Hartford janitorial training program. I thought there might be an opportunity to do a project based on my work with David given the desire of this virtual non-reader to construct an autobiography, a genre that has also compelled me for many years. I laid it out to the facilitator:

I’ve been struggling quite a bit with this project concept and have given a lot of thought to dropping it. I continue to edit and write academic papers on adult literacy and have a book manuscript under review at a couple of publishers. I do practice teacher research, but I’m clearly on the boundary (a boundary I like) between academic based and experientially driven research. I not only seek to draw on academic research to inform practice, but draw on practice to inform and refine theory. That’s the niche that I’ve carved out and the only one that makes sense for me.

I've also been giving a lot of thought to working on learning theory as it applies to adult literacy. Currently, there is a dearth of such work. I could see a full book length manuscript on the topic at some time.

Here's what I propose. Drawing on my student David as a case study, I examine learning issues through the educational theories of John Dewey, Len Vygotsky, Scribner-Cole, Myron C. Tuman, Jerome Bruner, and Paulo Freire

These theorists along with a few others would be the main focus of a much longer-term project. So the initial work focusing on David would both provide an impetus for further exploratory efforts and be a topic that might appeal to the NCSALL project coordinators.

The proposed project affords an opportunity to reflect deeply both on practice and theory in relationship to adult literacy education. The topic (learning theory and practice) by its nature is highly relevant to the issues of motivation, retention and persistence. Perhaps this focus, both the present proposed essay and the larger research project might contribute to some of the longer-range objectives of this NCSALL project.

In any event, this is what I propose, as loose as it currently is. For me to go forward with the practitioner inquiry group it is essential to find an angle that really works for me. I suggest that the learning theory framework does so as it is linked to some of my longer-term research interests. This topic has not received wide attention in our field. I propose to attend to it and to begin with this initial essay.

The facilitator was quite receptive to the topic. Adult learning theory interested me much, but the kind of research I envisioned would take several years. I was unsure what I could accomplish on this topic in a few months time, but began to pursue it to see where it would lead. As a result, I was able to frame a fairly extensive problem statement, more or less verbatim, below:

Problem Statement

David was a client of Community Enterprises, Inc. whose mission "is to support self-determination for people with disabilities by providing a set of resource options in a manner deeply respectful of personal dignity." He is also employed by the Easter Seals Rehabilitation Center's contract cleaning business and attended school at Southberry Training School for the retarded. If David in fact has retardation, it is of a mild nature characteristic more of a "slow learner."

David was brought to our program by his social worker. I decided personally to work with him because I did not feel it would be appropriate for David to go through our regular matching process since it might be weeks before he obtained a tutor. I had an implicit sense that he had been jerked around various systems before and there was a certain immediacy to his desire to participate in the program. A tutor working with David from a "deficit" perspective might reinforce perceived inadequacies David held about his learning self that could inhibit rather than expand the potential of what he might accomplish in a student-centered learning environment. That prospect I wanted to forestall at all costs.

At an early age, David had been depicted as a special education student and labeled as retarded when he was sent to Southberry Training School at age nine. He remained there until he was about 18 and learned basic job skills and aptitudes that he has been able to apply throughout his life, although he had not acquired much capacity to read and write. Southberry had a profound impact on his life, both positive and negative. Much of what he wanted to accomplish in our literacy sessions was to publicly articulate and critically reflect on his schooling experiences, which would be the focus of his first “book” (below).

At Easter Seals David received training in building services and cleaned buildings for the agency’s contract cleaning division. He was a steady and reliable worker and sought opportunity for employment advancement. Just previous to our working together on his autobiography, he received a promotion and was assigned to clean a building in Glastonbury on his own.

At the time of our meeting, David and his wife, who also apparently had “developmental disabilities,” were working with their social worker to increase their independent living skills. They shared an apartment and received assistance in such areas as money management. Although one might have found many “deficiencies” in David’s life he did not want nor saw the need to focus his work with me on what is commonly characterized as “functional literacy.” Rather, David wanted to build his literacy program on his reading of the world. Echoing a similar refrain Merrifield, Bingman, Hemphill, and deMarrais (1997, p.213) state that:

The concept of functional literacy is flawed. Its definition is arbitrary, its measurement is problematic, and the phenomenon of “functioning in life” cannot be readily equated with literacy. Adults with limited literacy should be credited with the skills and knowledge that they do have. Educators should start to build on and extend this knowledge and skill, based on the needs, desires, and interests of the adult learners, rather than dwelling on measuring how “functional” a learner is or needs to become, according to standardized tests.

I cannot deny the role I played in reinforcing a certain direction toward autobiographical exploration that characterized our work, and I am clearly empathetic to the critique of functional literacy quoted above. Undoubtedly, my understanding of adult literacy education played a significant role in influencing the pedagogical process that developed between David and I, in which another tutor would very well have gone in different direction with him. As Dewey put it, referring to school children:

Everything the teacher does, as well as the manner in which he does it, incites the child to respond in some way or other, and each response tends to set the child’s attitude in some way or another (Dewey, 1910/1991, p. 47).

This is to be expected. Regardless of how student-centered and “invisible” a tutor may attempt to be, it is inevitable that he or she will exert an influence, directly or indirectly, on a student. While that may seem obvious, it bears stressing that invariably a teacher will imbue the teaching relationship with a certain set of values that will navigate the instructional setting in one direction or another. It is equally important to acknowledge that the student will influence the teacher so that what emerges is a negotiated relationship. *How* that relationship unfolds and its significance as determined by both partners is the critical factor in determining its pedagogical value.

By inclination and experience I take an exploratory student-centered approach as a literacy tutor. Moreover, I am highly partial to autobiographical narratives, although include much else in my general teaching related to the interests of the specific students with whom I work. I have to be careful, at times, not to impose my personal preferences on students. When a certain congruity develops between a student and me, I need always to think through the extent to which my values are shaping the instructional relationship and if my value system is impeding other kinds and ways of learning that might be of value to a student that another instructor might bring out. Such a concern was not to be the main focus of the proposed essay, but would comprise one of its subtexts that I expected would occasionally surface in my analysis of David's learning odyssey through our work together.

David and I began working in October 1998, several months before I began to conceive of our collaboration as a potential NCSALL teacher research project. I didn't have a specific direction to follow, but sensed the path would emerge through discussion. In our first session David articulated his goal in a language experience narrative titled:

My Book

I want to write a book about me. I go to work everyday at the I.R.S. I talk to my coworkers. Some people will talk to you and get a conversation going.

I promised this lady that one day I'll write this book. It's me, but I'm putting a different character in it so no one will get hurt.

I just want to get a step ahead. If it comes out a seller that will be fine. If not I won't be hurt. I'll go a different way, that' all.

Since I have written fairly extensive autobiographical narratives and have edited many student-generated texts, a question in my mind was the extent and the nature to which I was influencing David in his focus. Regardless of the influence, the more important question was the extent to which this focus represented David's more compelling needs and desires in his emerging literacy. It was my intention to explore both of these questions at least to some degree in the proposed essay.

The main portion of the essay would go to the composition process itself. What is this narrative that David was creating and how was it emerging? What would be its inter-textual components in terms of the relationship between his voice, my own influence, and those of the various student-generated texts from other literacy programs that he was reading? What contribution does compositional theory make toward better understanding the emerging process?

There are serious compositional issues. On the one hand, David stated that he wanted to write a best selling autobiography, clearly a daunting task for anyone. While on the other hand he seems to have sensed that he may not have been able achieve such an ambitious outcome, I was left wondering what was his "real" intent, or if there was any "intent" beneath what he actually stated. Since language is invariably symbolic, I assumed there were implicit meanings inherent in his discourse, but I did not want to assume *my* intent on what David meant.

As our work continued, we also drew to some significant degree on various student narratives, especially the *Oakland Readers*, which David enjoyed very much. As a discovery process, David began to read his own story through the narratives of others. The student narratives also established a virtual community for David that until he encountered those texts, he felt alone in his quest. As a result he became bonded with a group of like-minded others who have also told their stories and had them published in books. There was, then, a modeling process that took place that provided him with much vicarious satisfaction. Since David could also read the *Oakland Readers* Level One series without too much difficulty, those texts had the added advantage of helping him improve his basic skills, which provided him with a sense of competency and mastery. Because the stories are not too difficult to read, he was also able to skim them and picked up the main point quite quickly. On several occasions he accurately corrected me where I had misinterpreted the text or left something out that he had noticed.

In one sense the student narratives complicated David's "autonomous" text construction. On the other hand, they added important context and provided stylistic modeling that enabled him to better tell his story. The *Oakland Readers* perhaps also helped mediate what David interpreted as a "book." Such modeling as the series provided may have allowed him to envision a much "simpler" book than what I had in mind which may have been part of my difficulty in interpreting David's goal as "reality-based." Still, the issue of creating a "seller" remained.

Concluding Commentary on David

As a research project, the proposal on David narrative was problematic on a number of counts. Even still, within the time constraints of the NCSALL initiative, a viable essay could have been written on the difficulties encountered in the very struggle between David and I to make meaning of our work together. In my effort to formulate a teacher research project, I veered back and forth between compositional theory and learning theory on the one hand, and the actual narratives David construed and read about on the other; a phenomenological approach that might eschew formal theory. In the radical de-centering of theory and practice articulated by Cochran-Smith and Lytle, neither theory nor practice are privileged. In principle, therefore, I could have started with either focus with the expectation of creating, ultimately, a blurred genre that identified something substantial about David's learning trajectory. Because I aborted the essay, I don't know precisely how, if at all, I would have resolved the countervailing pulls. I wanted to work with learning theory, in no small part because I desired to learn something substantial about *that*, but viewed the narratives David constructed and read as the logical and "authentic" place to start, along with perhaps, a sharply focused hypothesis on compositional theory, particularly through the excellent text, *Beyond Communication: Reading Comprehension and Criticism* (Bogdan and Straw, 1990) that I had recently read.

I would likely have kept probing until a direction "hit me", then would have pursued its logic doggedly until I stated as perfectly as I could what I wanted to say through the voice that I chose to speak, whether academic, existential, or some combination thereof. That is, I would have probed through the seemingly conflicting voices and sources of evidence (not merely data) until I found *my* voice through some inner connection between logic and emotion in working through the narrative of

David, clearly a blurred research genre. The extent to which I would have successfully accomplished such a project would require an unanswerable counterfactual exercise. I know, however, almost to a certainty, that I would not have been satisfied unless I received and worked through the revelatory direction described above. Within the time constraints of the NCSALL project, David would not have written a book, though he would, and in fact, did compose coherent narrative fragments. If I had continued with this project, that would have left me with the far from unimportant task of attempting to capture something of significance about the *process* with which both David and I were struggling, clearly a work in progress, including an analysis of his emerging narrative.

This was a worthy project that I abandoned for two reasons. First, I had a likely book prospect pending (wrongly, as it turned out) on my research at the Bob Steele Reading Center and felt I needed to shift my discretionary time to that effort. Second, I linked David with a new tutor who I thought would likely take him down some new paths unrelated to the autobiographical narrative, although I would continue to work with him as well. Given the limited time constraints I was working under, adding a new person into the research design would add further complexity to an already complicated process that I did not feel I could adequately address within the time constraints of the NCSALL teacher research project. This historical essay on the process I underwent in seeking a topic was my attempt to seek closure on the NCSALL project without abandoning it.

Concluding Remarks

My involvement in the NCSALL Learner Motivation, Retention, and Persistence Practitioner Inquiry Staff Development Project had been a complicated affair. On the one hand it stemmed from the pragmatic necessity of writing the most competitive grant proposal that I could. On the other hand, from my previous work at LVA national I had gained an awareness of NCSALL and wanted to be a part of that initiative as long as the focal points of contact would be significantly based on my own research interests. Ideally, I sought a match and viewed the teacher research project as an opportunity for such a convergence. However, I also sensed from the beginning, and this was the more powerful intuitive stimulant, that my strong “intellectual” orientation on teacher research as mediated through the prism of Cochran-Smith and Lytle might not easily jell with the practitioner focus of the project planners. In short, I was driven by a momentum throughout my participation in the project to articulate and assert my own understanding of teacher research, however much that may have conformed to *or* contradicted the operative assumptions of the NCSALL project coordinators. Thus, even more than the proposed project on motivation, retention, and persistence, I was more fundamentally motivated by a quest to engage the facilitator and the NCSALL community on the nature and definition of teacher research.

One way of perceiving this essay is to imagine my own odyssey through the NCSALL project as analogous to that of an adult literacy learner struggling with issues of motivation, retention, and persistence within a particular program or agency. Clearly, I am motivated by learning (literacy) and am an active creator of teacher research. Moreover, like many adult literacy students, I am self-motivated, a value which resonates with the principles of participatory literacy education. Similar to many adult literacy students, I often feel constrained by institutional boundaries, which for me, frequently inhibit rather than enhance personal creativity, even as I am aware that such “lack of adjustment” compounds

certain difficult for myself as well as the institutions I seek to engage. I participate in formal learning organizations to the extent that I can gain insight from and through them, and sometimes because I at least feel, I have no other choice. Nonetheless, I am primarily motivated to pursue my own voice and sense of direction, particularly if institutional values conflict with these. What I truly seek is a synthesis, although the work of integrating the various practitioner and intellectual voices needed to achieve what Dewey (1938/1983) refers to as the “intellectual organization of experience” (p. 85) which, at least I *claim* as a fundamental source of personal motivation, remains largely elusive. I say, “claim,” because I am unsure as to whether my more potent quest is to establish some synthesis, however provisional, than to creatively live with the tension on the apprehension of collapsing it either into some unsatisfactory practitioner or intellectual resolution that would cut the dynamics of my own creative energy asunder. There is also some anxiety against closure at work in which the *illusion* of perpetual openness keeps at bay the need to commit to a specific path, which, while threatening and potentially stifling, could result in an exertion of, perhaps, needed discipline, which in many ways eludes me.

In terms of the stated objectives of the NCSALL project, mutual agreement even to the broad choices of subject matter available became extremely difficult in part because I was not able to make a sustainable attachment to the range of acceptable topics the facilitator envisioned as legitimate. That fueled a tendency, latent from the beginning of my involvement in the project to push against its boundaries based upon the differences I perceived between my interpretation of what the genre of teacher research allows and the views held by the NCSALL project planners. Although I did not strictly know it, I did have some sense from the very beginning that the initial project I proposed based on the new curriculum model that we were just beginning to pilot in our agency, would at best prove exceedingly difficult to bring to fruition in a teacher research essay. More fundamentally, there was some partially articulated sense operating in my consciousness from the beginning that the proposed curriculum project was not my real source of motivation. Although what it was did not appear exactly clear, I did have some sense that I wanted to engage NCSALL as a research community based on my own expertise as a practitioner-scholar in a broad dialogical encounter on the nature of adult literacy education.

When that became clear fairly soon after the NCSALL project got underway that my initial project was not going to work, I flipped through a series of tentative options. This enabled my mind to get a short-term handle at least sufficiently enough to ease the tension of being in a state of prolonged uncertainty or facing the prospect of not completing my assignment with the Harvard-based research agency. I sensed throughout this struggle that such confusion was a critical part of the process itself, if not *the* critical part and worthy of exploring in its own right. At the same time I had internalized the objectives of the NCSALL planners, in no small part through the persuasiveness of the facilitator. Through this pressure I felt constrained to pursue a more “objective” research agenda focusing on some aspect of my program. Even still, I sensed that any such effort was simply not going to work given the time constraints I was working under and the lack of a compelling topic. More fundamentally, it was not really what I was interested in doing. The autobiographical resolution, which is this very essay, was operative from the beginning in the goals that initially prompted me to participate in the project and in the yearlong struggle to surmount the confusion I experienced. One might say that the writing of this text represented an imaginative overcoming of the duality of consciousness I experienced between fidelity to

my own internal promptings and those that I internalized from—to put it starkly, if not overly dramatically—the External Other—the NCSALL planning team through the mediation of the facilitator. In short, what I sought remained elusive, their recognition of my expertise as a teacher researcher on my definition of the terms. The writing of this essay represented, at the least, an imaginative reclaiming of that authority even if the legitimacy I sought remained at bay.

A critical issue was whether this socially marginal, but intellectually acute teacher researcher had the moral and intellectual authority to challenge the operative assumptions of the Harvard-based National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, to transform *their* purposes for the project, at least, as it has applied to his own participation. Working analogically, do adult literacy learners possess the right and the authority to challenge the operative assumptions of programs that seek to serve them in order to meet their own learning needs, which may or may not conform to program directives? That is an open question worthy of much reflection given the responsibility programs to chart out their own frames of operation, as much as it is of students to locate workable niches in learning environments that may not be readily conducive to their learning needs. While a convergence is what I sought, I was primarily motivated by the questions and issues that compelled my own research interests which did not necessarily converge with the goals of the NCSALL project coordinators or designers, at least as I internalized them through my interaction with project facilitator.

I doubt that I extended myself beyond my comfort zone as the facilitator envisioned it for me, and I was the poorer for it, although working through this project tried and challenged me. I do know that in writing this essay, and other essays that this project indirectly spawned, I had sought to find my voice and authenticate my experience without which any teacher research project would prove meaningless. Through this essay I have sought to recapitulate not only something of my own emerging consciousness, but of the various teacher research themes with which I was grappling in 1998-1999, as well as something of the dynamics of the NCSALL project at the time. However personally “authentic” this narrative seeks to be, and it is in the nature of the autobiographical genre to mask as much as disclose, it is only in dialogue with *readers* that discourse can take place in the promotion of learning environments where “free social inquiry is indissolubly [sic] wedded to the art of full and moving communication” (Dewey, 1927/1954, p. 284). In short, the value of this essay is at least in part for you (dear reader) to determine.

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