A national literacy effort built on participatory principles will require study of existing learner-centered theory and practice, resource development, research and development, training and networking, and careful planning.

What Needs to Be Done to Build Participatory Alternatives

Paul Jurmo

Those who are interested in building a participatory approach to literacy education in the United States have solid foundation stones with which to work. These building blocks consist of the considerable theoretical and practical work that thoughtful and committed researchers, practitioners, and learners have already carried out.

But these building blocks have not yet been joined together to form a solid foundation for an effective national movement. Participatory theory and practice remain scattered and isolated across the literacy field.

And to further complicate matters, the literacy field is itself not very solid. With its limited vision and resources, it is an unstable environment

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in which to work. This instability discourages anyone attempting to develop a sustained, unified effort within the field.

So, for those with a participatory perspective, a key question remains: What needs to be done to build participatory education as a real force in the adult literacy field? More than fifty supporters of the approach were presented with that question. The recommendations that follow are built on their responses and on the evidence cited in the previous chapters.

Recommendation 1: Form Study Teams

Practitioners, learners, and others who are interested in building a participatory alternative in the literacy field should develop study teams of like-minded people from their own programs and perhaps from other programs. Team members can pool their resources to carry out the thinking and action that will be needed. The teams can also build the morale and group identity needed to sustain the effort through the long and complex process ahead.

Recommendation 2: Build Bridges to Develop a Deeper Understanding of Participatory Literacy Education

Without an understanding of what is meant by participatory literacy education, it is unlikely that practice will be strengthened or that the participatory approach will be a significant force in the literacy field. Those interested in developing such an understanding need to find the time to examine their own thinking vis-à-vis participatory education as well as the thinking of others. For example, the research described in earlier chapters should be widely discussed and analyzed. The levels of learner participation should be understood, and the arguments that support active learner involvement should be studied carefully.

For example, the efficiency argument generally comes from whole-language work done at the school level and from contextualized work done in the workplace segment of the adult literacy field. As such, the valuable theory and practice developed in these areas have generally been isolated from most adult literacy practitioners and policy makers. To allow this valuable research to be disseminated in the adult literacy field as a whole, new training opportunities must be created. But at the same time efficiency advocates should recognize that personal and social issues also have an impact on student learning.

Humanistic education has developed methods for group learning and brainstorming and other means of enhancing learners' self-confidence, social skills, and problem solving. These methods could be of great use to those looking for practical techniques for getting students involved in the learning process.

At the same time, personal development advocates should consider the social-change argument that collective action is necessary to change the conditions shaping the learner's life. Personal development supporters—especially those whose background in reading and writing instruction is limited—might also expand their literacy instruction abilities through study of work done by whole-language supporters.

Although social-change supporters are vocal in their calls for support for the participatory approach, they often remain aloof from the rest of the literacy field. The cause of this aloofness varies from individual to individual. But it is likely to be due to some combination of burnout, despair, cynicism, elitism, and lack of time or to the rational conclusion that outreach to other groups drains resources away from more immediate needs. Whatever the cause, this aloofness prevents social-change advocates from learning from the thinking and practice of others. It also prevents social-change supporters from winning converts to the social-change position and thereby continues to limit social-change efforts to a few widely cited but isolated programs and writers.

To remedy this situation, social-change advocates need to broaden the range of theoretical work that they study. And they need to make concerted efforts to reach out to others who do not fully understand or support the social-change position but who might nonetheless be sympathetic to the basic notion of active roles for learners.

No single, unified theory will emerge from this process of communication among proponents of the various perspectives on active learner participation. What should instead be the goal is for all interested parties to develop their own understanding of the purposes that a participatory approach can serve. By so doing, they might discover new allies and new tools.

Recommendation 3: Beware of Contextual Constraints

Participatory efforts operate in larger contexts that are not generally supportive of the idea that illiterate adults are capable of exercising power. Advocates of a participatory approach must be prepared to deal constructively with political constraints, demands for accountability, and economic constraints.

Political Constraints. Advocates of participatory literacy must understand how power is distributed in society at large and within and among literacy programs themselves and be prepared to deal with resistance to the notion of creating roles with power for low-level readers. For example, low-level readers may themselves be reluctant to take on new roles because the very notion of shaping an educational institution is foreign to them. They have grown up in a society that, notwithstanding its founding principles of democracy, does not give most people much oppor-

tunity to participate in decision making in the schools, workplaces, social services, and other major institutions that adults encounter regularly. Many learners have also had experiences in adult education programs structured in traditional ways that do not encourage participatory roles for learners. They are likely to feel bewildered—and perhaps threatened—by participatory efforts asking them to take on new responsibilities.

Even when learners are willing to take on new, more participatory roles, they may encounter resistance from fellow students or from family members, friends, or employers. These others may not be willing to accept the newly empowered learners' new identity, because it challenges familiar power relationships.

In addition, when staff open the decision-making process up to students, there might be confusion about how to manage all the suggestions and demands that begin to flood in. And the high-level decision makers who control adult education and other institutions may view a shift in control as a threat to the vested interests and the current power structure. High-level officials may move to limit the resources available to participatory programs.

Participatory programs may themselves encounter resentment and outright hostility from segments of the literacy field that see them as competitors for the scarce resources available.

To deal constructively with these political complexities, advocates of participatory literacy need to take a carrot and stick approach. The carrot can take the form of reasoned explanations of the benefits that participatory approach can produce for learners, the literacy field, communities, the economy, and the democratic process. Funders should be shown that support for effective learner-centered programs is a sound way of using their funds and that it will ultimately reflect on them in positive ways.

Participatory advocates should also pull together all their allies—learners, practitioners, community members, and others—to create a power bloc—a critical mass—of learner-centered activists. To accomplish this, advocates will have to be willing to compromise, communicate, find areas of agreement, and sometimes agree to disagree with others who nonetheless have shown an interest in learner-centered education. The resulting solidarity can, if necessary, serve as a stick that advocates of participatory approaches can use to convince unsupportive institutions of the power that these approaches represent.

Demands for Accountability. Accountability is a two-edged sword. Unreceptive funders can use it to push participatory programs toward inappropriate standards. But it can also be a tool that funders, practitioners, and learners can use to improve participatory practice.

To date, participatory programs have generally had to deal with the negative side of the accountability issue, which occurs when funders require them to use standardized reading tests, enrollment figures, and

other traditional means to measure program success. Participatory programs do not consider these assessment tools to be an appropriate means of measuring what learner-centered efforts try to accomplish. So they tend to feel that being forced to use these measures is at the least an imposition and at the worst an attempt to push them into adopting traditional literacy practices.

In some cases, learner-centered programs go along with these demands and submit their staffs and learners to standardized tests and other required reporting procedures. However, some of these programs keep records of their own based on assessments that they consider to be more useful. These measures can include informal feedback from learners, periodic review of learning contracts, observation of student involvement levels in various activities, student learning logs, and other methods developed by whole-language researchers and ethnographers.

If funders are truly interested in determining how successful literacy programs are, they need to take time to reassess what they should be funding and to work with effective programs to develop appropriate measures of program achievement. Participatory programs need to take the time to explain their instructional and assessment methods to funders as a way of helping to shape the field.

Learner-centered practitioners must also be prepared to argue their case before another group: the learners themselves. Learners invest a lot of themselves in their programs, and quite legitimately they want to be sure that their investment is well spent. Learners who have become accustomed to measuring programs by performance on standardized tests will have to be involved in discussions about the instructional and assessment methods used by participatory programs.

Economic Constraints. Both learners and practitioners who support the idea of learner participation are faced by difficult economic choices. Learners frequently need to drop out of literacy programs for financial reasons, and practitioners are faced with similar decisions. Unfortunately, few adult literacy instructors in the United States are presently paid a salary that is adequate to support a family. Literacy programs themselves generally continue to operate on shoestring budgets that barely cover their short-term basic operating expenses, let along staff training and other long-term development needs.

A major effort must be made to develop financial and other resources. Learner-centered advocates must first identify the goals that they hope to accomplish in the future and then the resources that they will need in order to achieve those goals. Basic operating costs—including equitable wages and benefits for professional staff and for learners working on staff—must be covered. Funds will also have to be available for new expenses incurred as a result of increased learner participation and for support services like daycare, transportation, and counseling. Programs

must decide how many of these activities they want to take on and prepare a budget.

Learner-centered programs must then identify potential sources of funding. Information on funders actively or potentially open to learner-centered programs can be developed from formal sources like nonprofit funding directories and from informal information networks of nonprofit agencies.

Activists must then develop short- and long-term strategies for enlisting resources from these funders. In the short term, they must submit funding proposals that have the dual aims of raising funds for effective projects and of informing funding sources about the potential in learner-centered practice. In the long run, activists must become advocates, arguing the case for a participatory approach before funders and legitimizing it as an effective alternative that deserves support. As noted in earlier chapters, learners themselves are some of the best advocates for participatory education.

Resource development goes beyond the securing of additional funds. Activists can work with community colleges, teacher training institutions, and universities, which can provide valuable research, training, and networking services. The media can provide coverage for effective participatory efforts. Publishers can prepare and disseminate theoretical and practically oriented texts for learners and practitioners. And the American public as a whole—particularly the young educated class—can provide volunteers, funding, and other forms of support. It is up to learner-centered activists to figure out ways of tapping these resources.

Recommendation 4: Institute a Research and Development System

Participatory educators need a systematic and sustained research and development system. Such a system would document and analyze participatory efforts in a way that served to guide practice, policy, and funding.

The first step toward the development of such a system would be to clarify what needs to be researched and developed. At national, state, and local levels, information about program needs can be gathered within the various segments of the field through conferences, interviews, and questionnaires. Individual programs can use meetings of learners and staff to determine whether there are special questions that the programs should be investigating for their own purposes. It is crucial for learners to play a major role in defining the research and development agenda.

A research and development effort must be based on an understanding of the considerable participatory theory and practice that already exists. Unfortunately, while some theoretical work is available in academic forms, there is little documentation of how learner-centered principles

have been put into practice. Existing theory and practice should be identified in the various segments of the literacy and research communities where they have been developed and then documented in accessible forms.

As existing and new findings are documented, the resulting information must be made available through a training, networking, and publications system that gets useful information into the hands of practitioners, policy makers, and learners. One or more clearinghouses might be established to focus on particular geographic areas, topics, or segments of the field. These clearinghouses could publish and distribute documents to interested parties.

Recommendation 5: Institute a Training and Networking System

Training activities can develop the theoretical understanding and technical skills of interested parties. They can strengthen the sense of solidarity among supporters of learner-centered education. They can serve to expand the number of supporters and thereby create a political constituency. And they can provide researchers with opportunities to gather information on needs and resources in the field for further use in research and development, training and networking activities, and publications.

This training and networking system could consist of the following formal and informal exchanges, many of which could be led by learners:

- Ongoing formal and informal training opportunities for staff, learners, and others within individual programs, which could take the forms of support groups for students and staff members in which technical and other questions were discussed and which could serve as key resources for others interested in learning about participatory practice in real program contexts
- Student and staff exchanges among programs that would have clear objectives and not consist merely of unfocused visits
- Longer-term residencies or internships for practitioners in model programs
- Teacher-in-residence programs, in which an experienced teacher worked for a period with another program
- Conferences and symposia
- Targeted training and development, especially for new programs, that included not only training sessions but ongoing supervision and consultation by master practitioners and students
- Training institutes (perhaps on a regional basis) conducted by network members, for several days at a time, with ongoing exchange and support among members
- Longer-term training for practitioners (including learners who had graduated from GED programs) at the community college and university levels

- Referral services (perhaps carried out by the research and development clearinghouse system with the aid of a computerized information system) that enabled callers to locate resource people in their geographic area or with expertise in a certain technical area
- Concise, widely distributed newsletters and other practically oriented field guides prepared by practitioners and learners dealing with a wide range of instructional and management issues.

At present, too many practitioners have only a limited understanding of a few theorists and teaching techniques developed through participation in a few workshops, by reading a few books and articles, and through trial and error at the field level. Practitioners also tend to work in isolation from one another, constantly reinventing the wheel and not building on the good learner-centered work that has already been done. This training and networking system would aim at moving the field significantly beyond its present point.

Recommendation 6: Be Prepared to Deal with Learners' and Practitioners' Personal Concerns

Learners and practitioners come to participatory programs with genuine concerns about how they will fit in. These questions are legitimate ones, stemming from previous experience in other contexts. Learner-centered activists must be prepared to work with learners and staff to respond constructively to these concerns.

Confidentiality. For many understandable reasons, learners can feel threatened by the idea of revealing their basic skills problems to others. However, participatory programs cannot succeed in an atmosphere of shame and fear. They must deal constructively with learners' fears of going public right up front in a sensitive and mature way. In individual counseling sessions, in support groups, and in other forums, learners must be given the chance to express their fears and decide for themselves how much they want to reveal of themselves at any one time.

Manipulation. Learners can be (or feel) unfairly manipulated when they get involved in new, more active roles in their programs. For example, staff or sponsoring agencies may use learners merely as window dressing at public events or give learners no more than token roles in boards of directors and other activities. Learners may also agree to participate in an activity not out of genuine interest but because they feel obliged to do so. In these cases, learners are actually involved only at the lower levels of participation shown in Figure 1 in Chapter Two.

Whether staff consciously intend this manipulation or not, learners can end up resenting the program and backing away from further opportunities for active participation. As with the issue of confidentiality, the question of manipulation must be discussed up front before activities get

under way. Learners must also be given the opportunity to speak out if they feel they are being pushed into doing things they do not want to do.

Practitioners should understand the circumstances that might push them to manipulate learners. For example, they can fall unconsciously into the trap of manipulation if they rush into activities without fully discussing the purposes and implications of the activities with the learners in advance. A participatory activity can also degenerate into manipulation if the logistical resources required for smooth operation of the activity are not in place, the activity begins to fall apart, and staff members rush in to "save" the activity while effectively taking control of the activity away from the learners involved.

In the special case of hiring learners for work within the program, programs have to negotiate equitable pay rates so that learners do not feel they are not being paid a fair wage. Learners should also not be given the impression that their active participation in program activities will necessarily lead to jobs or other benefits inside or outside the program. If learners are left with that impression and the benefits do not materialize, learners are likely to feel cheated.

Learners should also have the chance to help decide who participates in which activities. Learners then need not feel that staff are choosing their favorites for such high-status roles as public spokesperson or board member.

Leadership. Participatory education is in many ways a question of developing leadership. Through participatory activities, students have the opportunity to learn how to become stronger leaders. But leadership does not happen just because a learner joins a participatory activity. Special technical skills (such as public speaking, running meetings, handling conflicts, and preventing ego trips), a change in thinking about oneself and one's role in the world, and an ongoing commitment are all things that many students will have to develop.

A student can learn some of these skills and traits by observing others in the program and by trial and error while participating in actual activities. Programs should also consider dealing with these leadership issues directly, through training activities for both staff and students. Such activities could include personal counseling with staff members and student-to-student discussions in support groups, classroom debates, or other student forums. Programs can also use an open-enrollment system, in which veteran students are mixed with newcomers. In such an arrangement, the veterans can serve as role models, demonstrating to the newcomers what is involved in taking active roles within the program.

Programs that have not had a history of having students in leadership roles might wonder where to start. Those who have been through this process advise that programs start slowly. Inexperienced programs need to offer a variety of participatory activities to learners and thereby provide

options from which learners can choose. As activities get under way, leaders tend to emerge who in turn serve as role models for others. These experiences should be evaluated by all involved and then built upon over time. In these ways, a foundation will be established for development of student leadership.

Practitioners will also have to develop their own leadership capacities as individuals and as a force within the field.

Moral Support. Both learners and practitioners embarking on building participatory alternatives will face challenges to their personal security. Learners can feel embarrassed and intimidated by the prospect of taking on new roles. Practitioners may be branded as mavericks in the field and end up feeling isolated from others who stay with the herd.

These risk takers will need more than an occasional pat on the back. For example, when learners emerge from an attempt to lead a group or speak to an audience, they can feel quite uncertain about how they did. When no one steps forward to reassure them or give them feedback on their performance, the learners can feel abandoned and reluctant to take the risk again.

For these reasons, well-structured counseling, support groups, self-help projects, and other mechanisms are needed to provide the sense of community and the technical guidance that learners need. Practitioners need similar structures to help them deal not only with the special demands associated with unfamiliar new learner-centered activities but with the normal stresses of any educational program setting. Staff members' salaries and benefits also need to be adequate to support their work in the program.

One added benefit of establishing student support groups: Some one-to-one programs have reported that establishing student support groups helped them make the transition to the small-group instructional format.

Commitment. A high level of commitment is required if a participatory literacy effort is to succeed. How committed we are determines how much we trust each other, how willing we are to work collaboratively, how many resources we can attract to our programs, and how strong our efforts will be.

We need to commit ourselves to the process not only in principle and spirit, but we also have to set aside the time and other resources needed for these activities to succeed. The illiteracy problem is not likely to go away soon. Even the best efforts to provide quality, equitable education to all children will continue to be weighed down by poverty, drugs, and violence. Immigration will continue to increase the pool of adults with limited basic skills. And new technologies will continue to raise the levels of literacy skills expected of citizens. At the same time, demands for literacy services are growing at a rate faster than existing, overburdened programs can meet. The need for the kinds of effective literacy

practices that participatory practices represent will thus remain with us for some time.

For all these reasons, active learner participation should be seen not as a fad that programs and support organizations jump onto this year and then abandon for another gimmick next year. It is a principle that should permeate the work of committed activists on an ongoing, constant basis.

Conclusion

The preceding recommendations represent a tall order for those who want to build the participatory approach as a significant force in the literacy field. We are asked to pull together, study existing theory and practice, beware of contextual constraints, find resources to work with, establish research and development and training and networking systems, and attend to the personal needs of learners and practitioners.

Fortunately, we are not starting from scratch. Learners and practitioners have already done a good amount of work, and there are clear signs of growing interest.

We invite others to join us in creating a political constituency for learner-centered education. We will persevere because we have seen what a more efficient, human, and democratic form of education can accomplish for us all.

Reference

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