Philosophy of and Approach to Adult Literacy Underlying the Binder Concept at
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Programmatic Premises

♦ The traditional LVA model of instruction is based on a student centered philosophy. In this model materials selection is a decentralized process in which students, but more typically, tutors choose what to work on for a given session. Those materials would be those available from an affiliate library collection or additional resources the tutor would find. This approach has the important advantage of leaving to those who are most directly involved total discretion in selecting the materials. Its disadvantage is that on a program-wide basis there may be unevenness in quality of selection, sometimes based more on comfort level, but not necessarily on what may be of most value to students in moving learning forward. In addition, the decentralized approach does not accommodate those tutors who want more rather than less structure, and in any event, doesn't take advantage of what a centralized site has to offer in terms of developing a more uniform curriculum that still leaves room for choice.

♦ The initial response in the late 1990s was a singular text, which had the advantage of providing structure, but did not incorporate the range of materials adult literacy students are interested in studying. A thematic textbook combined with plenty of opportunities for developing basic reading and writing skills would be ideal in bringing together the two approaches. If such a textbook exists we are not aware of it. Our approach then was to create composite textbooks from a wide range of available materials corresponding to the different levels of our student abilities. While it took considerable work, it allowed us to draw on our own collective experience in putting the binders together. The binders can always be improved, and a useful textbook may eventually be made available. In the meantime, the binders as constructed represent a wide range of content and offer plenty of choice in the selection of materials that can stimulate effective learning.

♦ The construction, compilation, and organization of the binders has resulted from the direct work of the tutors and the program staff in a highly interactive process of discussion, recommendation, review, selection, and an open process of continuous construction. The materials selected are drawn from a wide range of published texts. While we have not, for the most part, created the materials, as those who have selected and organized the materials, we (staff, tutors, and to some degree, students) are creators as well as consumers of the instructional program. This has allowed for our own collective intelligence to play an

important role in the shaping of the instructional program, while providing structure as well.

Instructional Premises

♦ Learning to read and using print based texts to gain relevant knowledge and information in one's life outside the program are interrelated. Basic skill development in reading and content-based mastery knowledge, mutually reinforce each other in our program. Drawing on the language of K-12 education, the object is to teach reading across the curriculum in order to help students apply what they are learning to as many contexts of their lives as possible. Because basic reading skill development is the common denominator, that is featured prominently in the binders at every level.

♦ Meeting the needs of a broad range of students and tutors requires a balanced approach between structure and flexibility in instructional materials and in approaches to teaching and learning. Within certain guidelines, each group of students and their tutor needs to work out that balance for themselves. A loose curriculum construction with adequate resources built in is preferable to a tight curriculum construction in order to accommodate the range of our student and tutor needs and interests

♦ The core content areas—employment, family, health, money management, civics, human interest, are the primary topic areas highlighted in adult literacy resource collections and curriculum guides. They are also the topics that students and tutors have gravitated toward over the years at LVGH and many other adult literacy programs. The binders are a representation of the many texts that contain this content for which no single text as far as we have been able to determine is adequate.

♦ Instructional materials are means and not an ends. Their value is in their capacity to stimulate important and interesting knowledge and learning. The mastery of the materials in the binders as an end is only important to the extent that any lesson focuses on specific content students actually need, such as accurately filling out a job application. Short of that the materials serve as a pathway in the stimulation of learning and knowledge creation rather than having intrinsic value in their own right. Neither binders nor a book are an ends in themselves, but a means toward the end of highly effective learning.

♦ Accordingly, the primary goal of the instructional program is not to cover the curriculum, but to stimulate effective learning. Oftentimes focusing on fewer materials with more depth is the most effective pathway to this goal. Success, in the final analysis, is determined by what and to what extent student growth in learning how to read, how to learn, and broad content mastery has increased over some decent interval of time, typically, over a year or more.

Background Assumptions on Reading

1. **Functional context theory,** which maintains that interest and motivation play a crucial role in a student's ability to read and comprehend a text, is one underlying assumption that underlays the binder concept. The premise of functional-context theory is that all else being equal (which it never is), students will be able to read more complex texts at a given reading level that are of interest to them than those that are not, and in any event, will be more engaged in the topic matter. The binder concept draws on the life competency Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS) and the National Institute for Literacy's Equipped for the Future (EFF) frameworks as well as my own experience with a wide span of many types of materials. All of this points toward a life application curricular focus, combined with a focused attention on developing basic reading and writing skills.

   We took special effort to assure that the binders contain a wide range of topics in the areas of work, family education (especially parenting), health, civic awareness, money management, and human-interest stories. Many of these materials have been field tested and shown to be of interest to students. Many of the content-based materials have basic skills activities built in to them as well. The content and organization of the binders can always be improved, and we still may find a text book that meets the wide ranging needs and interests of our students. In the meanwhile we draw on our locally-created binders which we will improve in succeeding years or will find a textbook instead, that better meets our needs.

2. The binder concept is also premised on the **balanced theory of reading**. The general assumption of this theory is that adults develop reading and writing skills in multiple ways. These include automatic processing skills such as the mastery of the sight sound connection (phonemic awareness) and sight word memorization, and more holistic approaches like assisted reading, reading fluent texts, and context clues. Independent decoding fluency is most thoroughly mastered when students can decode isolated sounds, syllables, and words. Nonetheless, there is no universal process of getting there, and for effective *reading* development, focused attention on comprehension and critical thinking is also required even as students are developing phonemic awareness competency. Therefore, technical mastery of the basic skills of reading is essential, along with the ability to draw meaning from texts and utilizing such information for one's own purposes, which is the ultimate objective of adult literacy education. We have done our best to create a format where the relationship between basic skills development and content-based knowledge is as interactive and as mutually reinforcing as possible

3. The third assumption that underlies the binder concept is the symbolic nature of instructional materials in their role of tapping into student and tutor imagination. What is important is not always what comes across at the surface, but what instructional materials come to **mean** to students and tutors who use them. The

search, therefore, is for "**the learning that matters**," as interactively defined by students and tutors in their interface with the text and each other. While this objective could be viewed as overly subjective, its partial fulfillment is experienced whenever a "learning/teaching moment" is achieved. In whatever shape it takes it is the subtle learning connection that we experience when learning is most alive that drives what we are after in adult literacy education. Instructional materials play an important symbolic role in facilitating this learning. They are an indispensable **resource** toward the realization of this broader an end of learning and knowledge acquisition in areas that students deem important, including utilization in real-life settings and situations outside the program.

A final consideration: What proves effective for one tutor or one group of students may not necessarily have the same impact with another. In this respect, materials are what the educational philosopher John Dewey refers to as "middlemen" in the stimulation of important learning. In short, materials are a resource in which their effectiveness will depend on how they are used. The materials included in the binders were selected for their potential in stimulating highly significant learning, including knowledge transference to settings beyond the tutoring environment. Other materials might do as well, but on our judgment, the materials we were able to assemble for the binders was the best collection we could put together, at this time, based on our collective experience and available texts at our disposal. Of course, improvement is always possible and desirable. Regardless as to materials used, a stimulating learning experience taps into the imagination and motivational drives of students, pushing them on toward broader knowledge acquisition and learning. Stimulating such curiosity is what we are seeking to accomplish, utilizing the best resources we have.

Appendices

The Theory Behind Content-Based Instruction
Tom G. Sticht
Adapted from Focus on Basics
Issue D, December 1997 http://www.ncsall.net/?id=771&pid=433

Cognitive psychologists have studied information processing in reading. They have found that what people know about what they are reading greatly influences their ability to comprehend and learn from texts. In one study, young adults in a remedial reading program required 11th grade "general reading" ability to comprehend with 70% accuracy if they lacked much knowledge. On the other hand, those with high amounts of knowledge about what they were reading were able to comprehend with 70% accuracy with only sixth grade "general reading ability.

Many research and demonstration projects show that reading can be taught using the content of job training—or other contents, such as parenting, religious study, health,--right from the beginning levels of learning how to read.

If adults have difficulty decoding by phonics, they may need training in phonemic awareness, so they can hear the different sounds in the oral language, before they proceed with learning phonics knowledge. Those with fairly well-developed decoding skills can engage in practice reading in job-related materials [and other relevant contexts] to develop word recognition and comprehension skills.

The content-based approach combines decoding and comprehension education with relevant content learning. This offers the fastest way to get adults from basic literacy to entry level competence in reading in some desired domain. Then by following a program of lifelong learning, including continuous, well-rounded reading, a person can become literate enough to qualify for higher education or advanced job training to move into better paying careers or to simply enjoy the many personal, social, and cultural benefits of higher knowledge and disciplined thinking skills.

Basic Assumptions of Balanced Reading Theory
Adapted from Victoria-Purcell Gates
There's Reading…and Then There's Reading
Focus on Basics 1997 Volume 1, Issue B http://www.ncsall.net/?id=771&pid=460

- Students need to focus on meaning with real, authentic texts, and to work on basic reading skills in isolation context and in isolation.

- Students learn through the give-and-take influence of different aspects of the language process, from letter and sound recognition information, through an implicit understanding of grammar syntax in terms of how words fit together in a sentence, to semantic knowledge about what texts mean.

- Readers process all the different letters or words on a page (whether quickly or slowly), but also draw on syntax and meaning, which, in turn, influences perception and recognition of letters and sounds.

- Balanced reading theory is referred to as a "whole-part-whole" approach. Students engage in meaningful reading, the teacher, then, pulls out certain words or phrases that students have problems with, which may require anything from sound decoding analysis, to sight memorization, to an analysis of the type of text being read and accompanying reading strategies needed, to effectively comprehend the text.

- The balanced reading approach assumes we process information about reading in different ways, which included breaking down skills into isolated components and working synthetically to put pieces of information together in logical wholes.

Moving Back and Forth from Instructional Materials to Highly Significant Learning
Adapted from George Demetrion
Instructional Materials and Highly Significant Learning. All Write News, March 2001 http://alri.org/pubs/significantmaterials.html

♦ Adult learners are complex beings who have a range of learning needs, interests, and aspirations.
♦ The learning that matters is highly individualistic, peculiar to that person
♦ The learning that matters may be what students can identify prior to instruction or it may emerge as a result of the learning process.
♦ Often there is a significant gap between what students want (or discover that they want to) learn and available instructional materials, a gap that requires bridging support provided by
   • What the teacher brings
   • What a student or the students collectively bring
   • Aids embedded in the materials or the materials themselves
♦ The key to stimulating a dynamic learning process is finding a creative synthesis between what the students know and lack , the strengths and limitations of the instructor, the quality, effectiveness, and applicability of the instructional materials, and the broader social and cultural context that shapes the learning environment.
♦ Substantial research and informed practice point to seven broad topic areas to ground adult literacy education, which are addressed in the instructional binders
   • Occupational knowledge
   • Family and parenting education
   • Health
   • Community/involvement/citizenship
   • Money matters
   • Preparing for advanced schooling, learning how to learn
   • Personal development/self awareness

Additional Points

♦ The learning that matters to students is the focal point of the curriculum, not the instructional materials.
♦ Instructional materials may or may not stimulate the learning that matters, although they obviously play a role, often, a key one, and are indispensable in any event.
♦ Two tutors will typically have a different experience with the same materials with the same students.
♦ Students and tutors will vary about how much structure and how much flexibility they want and need. Effective materials and approaches to learning and teaching need to accommodate this range.
♦ The learning that matters is discovered through the learning process. It emerges over time.

- The learning that matters may be defined most succinctly as growth in the progressive expansion of skills, self-learning capacities, knowledge, and world experience.
- The organization and format of the materials play a pivotal role in their accessibility and receptivity through the use and placement of graphic organizers such as subtitles, pictures, bold print, wide space, large print, color, frequent use of common words, etc.

Pedagogical Principles Underlying Literacy Volunteers of Greater Hartford's Basic Literacy Curriculum Focus More Formally Stated

Current research on literacy states that language development is most fully acquired when it is applied in living contexts that people identify as important. This is the foundation for LVA's student-centered approach. This core assumption is at the heart of the five principles upon which ground the Basic Literacy curriculum in our program.

Principle #1 Adult literacy learning is best stimulated by a student-centered focus. As put by Elsa Auerbach: "People learn best when learning starts with what they already know, builds on their strengths, engages them in the learning process, and enables them to accomplish something they want to accomplish." Learning best takes place when students identify their own questions and gaps in knowledge as well as their own interests and work out of their own sources of strength. Our binder-based curriculum orientation is designed to facilitate such a discovery process.

Principle #2 Adult literacy learners are multidimensional in their interests, experience, and knowledge. As Juliet Merrifield and her colleagues put it, "Adults with limited literacy skills should be credited with the skills and knowledge they do have. Educators should start to build on and extend the knowledge and skills of students, based on their needs, desires, and interests, rather than dwelling on measuring how 'functional' a learner is or needs to become according to standardized tests." Adult students seek to enhance their learning in various areas that may not always seem immediately practical as well as to gain important useful knowledge to help them find employment or do better in their jobs and to help them with their family responsibilities. As researcher Susan Lytle put it:

> Some [students] come with a desire to learn more about a particular subject, for example, American-American history, parenting, or health. Many seek ways to deal with their own children's literacy and schooling, whereas others wish to participate or assume new roles and responsibilities in their families, workplaces, or communities. Some are looking for community in the literacy program itself. Some seek economic improvements in their lives through new jobs or promotions, or by dealing more competently with personal finances and/or their encounter with 'the bureaucracy.' For many, the program offers the possibility of taking more control and ownership of their own learning. For most adult learners who come to the programs, the desire for enhanced self-esteem is implicit in many of their stated and unstated goals.

Principle #3 Literacy and conversational English are developed while in and through application. One does not learn to read, write, speak and comprehend English first through decontextualized exercises and then apply such skills to relevant contexts only once basic language mastery is attained. Rather, LVGH's binder-based curriculum focus utilizes authentic content from the inception of instruction even among those students whose basic skills are least developed. Basic skill work is not ignored, but incorporates authentic language and content. Literacy Volunteer of America supports this contextual

approach to language development in the 7th edition of *Tutor* and the 4th edition of *I Speak English*.

Principle #4 LVGH's binder-based curriculum focus is premised on basic principles of adult learning theory such as the following:

- Education is lifelong learning and helps individuals prepare for changing needs and interests in the present and for the future. As one study puts it, "Students do not necessarily have a concrete goal in mind, an instrumental view of literacy tied to some specific task or aspiration. More than anything, they want to feel that there are possibilities for the future, that there are choices and potential for change."

- Adult education focuses on what adults want and need to know and to be able to do to succeed as parents, citizens, community members, workers, consumers, and in other important social roles and contexts. It integrates basic skills with expanding competency in communication, decision-making, and interpersonal relationships, across specific contexts and roles.

- Adult education is driven by what adults say they need and want to know in order to meet self-defined life-plans. It provides resources for individuals in meeting personal as well as social goals.

- Progress is measured by the capacity of adults to progressively organize experience and perform real-world tasks that cannot always be measured in standardized ways.

- Adult education is developmental as well as cognitive. It integrates emotional and social growth with cognitive capacity in the development of persons as individuals and as social actors within a variety of community contexts.

- Adult education helps students to learn how to learn-to expand their ability to explore new knowledge.

Principle #5 Mastery of specific language and learning contexts of the social environments in which students are or would like to be engaged is critical to their success, what literacy researcher Thomas Sticht refers to as functional context education. The curriculum focus draws on such contexts in setting the instructional program in order to help students progressively master the range of social environments that are important to their lives. While emphasizing the significance of the external setting, LVGH's binder-based curriculum is responsive to current student development and fosters an interactive relationship between what students currently know about such environments and what they need and want to learn through supportive mentoring instruction. The instructor, other students, or other persons or certain activities assist students to progressively master the language and learning demands of particular social contexts critical to their self-defined objectives. Simultaneously, the challenges embedded within the social environments students seek to master, if tapped in a manner that builds on and extends current student knowledge, is a powerful stimulus to learning that matters for life.