

*Active learner participation in adult literacy programs enables learners to take higher degrees of control, responsibility, and reward vis-à-vis program activities. Active participation can improve program efficiency, enhance learners' personal development, and enable them to transform the larger social contexts in which they live.*

## *The Case for Participatory Literacy Education*

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The preceding chapter established that adults with low levels of basic skills are capable of participating actively in literacy programs and other social contexts. We need now to examine what it means to participate actively in a literacy program. This chapter, which is based on Chapter Two of Jurmo (1987), addresses that issue.

### **What Is Active Learner Participation?**

When learners and practitioners are asked what active learner participation is, a wide range of answers results. Participation varies from simple attendance to active control of one or more program activities.

If these responses are organized according to the amounts of control, reward, and responsibility accorded the learner, several levels of participation emerge. Organized along the steps of a ladder (Arnstein, 1971) with the lowest levels of participation on the bottom rungs and the highest levels at the top, these levels might look as shown in Figure 1.

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This chapter is based on Jurmo, 1987, Chapter Two.

The author wishes to thank the Association for Community Based Education for its partial funding of research costs for Chapters Two, Three, Eight, and Nine of this volume.

A. Fingeret and P. Jurmo (eds.). *Participatory Literacy Education*.  
New Directions for Continuing Education, no. 42. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Summer 1989.

**Figure 1. Levels of Learner Participation in Adult Literacy Programs**

Learners have greater degrees of control, responsibility, and reward vis-à-vis program activities.

Learners are consulted for some input into the instructional and/or management process.

Learners cooperate with the rules, activities, and procedures developed by program staff.

Learners are present (physically or on paper) in the program.

This hierarchy of levels shows that there is no one simple definition of learner participation. In some instances, a learner participates merely by signing up for a program and showing up for a minimal number of classes. In its most active form, participation means that the learner has active control, responsibility, and reward vis-à-vis some or all program activities.

It is these highest levels of learner participation for which advocates of participatory education generally aim. In practice, literacy programs aiming at the highest levels of learner participation give learners ongoing opportunities to plan and implement a wide range of instructional and management activities within the program. While it is impossible for all learners to be actively involved in all activities all the time, maintaining a high average level of participation is the goal.

#### **Why Is Active Learner Participation Important in Instruction?**

The arguments for the importance of active learner participation can be organized according to three major purposes that active learner participation can serve in the instructional process: efficiency, personal development, and social change.

**Efficiency.** A number of researchers have concluded that, for instruction to be successful, learners must be given opportunities to take on highly active roles in making printed language meaningful to themselves and others. This conclusion is based on research on the ways in which fluent readers and writers operate and on the ways in which instruction can facilitate or impede the development of fluent literacy.

Successful readers develop strategies enabling them to relate printed forms of language to what they already know about the content and form of language. In this process, the learner attaches a meaning to the printed language. Successful writers are able to put thought into a printed form that others can relate to their prior experience and develop meaning for.

This view of the reading and writing process is central to the whole-language approach to literacy instruction. Whole-language advocates argue that reading instruction should be organized to maximize the brain's strong point, the "utilization of what it knows already," and minimize the brain's weakest area, which has been identified as the "processing of . . . new information, especially when that new information makes little sense" (Smith, 1978, p. 179).

According to this view, the process of learning to read is one in which the reader gradually makes "sense of more and more kinds of language in more and more contexts," a process that is "fundamentally a matter of experience" (Smith, 1978, p. 191) through which the reader uses skills of selecting, predicting, searching, and tentative choosing (Goodman and Niles, 1970). All these skills require the reader to take an energetic, active role as a seeker of meaning in print. The outcome of this process is someone who can distinguish between the form of printed language and its true function: reading and writing for meaning (Watson, 1979). Reading and writing are "tools which language users use in the process of getting things done" (Harste, Woodward, and Burke, 1984, p. 204).

To facilitate acquisition of these tools, the teacher does not need to rely on one universally applicable instructional method. Instead, the teacher should seek to set up a learning environment that encourages the learner to explore a variety of forms of written language and find the ones that are particularly meaningful (Smith, 1978). These forms of language can include "daily journals, newspapers, message boards, letters to pen pals, recipes, menus, reading environmental print, and other functional uses of written language" (Harste, Woodward, and Burke, 1984, p. 205) all taken from contexts meaningful to the learner (Smith, 1978).

In such a process, readers should be allowed to make mistakes and learn to distinguish between forms of language that help the acquisition of meaning and forms of language that hinder development of meaning. The reader should be allowed to correct himself or herself and not have to depend on others to make the corrections (Smith, 1978). Instructors can facilitate this process by providing "multiple opportunities to test their written language hypotheses in a low-risk environment" (Harste, Woodward, and Burke, 1984, p. 205). When learners in these ways choose and interpret reading experiences freely, they are likely to develop a greater sense of ownership of—and interest in—the reading process. Finally, the reader should not be expected to learn symbols outside a meaningful context.

Unfortunately, most instructional systems are not based on such principles, and teachers often lack the time or resources needed to provide this more ideal learning environment (Smith, 1978). At the least, teachers and others who believe in these principles should strive to limit the conditions (such as presenting learners with meaningless forms of language) that reduce efficient learning.

These and other whole-language arguments (Graves, 1981) are based primarily on research done with school-age children. Others have based similar arguments on research with adult low-level readers.

Proponents of a contextualized view of literacy argue that "illiteracy is situational; it can only be defined in context and can only be tackled in [the] context" in which each individual lives (Harman, 1987, p. 44). This contextualized approach is particularly evident in current employee basic skills efforts in which the context is defined as the workplace in which learners are expected to perform certain literacy tasks. Some workplace programs have been structured so that workers actively discuss and teach each other from reading materials found on the job. They also carry out work-related research projects, collecting information about a particular work procedure by reading manuals or by direct observation and then interpreting that information and recording it in charts, graphs, or written form. This active approach to learning is based on the assumption that workers will find such uses of literacy familiar, meaningful, and motivating. In the process, workers can be expected to enhance their understanding of job tasks while at the same time improving the reading, writing, thinking, teamwork, and verbal communication skills needed on the job (Harman, 1987; Sticht, 1987).

These arguments from the worlds of children's reading research and workplace literacy share the belief that those who provide literacy instruction—whether for children or for adults—must understand how fluent readers and writers acquire meaning from print. Literacy instructors should then build on that understanding to give learners multiple opportunities to develop their own abilities to make sense of printed forms of language.

**Personal Development.** Another set of arguments holds that, although the development in learners of efficient reading and writing skills is desirable, it is not in itself an adequate goal for literacy programs. This second set of arguments claims that, because many learners come to literacy programs lacking in other cognitive and social traits, literacy programs need to be structured to enhance development of those characteristics as well. These other characteristics include critical thinking or problem solving, ability to work collaboratively with others, self-esteem, and interest in continuing one's education.

This perspective on participatory learning argues that such personal qualities are basic to the development of a mature, healthy adult. Without such qualities, the individual is likely to remain passive and not use even

the technical skills that he or she already has. The educational process can help the learner to acquire these personal traits by providing the learner with opportunities to set goals, explore options, and develop strategies for meeting goals through active experimentation. In these ways, active learner participation in the educational process is seen as central to achievement of these important personal goals.

This perspective is found in the work of humanistic educators who argue that education should aim at helping the learner to develop skills of inquiry that enable the individual (with or without the help of others) to take the initiative in a self-directed learning process. Learners should be able to assess their own learning needs and objectives, identify human and material resources, and develop, implement, and evaluate appropriate learning strategies (Knowles, 1975).

According to this view, the learner should no longer be seen as a mere object to be shaped by the educational process. Rather, the learner must become "the subject of his own education," no longer "submitting to education" but instead "educating himself" (Faure and others, 1972, p. 161).

These humanistic educators argue that a "theoretically optimal experience of personal growth," whether in the form of "client-centered therapy or some other experience of learning," would enable an individual to "function in all [his or her] complexity" and actively chart the course of his or her life (Rogers, 1969, p. 288). One such educator (Curran, 1976) developed a group-learning approach that "aims at adapting basic subtleties and awareness from the field of counseling and psychotherapy and integrating them into learning" (p. 1). Curran's group-learning approach aims at developing "a very special kind of community involvement . . . and a kind of security and support" among all members of the group. This mutual support is seen as the opposite of the isolation created by "competitive, 'laissez-faire' classroom individualism" (Curran, 1976, p. 1). A supportive atmosphere of this type allows the learner to advance from an initial stage of dependence on the teacher to increased self-confidence as an active, independent developer of new knowledge. In addition, the learner becomes more able to help fellow group members to proceed in these ways.

Similar arguments are made by writers who focus on reading and writing instruction per se. These writers argue that literacy instruction must recognize that many learners come to the educational setting with a limited sense of who they are and what they can do with their lives. These learners are in danger of losing their own culture and of becoming nonentities in the dominant society (Ashton-Warner, 1963). For those with such a perspective on life, reading and writing are a ritual in which "appearance" is overemphasized and "meaning is atrophied" (Ashton-Warner, 1963, p. 176).

To counteract these destructive tendencies, educators need to develop reading and writing instruction focused on issues that have meaning for the learner. In some cases, these themes might be controversial ones like fear or sex (Ashton-Warner, 1963). Teachers must not shy away from such topics. Rather, they should recognize that many learners have unanswered questions about these kinds of sensitive issues. By dealing constructively with these topics in basic skills sessions, teachers can achieve two goals at the same time: Learners can achieve a deeper understanding of questions of personal concern to themselves, and they can develop their basic skills by using them to achieve personally meaningful goals. Through such personally meaningful uses of language, learners can enhance their self-image and reduce their anxiety levels. Proponents of this approach argue that it succeeds because it "returns teaching to where [learners] *are* and removes it from the esoteric realm of where they *ought* to be" (Fader, 1976, p. 163). In contrast, poor readers have only been "taught the elements—the pieces—of reading," not the "why" (Fader, 1976, p. 192).

**Social Change.** Still another line of thought holds that efficiency and personal development are worthy goals but that they do not go far enough in getting at the fundamental causes of the problems faced by most undereducated adults. Advocates of social change claim that, to understand those problems, we must study the historical conditions that shape an illiterate adult's life. In the case of a large segment of the adult nonreaders in the United States, life has been characterized by poor physical conditions, poor-quality education, inferior social status, and a lack of economic and political power.

Supporters of the social-change analysis argue that it is not a coincidence that many nonreaders live in oppressive conditions. Their illiteracy is a direct result of the conditions, and there is little chance that the cycle of illiteracy within oppressed populations will be broken unless the conditions are eliminated. It is the job of adult education to enable learners to participate actively in changing those conditions.

Such an educational process aimed at social change provides opportunities in which learners actively analyze and shape tasks facing them in the program. The learner thereby learns by doing. He or she learns to take an active role in transforming the world outside by developing the needed abilities within the educational program setting. This approach requires a collective effort of learners and educators working in a two-way, dialogical relationship to analyze and change the status quo. It is therefore inherently political and a step beyond the more individually oriented personal development approach. To a large degree, this perspective springs from adult literacy efforts in the Third World. Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1985) is a central figure among those who have considered the implications of literacy education for social change, and literacy efforts worldwide are being built on ideas borrowed from his work.

His writing articulates the basic premises of the social-change perspective. For example, he argues that illiteracy is neither a disease that needs to be cured nor a poisonous herb that needs to be eradicated. It is rather “one of the concrete expressions of an unjust social reality. . . . [It is] not strictly a linguistic or exclusively pedagogical or methodological problem. It is political. . . . Literacy [is] . . . a process of search and creation . . . to perceive the deeper meaning of language and the word, the word that, in essence, they are being denied” (Freire, 1985, p. 10).

The role of learners in such education is to identify themes of personal importance to themselves, to develop their own texts based on those themes, and to critically analyze texts produced by others. Through this process of dialogue among learners and educational facilitators, both learners and practitioners become creative subjects able to identify the problems within their situations and find solutions for those problems. This process is to form the basis for the individual or collective action needed to produce positive changes in the situations in which the learners live.

Freire (1985, p. 137) sees those who focus on personal development as the goal of literacy instruction as limited by their inability or unwillingness to go beyond individualized—and hence incremental—change: “Even though they speak of liberating education, they are conditioned by their vision of liberation as an individual activity that should take place through a change of consciousness and not through the social and historical praxis of human beings.” Education is thus to be seen as part of a large process of change, not as a mere fine-tuning of the individual’s outlook and technical skills.

United States-based educator Carman St. John Hunter (1987, pp. 4-7) analyzes the causes of the illiteracy problem and what must be done to solve it: “Illiteracy is not an isolated phenomenon. It can neither be understood nor responded to apart from the complex set of social, political, and economic issues of which it is but one indicator. . . . Poverty is the underlying cause of illiteracy. Without any proven will or ability to break the chains of poverty, no government has been able to make significant progress toward universal literacy. . . . Literacy cannot be understood as a remedial program designed and delivered by zealous missionaries to those ‘in need.’ Rather, literacy levels will increase where there is serious commitment to goals of equity and justice and where the educationally disadvantaged are able to be involved in shaping their own learning within the context of reshaping the social, political, economic, and cultural environment within which they live. If we are to begin with programs that promote participation and direction by learners, that degree of openness can become a first step toward the larger, more socially and economically inclusive change that will provide the basis on which universal literacy can be realized.”

Supporters in the United States of this social-change approach call for a shift in the nation's literacy efforts toward a new emphasis on learner-centered goals. In this approach, learners determine program goals and strategies and teach and otherwise help each other in various aspects of the program (Fox, 1986). Social-change practitioners have built curricula around such learner-identified themes as marriage and child-rearing, sexuality, self-government, utopia, school experiences, clothing styles, and even *the hamburger*—a code word for the fast-food industry (Shor, 1980). In participatory learning activities, learners work together to explore these issues and determine how they would deal with them in the real world. Such activities are seen as a means of counteracting the negative effects of schooling and mass media on the learners' self-image and world outlook. As one proponent of this approach explains, "A pedagogy which empowers students to intervene in the making of history is more than a literacy campaign. Critical education prepares students to be their own agents for social change, their own creators of democratic culture" (Shor, 1980, p. 48).

### **Why Is Active Learner Participation Important in Program Management?**

Most of the literature on learner-centered literacy education focuses on the active roles that learners can play in the instructional process. But much of what goes on in literacy programs is not strictly instructional in nature. Recruitment of new learners, fund raising, public relations, the setting of program policy, staff training, program logistics, and other noninstructional activities provide the framework of resources within which instructional services can be provided.

Historically, program staff operate these management-related activities. But learners have increasingly become involved in the management of their programs. The same general kinds of arguments just cited for learner participation in instruction can be made for active learner participation in management. These arguments are occasionally found in the literature on literacy education, but they are more common in writings on management of for-profit and nonprofit organizations and in the literature on community organizing.

***Efficiency and Personal Development.*** Three major reports on effective literacy program practice describe examples of learner participation in various management-related activities (Balmuth, 1987; Lerche, 1985; Mayer, 1984). All three reports argue that such participation increases the efficiency of program operations or enhances the self-esteem and other personal attributes of the learners involved.

For example, current and former literacy students are seen as particularly effective recruiters of new students, as they can "go to areas of need



for presentations concerning their own personal success stories" (S. Darling quoted in Balmuth, 1987, p. 5). "Word of mouth is at its best when the words are from a 'satisfied customer.' When this customer is a friend, relative, or community resident respected by a potential student, recruitment becomes a self-generating process" (Lerche, 1985, p. 49).

Once new learners have been recruited, veteran learners can help with intake procedures—initial interviews, scheduling, and needs assessments. These early experiences in a program can make or break a newcomer's willingness to stay with the program. Veteran learners can help newcomers make it through this initial "journey on eggshells" (Balmuth, 1987, p. 4).

Buddy systems—in which experienced students serve as mentors to new students—are cited (S. Darling cited in Balmuth, 1987) as useful in reducing dropout rates and absenteeism and in generally maintaining learner morale and interest in the program. The same purposes are achieved by self-help support groups and social activities (P. C. Gold cited in Balmuth, 1987). In such peer-support activities as rap sessions, experienced students "can explain how they deal with the problems and successfully completed the program"; these personal stories "are real and believable and give new students confidence in the claims of program staff" (Lerche, 1985, p. 65).

Learners can make the programs more responsive to their own real needs and interests by serving on program boards of directors and advisory committees, in staff orientation and training, and in program evaluation and goal-setting (Mayer, 1984). Such roles for learners in the planning and evaluation of programs can enhance learner ownership of the program, smooth communications within the program, and clarify learners' interests vis-à-vis staff expectations (Kinsey, 1978).

These forms of learner involvement "build on the fact that adults have already engaged the world, learned a considerable amount, and probably taught someone something" already (Deveaux, 1984, p. 11). Peers-helping-peers minimizes dependency on staff and maximizes group problem solving and "group energy and commitment . . . People who teach others develop confidence, self-reliance, learn to do homework, and come to school regularly" (Deveaux, 1984, p. 11). Peer-help can also have therapeutic value, "for who better than they know" about the problems their fellow learners face (Deveaux, 1984, p. 11).

For one participatory program, learner participation "means having students elect representatives to the program's board of directors, helping students develop committees to help with building maintenance, fund raising, curriculum development, and whatever is appropriate for a program. . . . Such activities as bus trips or theater parties are among the few social events in which adults who cannot read can participate and not have to worry about being exposed as an illiterate because their

companions on these outings will be fellow students and staff and all can help one another" (Deveaux, 1984, p. 12).

**Social Change.** As in the case of instruction, a variety of arguments can be made for active learner participation in program management from the social-change perspective. Most of these arguments are found in the literature on socioeconomic development, community organizing, and organizational development. Kindervatter (1979) summarizes these arguments in her survey of efforts to promote sociopolitical empowerment of historically powerless groups. Central to all these empowerment efforts is the active participation of client groups in democratic decision making about the course of those efforts.

For example, critics of current national development efforts argue that the key to the modernization of society is a restructuring of the relationship between government and people. In that new order, the people would have a say in policies that affect their lives. "People can be expected to invest in a modern economy only when they believe they are part of it and can benefit from it" (E. Owens and R. Shaw quoted in Kindervatter, 1979, pp. 42-43). One critical issue in any effort to develop society is the factor of popular control, "the difference between being the agent of one's own development as defined in one's own terms and being a mere beneficiary of development as defined by someone else" (D. Goulet and M. Hudson quoted in Kindervatter, 1979, p. 43).

At the local level, community organizers have recognized the principles of democratic decision making and developed activities and structures in which community members themselves have greater measures of control. These attempts to organize communities to solve local problems "begin with the people's interests . . . move at the community's pace . . . develop 'native' leaders . . . promote peer support and mutual help . . . involve cooperative community problem solving . . . emphasize discussion methods, democratic procedures, and action taking . . . include an organizer who [facilitates rather than dominates the process] . . . and [gradually] transfers initiative and responsibility from the organizer to the people" (Kindervatter, 1979, pp. 87-88).

Efforts to democratize the workplace are sources of similar arguments for participant control. Apart from the material and emotional benefits that accrue to workers from managing—and in some cases owning—their own workplaces, workplace democratization can also enable workers to see that "changes are possible. These skills more than any single change are perhaps the main accomplishment" (D. Zwerdling quoted in Kindervatter, 1979, p. 97). With this altered sense of what they can accomplish through collective analysis and action, workers have a new potential to make changes in the larger society outside.

These approaches to participatory management at the national, local, and workplace levels attempt to "give people power as decision makers,

not just 'advisers,' on all aspects of planning, from design to implementation to evaluation . . . base 'content' on people's immediate interests . . . pose problems which participants themselves solve through discussion and action taking . . . utilize methods which promote self-expression and dialogue . . . recognize the importance of training change agents according to the same participatory principles . . . may begin with an imposed structure but gradually enable people to define and control their own structure" (Kindervatter, 1979, p. 137).

These voices from the realms of national development, community organizing, and workplace democratization do not come from the adult literacy field. Nevertheless, they support the notion that client groups can become more politically empowered through participation in the management of the organizations with which they come into contact.

## Conclusion

To participate actively in a literacy program, learners must do more than show up for classes and passively do what they are told. To participate actively, they must take on higher degrees of control, responsibility, and reward vis-à-vis program activities.

Advocates of such active roles for learners argue that active learner participation in instruction and program management can increase program efficiency, enhance learners' personal development, and enable them to transform the larger social contexts in which they live.

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