

In participatory literacy programs, learners take active roles in planning, evaluating, and implementing a wide range of instructional activities. They also participate in program governance, student and staff recruitment, public awareness and advocacy, income-generating activities, peer support, and other management-related functions.

Instruction and Management: Where Participatory Theory Is Put into Practice

Paul Jurmo

The preceding chapter presented arguments for why it is important for learners to have active roles in both the instructional and the management components of literacy programs. However, for many interested in developing a learner-centered approach in their programs, the question remains: What specific activities can be used to provide learners with the opportunity to achieve high levels of participation in the program? Or, more simply, what does participatory practice look like? This chapter summarizes the learner-centered activities currently used in the adult literacy field in the United States. For details about the practices, the reader can consult Chapters Three and Four of Jurmo (1987).

Participatory Practices in Instruction

Traditionally, literacy students have been handed a prescribed set of topics, materials, and activities that they are expected to master. Learner-centered programs give learners some control in the planning of instructional activities. At minimum, learners select from among topics, materials, and activities that others have developed. In the most active cases,

learners develop topics, materials, and activities on their own or in collaboration with others.

For example, some programs encourage learners to respond as a group to open-ended questions (such as, "If you could write to any international leader, who would it be and what would you say?"; "Where did you grow up?"). These discussions are then used to help the learners express issues that are on their minds or uses of language with which they need help. The instructor notes these themes and language areas as they emerge in the discussion or tape-records the discussion for later analysis. In this way, learners contribute actively to the process of identifying curriculum topic areas.

In other cases, learners are asked to analyze what they have already achieved in their jobs, in their family lives, in their hobbies, and in other aspects of their lives. By discussing areas in which the learners have developed skills and, in particular, areas in which they use language, instructors help learners to identify the skills and background knowledge that they already possess and bring to the program. These assets are then used as foundation stones for further learning activities.

Learners are also being given the opportunity to participate actively in the evaluation of instructional activities. Many programs encourage learners to give informal feedback to staff on activities as they occur. But formalized mechanisms have also been established. For example, learners hold regular mutual-feedback sessions with their instructors, program supervisors, and fellow learners. They also participate in regular record-keeping procedures in which they not only record their attendance and what they did in a session but assess their own performance and that of their instructors and the materials used.

Learners not only can plan and evaluate what they learn, they can also take active roles in the implementation of instructional activities. In some participatory programs, learners serve as peer teachers of fellow learners who have either the same or a lower skill level. In the first case, learners who have successfully passed through a program or who at least have reached a higher skill level within the program serve as instructors to other learners in the same program or in another program. In the second case, learners work in teams to give feedback and guidance to each other around their performance in instructional activities.

In other situations, learners provide instructional help to individuals who are not participants in adult literacy programs. In an increasingly common use of this idea, adult learners are given guidance in helping their children or grandchildren to deal with literacy-related tasks under the auspices of intergenerational or family reading programs.

Writing is also seen as an area of instruction particularly suited to development of active thinking and self-expression among students. Learner-centered programs have made special use of the word processing

and data base capacities of the computer to provide learners with opportunities to write texts around personally meaningful themes. The program newsletter allows learners to practice their writing and self-expression skills in poems, letters to the editor, essays, and stories. And learners write letters to pen pals (for example, learners in other literacy programs or college student volunteers), to program staff and board members, to the news media, or to potential and actual funding sources. Some programs organize writers' workshops to encourage learners to review each others' work, make suggestions, raise questions, and generally pool knowledge while developing individual self-confidence and cooperative behavior. Writing awards given in recognition of specific writing achievements are a mechanism for encouraging learners to write with a clear purpose in mind.

As an alternative to forcing learners to read texts that have limited meaning for themselves and as a way of encouraging learners to reinforce each other's interpretative abilities, some programs have established participatory reading activities. In these activities, learners explore, analyze, and seek help with their reading in the natural ways described by whole-language advocates. In one form of participatory reading, students meet in groups to select and discuss texts that they read in common.

Programs are experimenting with a number of activities that are not usually considered to be instructional in nature. For example, field trips to plays, theaters, television studios, poetry readings, museums, art galleries, and historical sites provide a number of possible benefits: exposure to new areas of knowledge, team building among participants, and awareness that learning can go on outside the classroom. In addition, artistic activities contain many elements of the writing process, including conceptualizing and transforming an idea into a form that others can understand. Examples include role playing, video and photo presentations, and drawing. And learners are now participating in a variety of community development activities that have the dual aims of improving the community and enhancing learners' knowledge of community issues, self-confidence, and abilities to work as part of a team toward a common goal. Examples include voter registration drives and organizing around community issues.

Participatory Practices in Management

In addition to taking the kinds of active roles in literacy instruction just outlined, learners are taking increased responsibility for various aspects of the management of their programs. For example, learners participate in program governance by serving on program boards of directors or on student advisory councils. Learners on boards of directors are either elected by fellow students or appointed by other board members. In stu-

dent councils, learners give feedback to program staff about particular student concerns.

Learners are taking on new roles as paid or volunteer staff within literacy programs. Most commonly they work as staff in the programs in which they have participated as students, but in some cases they move on to work in other programs. Their roles as staff members range from daycare worker for the children of other learners to clerical worker, assistant teacher, or manager of a learning center operated by a larger literacy program. In a few cases, graduates of literacy programs have gone on to found their own neighborhood learning centers.

Learners help some programs to recruit, select, and train staff. For example, learners recruit volunteer tutors by appearing in public service announcements and media interviews and by making tutor recruitment presentations to audiences of community groups, corporate employees, and other sources of volunteers. In some cases, learners also advise staff on the suitability of newly recruited volunteer and paid staff. And learners contribute to the training of newly selected staff members by making presentations, joining in discussions, and participating in role plays during staff training workshops.

Learners are themselves possibly the most effective recruiters of new students for literacy programs. Recognizing this, programs have created roles for current students as well as for graduates in which they help to recruit and orient new participants. For example, learners informally serve as recruiters of new students by telling friends, relatives, and neighbors about the program. The community observes the changes in learners and realizes the positive potential of the program. Learners also take on more formalized roles as recruiters by participating in public service announcements, media interviews, and presentations to community groups. Some groups have arranged for learners to go door to door or to hand out flyers.

Veteran learners commonly make new learners feel comfortable when the newcomers arrive in the program. Building on this natural relationship between veterans and newcomers, programs have asked experienced students to take on formalized roles in assisting with intake of new recruits. To do so, programs have set up student orientation meetings and open houses. Veteran learners are prepared ahead of time about how they can explain the program to newcomers and help newcomers to identify the goals and abilities they bring to the program.

The 1980s saw a major push to increase public awareness of the literacy problem. Coupled with these awareness projects were efforts to increase material support for literacy programs from public-sector funders. Learners have played important roles in public awareness and advocacy activities. For example, learners have appeared in various forms of

media coverage—public service announcements, news stories—in which they typically describe their lives before and after they participated in a literacy program. Learners have also taken public speaking engagements on behalf of the literacy field.

In addition to contributing to general public awareness of literacy efforts, learners have served as advocates or lobbyists for the literacy field. In these roles, they concentrate on generating material resources from public sources. Learners speak and write letters to city councils and state legislatures, and they appear at federal hearings. Learners take on these advocacy roles as individuals, as teams of students within programs, and as members of city- and statewide literacy coalitions.

Learners also help to raise funds from private- and public-sector sources in other ways. These funds normally go to support the program, but in some cases they provide income for learners. To raise funds for their programs, learners accompany program staff when they make the rounds of funding sources. It is felt that successful learners are particularly convincing spokespersons for a program. Some programs include examples of student writing in fund-raising packets or encourage learners to serve on the program fund-raising committee. Students on one such committee came up with the idea of asking their employers to make tuition payments to the program, in keeping with the common practice of employer-paid tuition assistance.

Learners have organized book sales, bake sales, raffles, and group outings to raise funds for their programs. And some programs ask learners to make a small weekly tuition payment, both to generate income for the program and to encourage a sense of ownership in the program among learners.

To generate income for learners themselves, programs have created jobs for learners as managers of a program snack bar and as members of a sewing cooperative.

Through participation in such support activities as support groups, recognition events, and social activities, learners are bolstering each other's morale, self-esteem, group identity, and cooperative spirit. These activities also seek to achieve such technical goals as improved communication among program participants, an increased sense of ownership for the program among participants, reduced dropout rates, and increased public awareness of what goes on in the program.

Participation in conferences has historically been something that staff members—not students—do. This situation has changed in recent years as learners themselves have participated in conferences in active ways. Students now observe presentations made by others, make presentations of their own, work in support groups to make recommendations around special student issues, and even plan and organize conferences.

Conclusion

It is relatively easy to generate lists of participatory literacy education activities. It is far more challenging to incorporate these activities into the daily life of a program. Most educators and learners have no training or experience in sharing the power in instruction or program management and no models to follow. In the next four chapters, the authors share their experiences in taking such activities from the realm of ideas into practice. Recognizing the difficulty of making the transition from traditional to participatory practices, they explain not only the practices that they use but the steps that they took to introduce them into their respective programs.

Reference

Jurmo, P. J. "Learner Participation Practices in Adult Literacy Efforts in the United States." Unpublished Ed.D. dissertation, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 1987.

Paul Jurmo is senior program associate at the Business Council for Effective Literacy in New York City.