A small number of innovative, community-based organizations and volunteer literacy groups have taken the lead in developing participatory literacy education practices in the United States.

History in the Making: Key Players in the Creation of Participatory Alternatives

Paul Jurmo

The participatory thinking and practice described in Chapters One through Seven are at this point generally not widely used in the literacy field. However, interest in the participatory approach seems to be growing among literacy providers and support institutions. This chapter, which is based on Chapter Three of Jurmo (1987), surveys key players in the creation of participatory alternatives.

The Literacy Providers

The segments of the literacy field that have shown the most interest in the participatory approach to date are the community-based organizations and the volunteer literacy field. A few promising signs of interest are also evident within the workplace literacy field. Little evidence of

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support for a participatory approach could be found in Adult Basic Education, correctional education, or other segments of the field.

Community-Based Programs. The Association for Community Based Education (ACBE) defines *community-based organizations* (CBOs) as "groups set up to serve a given geographical area and constituency—usually urban or rural poverty communities and the educationally, economically, and socially disadvantaged. They are formed by their constituencies—including . . . ethnic, racial and cultural minorities—to meet specific needs that exist within the community. Their goals inevitably go beyond the mere provision of educational services to missions of individual and community empowerment. They often link education to community development activities. Their methodological approaches are nontraditional, to meet the needs of those whom traditional education has failed, and learner-centered, focused on helping people meet objectives they themselves set in response to their own needs" (Association for Community Based Education, n.d., pp. 2-3).

Under this definition, CBOs inherently involve learners in defining their own needs and use learner-centered means to respond to those needs. They do so both to enhance the personal development of learners and to change the communities within which the learners live in positive ways.

In fact, these kinds of CBOs have led in the use of participatory literacy education from the earliest days of literacy work in the United States. During the civil rights movement, community organizers ran literacy classes in the South to enable black residents to pass the literacy test that was required in order to become a registered voter. Classes used the voter registration test materials as a key instructional text and involved learners in discussions of human rights and other community issues. For many learners, the final exam was a trip to the voting registration office where they would attempt to pass the literacy test that prevented them from exercising the fundamental right of voting (Adams and Horton, 1975; Morris, n.d.).

By the 1980s, similar social-change-oriented CBOs were cited in several national reports for their particular effectiveness in serving hard-to-reach communities (Harman and Hunter, 1985; "CBOs: Reaching the Hardest to Reach," 1986). But little research has been done on CBOs, in large part because these overburdened groups have had little time to devote to the documentation of their experience for others. For these and other reasons, there is limited systematic information on the number of CBOs or on what makes them effective.

To a limited degree, the Washington, D.C.-based ACBE serves as a link among these groups. The association provides modest funding in the form of minigrants, and it developed an evaluation system for CBOs. It hosts an annual conference, lobbies for CBOs on Capitol Hill, publishes a directory and newsletters, and conducts community-level training

workshops for literacy organizations that are interested in developing a participatory approach. The ACBE literacy effort received a substantial boost from the MacArthur Foundation in 1987 in the form of a grant for $750,000. In 1986, MacArthur funded Push Literacy Action Now, a Washington, D.C., CBO, to produce a position paper on the need for a national learner-centered effort. These grants have made MacArthur the largest single source of funding for participatory efforts to date.

Volunteer Programs. During the period between 1984 and 1989, both Laubach Literacy Action (LLA) and Literacy Volunteers of America (LVA) began to look more closely at the kinds of participatory practice described in Chapters Three through Seven. In part this interest emerged from the positive leadership provided by local volunteer programs, which on their own had gotten learners involved in conferences, support groups, and other activities. At the same time, volunteer groups were under considerable pressure from advocates of the participatory approach who criticized volunteer program instructional and management approaches as ineffective and patronizing.

Laubach Literacy Action. The years 1983 and 1984 marked the beginning of LLA's interest in the issue of student involvement. Students were talking to the media and making their presence felt at LLA national headquarters. At the same time, some LLA personnel were considering how social-change literacy efforts in the Third World might be adapted to U.S. programs.

In 1984, an event occurred that served as a catalyst for much of LLA's subsequent student involvement efforts. Lutheran Church Women covered the costs of sending fifty students from local LLA programs to Laubach's 1984 biennial conference. This experience was deemed successful in laying the groundwork for further peer support among learners, which was seen by some as an extension of LLA's "Each One Teach One" philosophy. Building on this experience, LLA arranged to have about sixty students attend its 1986 biennial conference, this time with no travel subsidies provided. Learners ran workshops and recommended the formation of a national LLA student network linked by a student newsletter and state representatives.

In response, LLA created a national student newsletter and assembled a four-member team of student leaders. This team urged LLA to foster local student support groups, expand learners' roles beyond their traditional roles in tutoring relationships, see empowerment as a goal for learners, and protect learners who "go public" from embarrassment.

This same student advisory group then helped put together a national student congress that was held in Philadelphia in September 1987 for fifty students from Laubach affiliates nationwide. The congress produced statements on the issues identified by the student advisory committee. These statements were widely circulated among LLA affiliates and

inspired a growth during 1988 in student involvement in support groups and public awareness activities. LLA students were particularly visible in the Learner of the Month public-service messages aired that year on ABC. These same learners appeared on stage with Barbara Bush during a National Literacy Honors extravaganza at the Washington Hilton.

By 1989, the national student advisory committee was being more formally established as an official New Readers Committee comprised of five learners deemed by LLA to be outstanding local leaders. This committee was to represent student concerns before the national LLA steering committee, one of whose elected members was, for the first time, a former LLA student. And a second national congress was planned for September 1989, this time to include learners from Literacy Volunteers of America programs as well.

By early 1989, LLA hoped to conduct a national survey to document how many of its local programs were involving learners in these ways. It also planned to put together a series of resource materials for those wishing to implement various student activities.

Nevertheless, for LLA, student involvement was almost exclusively on the management side of the program. In the area of instruction, LLA was telling local affiliates to feel free to adapt non-LLA instructional approaches to their curricula. But apart from a guidebook or two on topics like language experience (Kennedy and Roeder, 1975), LLA was not making significant efforts to provide affiliates with the kinds of participatory instructional tools described in Chapters Three through Seven. LLA thus exposed itself to the criticism that, although its learner support activities had perhaps been successful in providing a comfortable "home" for learners, it was not developing the more effective instructional tools represented in whole-language and other learner-centered approaches. A number of Laubach affiliates began communicating with participatory programs to discuss how they might replace their traditional Laubach methodology with a more learner-centered approach.

Literacy Volunteers of America. LVA traces its interest in creating new roles for learners to the late 1970s when a Connecticut affiliate arranged to have a student coach counsel fellow students and act as a go-between between students and staff. This nontraditional student role was subsequently disseminated as a model that other LVA affiliates were invited to try. By the early 1980s, the issue of student involvement was being discussed at LVA national conferences, and reports began reaching LVA headquarters of learner participation in tutor training, intake procedures, dropout prevention efforts, and advisory groups.

LVA's Field Services Committee published *Student Involvement Guidelines* (Literacy Volunteers of America, 1984), which documented this growing interest and recommended that programs consider involving learners in most of the management activities described in Chapters Three

through Seven. LVA's emerging interest in student involvement was pushed forward by a special grant. In 1986, author Sidney Sheldon gave $10,000 to LVA to be used for special student-related activities.

Half of the grant money was set aside to cover travel costs for students set to attend LVA's national conferences in 1986 and 1987. At these conferences, learners for the first time went beyond the mere giving of testimonials. They put together special presentations for the general conference audience, organized workshops for themselves, and prepared recommendations for consideration by LVA headquarters.

At the 1986 national conference, the LVA national office awarded the remaining $5,000 of the Sidney Sheldon grant, augmented by $2,000 from Lutheran Church Women, to thirteen affiliates for special student projects. Small grants supported local student councils, student newsletters, a student telephone committee, book clubs, student coaches, and a parent-child reading circle. LVA subsequently continued this series of grants, receiving twenty-five proposals in 1987 and fifty applications in 1988. In its most recent grants, LVA emphasized that projects not be merely for students but be managed by students.

A revision of *Student Involvement Guidelines* based on responses from 100 local affiliates to a questionnaire was issued in 1989. The responses showed that interest in the notion of student involvement had grown among affiliates: In the 1984 survey, 67 percent of the responding affiliates said that learners should be more widely involved; in 1988, 85 percent responded in this way.

By early 1989, LVA headquarters felt that many new affiliates were building the notion of student involvement into their programs right from the start. This change in mindset at the local level—seeing learners as fully participating members of the organization—was seen as vital to LVA's effort to shift to the learner-centered approach. A similar shift in thinking was also evident at the national level, where board members had learned from the students who had taken part in the national conferences and were paying increasingly active attention to learners' concerns.

Again at the national level, LVA by 1989 was consciously incorporating whole-language principles into its curriculum development work. In 1988 and 1989, it developed a manual on small-group instruction that encouraged affiliates to take advantage of the peer support that such groups can afford. Affiliates that had been reluctant to try small groups were reported to have become enthusiastic when they saw the format demonstrated in workshops. The fact that LVA founder Ruth Colvin adopted the format in her parent-literacy project has further legitimized the idea for affiliates attached to the traditional one-to-one format.

In its tutor-training activities, by 1989 LVA was trying to present small groups, the language experience approach, and its other methods as only tools to be used in a larger process. That process, LVA increas-

ingly emphasized, was to begin with the students. Instruction should focus on identifying learner goals and motivations and on selecting the techniques that respond to them. These ideas met with acceptance from many of the retired schoolteachers who volunteer as LVA tutors. Traditionally, many of these schoolteachers were wedded to the old ways, in which the teacher feeds information to students. Now it seemed that increasing numbers of teachers had received training in the whole-language philosophy and they had thus been prepared to listen to LVA's ideas for a more learner-centered curriculum. LVA feels that such shifts are in keeping with LVA's founding principles of providing tutors with the best tools possible. In this case, learner-centered instructional methodologies have been officially recognized as effective tools.

Other Literacy Providers. There is little evidence that participatory learning has caught on in any significant way in other segments of the literacy field. However, workplace literacy efforts have at once shown real promise and presented significant obstacles for advocates of a participatory approach.

As workplace literacy became a focus of attention during the late 1980s, claims were made that employers wanted workers who could apply basic reading, writing, and math skills to real-life problems; think critically and take initiative to solve problems; and work in teams—all key elements of the kinds of participatory thinking cited in Chapter Two of this volume. Widely circulated manuals (Business Council for Effective Literacy, 1987; U.S. Department of Education, 1988; Sticht, 1987) and reports (*A Job to Be Done,* 1987; Carnevale, Gainer, and Meltzer, 1988; Petrini, 1989) on workplace literacy proposed the contextualized learning approach as a solution to these workplace needs. A minority of workplace programs—including the programs described in Chapters Four and Seven—took these principles to heart and involved learners in developing worker-centered curricula based on interests taken from their workplaces and lives.

However, at the field level most workplace literacy programs appeared to consist of traditional basic skills programs applied in a workplace setting. The fact that a contextualized approach was not being used was often due to a lack of professional and other resources required to tailor a program to the situation of particular workers. However, in some cases, textbook, software, and video manufacturers used their marketing clout to promote their own decontextualized approaches to employers looking for a quick solution for their employees' basic skills problems.

Thus, while the interest in workplace literacy provided an opportunity to investigate at least some principles of the participatory approach, the resources needed to translate the discussions into creation of participatory practice were often lacking.

Support Institutions

Support institutions are organizations in the literacy field that supply literacy providers with various kinds of resources. These organizations provide the field with planning and coordination, funding and in-kind assistance, research and evaluation, public awareness, and training and instructional materials. Except for the support from the MacArthur Foundation, Lutheran Church Women, Sidney Sheldon, and workplace literacy research cited earlier, there is limited evidence that support institutions have a significant, ongoing interest in developing the participatory approach.

For example, a few national, state, and local coalitions have learners on their boards, or put the topic of student involvement on their list of issues to be discussed, or hosted student-recognition events. Similarly, some public awareness campaigns have had students provide personal testimonials. A few national, state, and local coalitions have allowed learners to discuss student issues and make recommendations to literacy policy makers.

Funding sources likewise provided limited support for student newsletters and anthologies, support groups, and student conferences. The U.S. Department of Education's National Diffusion Network funded Bronx Educational Services to disseminate its community-based model nationwide. Federal VISTA funds enabled outstanding literacy students to stay on in their programs as paraprofessional staff. The research community has developed some learner-centered assessment tools like the University of Pennsylvania's ALEP project (see Chapter Six) and the California State Library's CALPEP project. A few university-based adult education programs have established courses for practitioners interested in developing their participatory thinking and practice. Within the publishing world, a few companies have published the kinds of theoretical works cited in Chapter Two, but the use of these works tends to be confined to university-level education courses. With its *ESL for Action* (Auerbach and Wallerstein, 1987), Addison-Wesley was one of the few commercial publishers providing literacy practitioners with learner-centered instructional tools. World Education, with its *Focus on Basics Newsletter* (World Education, 1987-89), and an underground of participatory-minded programs occasionally produced learner-centered teachers' guides and learner-written reading materials, but these texts had limited circulation within the literacy field.

Conclusion

At the close of the 1980s, supporters of the participatory approach can point to growth in learner-centered activity not only among social-change-oriented CBOs but among some mainstream programs and support institutions as well. In fact, a few mainstream groups have jettisoned

traditional approaches entirely and taken on new identities as participatory programs. But these positive examples of programs in transition are exceptions in the literacy field.

More commonly, attention and resources continued to be devoted to traditional thinking and practice, whether packaged as workbooks or in high-tech formats. Participatory educators thus have reason to be both encouraged and discouraged as they look ahead to the new decade.

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