Adult Basic EDUCATION

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An Interdisciplinary Journal for Adult Literacy Educators

Exploring the Middle Ground: Literacy as Growth

Adult Basic Education Journal Spring 2002 Vol. 12 # 1, 34-58

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Abstract

This essay examines John Dewey's concept of "growth" as offering a fruitful angle of vision by which to mediate the pedagogy and politics of adult literacy education, particularly within the context of normative settings of adult basic education classes and volunteer literacy programs within contemporary U.S. society. That is, his philosophy of pragmatism may be viewed as a symbolic midway point between structural-functional views of literacy linked to the stabilization of the status quo and more radical Freirian variants that seek substantial transformation of the social order. Dewey succinctly defines growth as the enhancement of living experience through the exercise of critical thought and reflective action. For Dewey (1938), such growth is continuous as long as life endures. Thus, experience is not an end. Rather, "every experience should do something to prepare a person for later experiences of a deeper and more expansive quality" (p. 47). Such "growth," or "reconstruction of experience" (ibid.) contributes both to personal fulfillment, and in a collective sense, *toward* democracy wherein "free social inquiry is indissolubly wedded to the art of full and free communication" Dewey, 1927, p. 134).

> If education is growth, it must progressively realize present possibilities, and thus make individuals better fitted to cope with later requirements. Growth is not something which is completed in odd moments; it is a continuous leading into the future (Dewey, 1916a, p. 56).

> Each of us knows, for example, some mechanic of ordinary native capacity who is intelligent within the matters of his calling. He has lived in an environment in which the cumulative intelligence of a multitude of cooperating individuals is embodied, and by the use of his native capacities he makes some phase of this intelligence his own. Given a social medium in whose institutions the available knowledge, ideas and art of humanity were incarnate, and the average individual would rise to undreamed of heights of social and political intelligence (Dewey, 1935/1991, pp. 72-73).

Overview

This essay draws extensively on the ideas of educational and social philosopher John Dewey, primarily his concept of "growth." The "middle-ground" thesis of adult literacy education argued for in this essay is based on the pragmatic intellectual tradition of the early twentieth century, of which Dewey was one of its major proponents along

with Charles S. Peirce, William James, and George H. Mead. Despite their divergent emphases, pragmatists argue that social reality is constructed and "truth" emerges in the process of such construction. In short, pragmatists "get insights into whether our beliefs work by acting on them and observing the consequences" (Cherryholmes, 1999, p. 44).

The belief that human beings have the capacity, at least in part, to chart their future is a philosophy well suited to the optimistic temper of the American imagination despite the reality of enduring social institutions and cultural patterns to resist significant change. Recent times have been marked by a substantial neo-pragmatic revival, including an explosion of contemporary Dewey studies linked to philosophy (Rorty, 1982), political ideology (Bernstein, 1986; Festenstein, 1997), culture (Gunn, 1987), logic, (Burke, 1997), aesthetics (Alexander, 1987; Shusterman, 1992, 1997), technology (Hickman, 1992), and education, (Garrison, 1997). This essay draws on this rich intellectual work to bring a postmodern, neo-pragmatic Deweyan perspective to adult literacy studies.

Postmodernism is sometimes linked with deconstructionism, which is one of its major manifestations. The aspect that I draw upon to frame my neo-pragmatic argument is what Kegan (1994) refers to as postmodernism in the reconstructive mode "that seeks to reelaborate and reappropriate modernist categories (such as reason, freedom, equity, rights, self-determination) on less absolutistic grounds" (p. 324). At the basis of postmodern thought is the assumption that there is nothing foundational or intrinsic "beneath" or "above" human history, experience, and, culture to provide an overarching direction or teleology. The pragmatic impetus is one such force operating within history as a powerful cultural embodiment of the American imagination. I draw on this strand of

American culture, particularly through Dewey's concept of "growth" as providing a fruitful angle of vision between the radical critical perspective of Paulo Freire and more normative interpretations of adult literacy linked to the buttressing of the post-industrial society and global economy via what Graff (1979) refers to as "the literacy myth." To this I posit Dewey's gradualism of working from the present toward a more reconstructive political culture stemming from a certain idealistic strain, linked to a 20th century version of Jeffersonian democracy—clearly a reformist rather than radical political ideology (Dewey, 1930).

Because of the specter that there may be no "solution" to the politics of literacy that mediates justice, equity, and power, my embrace of pragmatism sometimes seems illusory to me. Nonetheless, I draw on this thought as a grounding article of faith that this tradition speaks most compellingly, however faintly at times, to both the opportunities and constraints inherent within the political culture of the United States. I ground this faith in pragmatism from where it sprang. This is the American reform tradition of the early 20th century which requires perpetual reconstruction in light of new experience that nonetheless sets out the broad contours that mediate the relationship between change and continuity in a social culture that contains significant progressive and conservative forces. As new left scholars have pointed out so well, historically, such meliorism has thus far failed in coming even close to realizing the inclusive, egalitarian vision of American democracy; what Dewey (1927) refers to as "the Great Community." This critique of the mainstream is vital to the political culture of the nation and as *theory* is compelling in many respects. Deweyan pragmatism has had but marginal impact on the broader stream of American politics and social policy.

Yet, the radical critique, too, is a historically failed tradition on having lasting, profound impact on society, notwithstanding its energies in informing such movements as feminism, Afrocentricism, the labor movement, and engendering a greater respect for pluralism and equality in the public square (Diggins, 1992). Any "emancipatory" ideology that has had significant influence on the American political culture, therefore, has had to come to terms with the reform tradition and has exercised little choice but to compromise its radical edge in order to enjoy sustained social influence.

The extent to which such political pragmatism leads to life enhancement, for whom, and at what costs to individuals, specific social groups and the body politic is an open issue that can only be worked out historically. For Dewey's concept of growth as a middle ground thesis argued for in this essay, is enmeshed within the struggle for meaning and direction in search of a viable pedagogy for our times in an era where certainties have vanished. Nonetheless, I perceive within the American pragmatic, reform tradition some potentiality that resonates more compellingly than either structural-functionalism or various strands of radical opposition, with both the constraints and opportunities inherent within the political culture of the United States at the beginning of the 21st century. For this reason I argue that it requires at this time at least as much of a hearing as social theories based on various European ideologies that have exerted such a profound impact on the intellectual and social history of the United States in the twentieth century.

As an open social philosophy the neo-pragmatic perspective argued for in this essay is subject to continuous revisability particularly in an ongoing dialogue with the school of critical pedagogy, more sophisticated variants of functional literacy (Sticht,

1997), and the National Institute for Literacy's Equipped for the Future (EFF) project (Stein, 1995, 1997). This essay is most closely linked with the ethnographic work of Fingeret and Drennon (1997) and Merrifield, Bingman, Hemphill, and Bennett deMarrais (1997), but brings an additional theoretical focus through a concentrated engagement with Dewey.

The "middle-ground" thesis focuses on pedagogy and the politics of literacy linked broadly to a meliorative reform impetus rather than an embrace either of transformative radical change or merely the stabilization of any given status quo. Thus stated, transformative-like energies are sometimes required to bring about even "modest" reform initiatives that may profoundly matter to affected individuals even though such "reconstruction" from a more macro perspective may seem little more than a benign reinforcement of given social patterns and cultural norms.

One of the central points of this essay is that despite the many constraints, normative institutions, such as adult literacy programs are open to a wide range of development that sometimes significantly matter to those who act within them. This is so even though such change often results in little or no fundamental transformation of the social order and also reinforces the many ambiguities over such issues as equity, social justice, and power that remain embedded within the status quo. This is not meant to deny the possibility of change or the perception of enhanced life emerging adult literacy students sometimes experience as they increase their mastery of literacy and apply it to critical areas of their lives (Fingeret and Drennon, 1997). Such development is what I am referring to as growth. However, this takes place within a constrained political environment that invariably, though in no lockstep fashion influences the learning

climates in which adult literacy education is practiced, particularly in mainstream settings like Adult Basic Education classrooms and community-based volunteer tutoring sessions.

Most adult literacy students seek inclusion or assimilation in a manner that they can internalize, into the dominant fabric of American social and institutional life rather than radical transformation of the social order (Beder and Valentine, 1990; Fingeret and Drennon, 1997; Demetrion, 1998). While stabilizing of the social order in fundamental respects, the attainment of such inclusion in substantially significant numbers could contribute to an enhanced humanization of institutions and social life synonymous with modest reform within the context of liberal capitalism. The neo-pragmatic challenge is to work within and to enhance that space even while, at times, drawing on radical-like discourse in order to help push reformist energies further than they might extend without such language. Dewey's concept of growth is an important aspect of this neo-pragmatic project.

The "Literacy Myth"

I build in part on the "literacy myth," a phrase I appropriate from the historian of literacy Harvey Graff (1979) but give a more benign twist through which I mediate Dewey's concept of "growth." Based on James' (1896, cited in Wilshires, 1984) concept of a "live hypothesis" the belief that literacy is a positive good in producing tangible outcomes of a life transforming nature, serves as a powerful source of motivation in stimulating program participation among adult literacy students (Fingeret and Drennon, 1997). The gap between the promise and the reality of literacy, though, is not always or easily bridged, particularly when linked to the quest for economic or social mobility. In a nineteenth-century study of illiteracy, Graff pointed out the many

disparities between the promise of literacy on the one hand to the prospect of social and vocational impact on the other hand. According to Graff:

> ...systematic patterns of inequality and stratification—by origins, class, sex, race, and age—were deep and pervasive, and relatively unaltered by the influence of literacy. The social hierarchy..., even by mid-century in the modernizing urban areas, was ordered more by the dominance of social ascription than by the acquisition of new, achieved characteristics (1979, p. xviii).

Through his extensive documentation of the disparities between the promise and the social reality, Graff debunks what he characterizes as "the literacy myth" at least as it applied to the nineteenth-century North American city.

Such debunking extends into the contemporary era given the continuing gap between the promise and reality. According to B. Allan Quigley (1990), such myths, which more often serve the policy needs of government than even the *perceived* needs of potential adult literacy learners, have been pervasive within literacy campaigns of the twentieth century. Presidential goals such as "eliminating illiteracy by 2000" intensify a "crisis" mentality which reinforces the myth that literacy in itself represents a major solution to a wide range of complex personal and social problems. There is more rhetoric than insight on the depiction of illiteracy in the popular press, which is inundated with statistics, dire forecasts, and stirring anecdotes of individuals overcoming illiteracy, pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps.

Such a belief also serves as a rhetorical function among the major literacy agencies, particularly in public settings laced with stirring anecdotes of students overcoming personal and social adversity in the realization of their version of the American Dream through literacy and second language acquisition (Quigley, 1997). The rhetoric provides a sense of direction and hope both among students and the broader

constituency that supports adult literacy against what is, in effect, an intractable social problem. Yet without radical restructuring of the socio-economic life of the United States and of its profoundly anti-intellectual culture, high levels of illiteracy will likely remain pervasive as both symptom and partial cause of the deep chasm separating the haves and have nots. Paulo Freire (1985) argues persuasively in a similar vein that the Third World has become internalized within the urban sectors of the United States (p. 188).

Notwithstanding this critique, I perceive a more viable appropriation of the literacy myth in the attainment of certain "life improvements" among those who persist with their efforts. The almost elusive quality of self-esteem has emerged as a major benefit as identified in many studies of adult literacy education. Also, students achieve specific, concrete objectives such as obtaining a driver's license or a better job, developing communication skills, learning how to learn in a formal, school-based way, and entering into more advanced adult education programs. For the individuals concerned, these represent tangible, though perhaps limited and ambiguous outcomes. Their value usually depends on how such attainments lead to other "life improvements" which may be influenced by forces beyond their control and well beyond the literacy program to determine.

While sometimes illusory and therefore ambiguous in its long-range impact, such vision as encapsulated in the 'literacy myth" plays an important potential role in constructing new realities and new possibilities through the commitment to literacy that would not otherwise likely come into place. As Fingeret and Drennon (1997) put it, "[s]tudents who make deep and pervasive changes in their literacy practices and in their

identities as literate people interact increasingly with other literate persons in diverse social and cultural settings" (p.96). In a print-based society the ability to read and write represent important cultural capital in negotiating critical social and psychological space, whether at home, work, the community, or in the more interior zone of the self. However modest from both the more ambitious aspirations identified in certain policy studies and among students themselves, the impact remains profound for many of the students who participate in adult literacy programs for sustained periods of time. This is the case even as such participation short of GED attainment does not typically result in significant social and economic mobility beyond the current status of adult literacy learners. Student-generated texts are replete with insight on the many life improvements both tangible and intangible gained through adult literacy education. The following student reflection is but one concrete representation of such "growth:"

> What I have learned here has helped me to move around a lot, to go places by car because I can read the signs that I could not read before and find streets. At first I could not read the road signs, my own street names and stuff like that. Now I can read the street names.
>
> When I drive, if I go on the highway, if I go to Massachusetts, I have to know where the exit is. You have to know where you're going. If somebody writes it down for me, it is easy for me to find some place. Like last week, I had to go somewhere for my aunt. I had directions and it was easy to find the place. This is very important because you know where you are going. If you don't know you drive like a blind man (Demetrion and Gruner (1995, p. 38).

None of this does anything to dispel the "literacy myth" on Graff's reading, where literacy would become a vehicle to achieve upward mobility. Yet in both their tangible and more intangible manifestations reflections like the above point to important development, or valued "middle-ground," as depicted in a wide body of literature that such accomplishments signify in terms of life enhancement (Beder and Valentine, 1990;

Fingeret and Dannin, 1991; Fingeret and Drennon, 1997; Eberle and Robinson, 1980; Merrifield, Bingman, Hemphill, and Bennett deMarris, 1997). In this case, such growth as depicted above, led to more substantial change as this student sustained regular continuity between his ongoing literacy development and the mastery of critical life tasks and situations (Demetrion, 2000), what Fingeret and Drennon (1997) refer to as "intensive continuing interaction" (p. 82).

Such growth represented the culmination of a long process of emergent literacy that enabled this student to read road signs and to navigate himself around a larger geographical area. The incipient progress discussed by this student is an early, but an essential stage both in the development of literacy and the establishment of an identity as a literate person, what Fingeret and Drennon refer to as "problem solving and seeking educational opportunities" (p.75). This takes place gradually with "adults' moving into an identity as literate persons, with literacy practices integrated into their lives" (p. 85). Growth results when students are able to move along the continuum at varying stages in the development from a non-literate to a literate identity. Dewey (1916a) refers to this as "progressively realiz[ing] present possibilities …[which] make individuals better fitted to cope with later requirements." This is not simply episodic development, but, rather, "a continuous leading into the future" (p. 56). What makes the literacy myth more empowering than not is the extent to which literacy plays an important role in the attainment of substantial life achievements even if the result is not the transformation of the social order or even significant social mobility for the participating individuals. What Fingeret and Drennon refer to as "Literacy for Life" is synonymous with the Deweyan concept of growth. Both represent a pragmatic middle ground between structural-

functional and radically transformative interpretations of adult literacy education, where hope and ambiguity are variously intermingled as individuals construct emergent literacy identities through a long process of development.

Dewey's Concept of Growth

John Dewey (1859-1952), one of the most comprehensive philosophers that the United States has ever produced, wrote for 60 years on psychology, ethics, politics, religion, art, formal philosophy, and education. He was profoundly perplexed by the fragmentation of an increasingly industrialized nation marked by wide social chasms in matters of race, ethnicity, and class distinctions. In an era dominated by mass communications through print and broadcast media, Dewey sought to elevate a civic consciousness among an enlightened public that would put the common good over that of personal interest (Dewey, 1927). Dewey held few illusions about the then current state of affairs in the 1920s. However, he maintained that even individualistic sensibilities would be inevitably marred until and unless a "new individualism" (Dewey, 1930) could be joined to that of constructing what he referred to as the Great Community from the Great Society of atomized individuals that comprised American social experience (Dewey, 1927). Dewey identified education, broadly defined as the chief vehicle for this transformation (Dewey, 1916a, 1938).

The heart of Dewey's theory of knowledge stems from an identification of a problem that bursts forth within consciousness as some disruption within the current homeostasis of a given socio-cultuural environment. Such a problem evokes an inquiry in search of resolution in order to establish a new homeostasis. Dewey called the achieved objective an ends-in-view, which in turn, would serve as means for other more

inclusive ends. For Dewey "severe thought" is the immediate instrument in moving the process of inquiry through a scientific-like methodology of fact-finding, hypothesis constructing, and experimentation (Dewey, 1925).

The movement from problem identified toward ends-in-view results in reconstruction or "growth" which Dewey (1916a) defines succinctly as the "cumulative movement of action toward a later result," (p. 41), the ends-in-view. There is much packed into this definition. What Dewey means is development toward a more desirable state through the realization of the full potentiality of each experience in a consecutive stage of development toward a particular ends-in-view. For that reason "it is imperative that every energy should be bent to making the present experience as rich and as significant as possible" (p. 56). Specifically, growth:

> …is essentially the ability to learn from experience; the power to retain from one experience something which is of avail in coping with the difficulties of a later situation. This means power to actions on the basis of the results of prior experiences, the power to *develop dispositions* (original emphasis). Without it, the acquisition of [new] habits is impossible (p. 44).

For Dewey (1938), authentic growth depends on whether development in a specific direction "promotes or retards growth in general [toward a larger aim]. Does this form of growth create conditions for further growth or does it set up conditions that shut off the person who has grown in this particular direction from the occasions, stimuli, and opportunities for continuing growth in new directions?" (p. 36).

In his vision, "every experience influences in some degree the objective conditions under which further experiences are had" (Dewey, 1938, p. 37). It was not "raw" experience that was central for Dewey, but its enhancement through critical reflection, which in turn, leads to a richer experience toward the release and fulfillment of

authentic human aspirations. “Its value can be judged only on the ground of what it moves toward and into” (p. 38). This, in turn, depends upon what Dewey characterizes as the “moving force” (p. 38) of an experience, the dynamic movement propelling the trajectory from means to ends. “Failure to take the moving force of an experience into account so as to judge and direct it on the ground of what it is moving into means disloyalty to the principle of experience itself” (p. 38). What is essential for Dewey is not an objective accounting of experience in any given time, but its pragmatic value in leading toward a fuller and richer experience. Consider the following two passages by one adult literacy student in search of such fulfillment:

> You have a variety of ideas to offer. But it takes education to bring all this out. I guess what education has done for me is to bring all of these things out of me. I may have had it from the beginning, but there never was an opportune time for it all to be brought out. I had to wait until education came into my life and opened up these things up to me, to give me more ways to express myself (Smith, Ball, Demetrion, and Michelson, 19993, p. 108).

> I think this is a big test for me. What are my limits? Right now, I’m seeking to see what that is. If I get into something that doesn’t work right, I move onto the next thing. I think that’s where I stand right now. I don’t know my limits, right now. I’m just taking anything I can grab onto and see what I can do with it (p. 109).

Cultural Critic Giles Gunn (1987) describes it this way:

> It’s not that we keep experiencing things beyond the ken of our experience; it is only that the ken of our experience keeps enlarging as we discover new ways to construe its components (p. 130).

When experience becomes particularly rich it is transformed into art, which Dewey characterizes as a “consummatory” experience that “at its height… signifies complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events” (Dewey, 1934, p. 19). Put by Deweyan scholar Alexander (1998), “[t]he great moral to be learned from the arts for Dewey is that *when ideals cease to be confined to a realm separated from our*

daily, practical experience, they can become powerful forces in teaching us to make the materials of our lives filled with meaning" (p. 6, original italics). Such experience collectivized is what Dewey meant by democracy. Dewey's concept of growth, or the enhancement of experience through critical experience and thoughtful action, has profound implications both for the pedagogy and politics of literacy linked to education as part of a broader process of socialization of individuals within a progressively humanizing culture.

A Contemporary Parallel in the Field of Adult Literacy Education

Although Fingeret and Drennon (1997) never mention Dewey, their discussion of "the spiral of change" (p.67) in moving from a non-literate to a fully literate identity shares close parallels with the concept of growth described above. Fingeret and Drennon are not making the argument of a "Great Divide" between orality and literacy as radically divergent ways of knowing, as the authors' accept the importance of oral subcultures that belie the notion "that nonreading adults are necessarily socially isolated, alienated, and inarticulate" (p.72).

Though they clearly acknowledge the importance of print literacy "in the larger literate society [where] the inability to read and write fluently defines inequality and incompetence and [where] interactions with the institutions (including media) of the larger society often result in adults with minimal literacy abilities feeling hindered and stigmatized by the limits of their literacy practice" (p. 72). There may be nothing inherent in print mastery as a superior way of knowing. Yet to the extent that nonreaders need and seek to interact with this larger literate society at the dawn of the post-industrial 21st century, the more important a literate identity becomes as an essential social practice

in mediating the challenges of living and thriving in such a society. This is especially critical where local subcultures are increasingly threatened with "internal colonization" (Habermas, 1987) by impersonal forces of bureaucracy, massification, media, and corporate consumer capitalism. In such an environment the progressive mastery of print communication becomes an important source of cultural capital that Fingeret and Drennon identify among the students they study in quest of "literacy for life."

Specifically, Fingeret and Drennon (1997) adapt a model developed by Lofland and Stark (1965) to describe "an iterative and dynamic process" of change "for how adults transform their identity as they move into [a] literate culture" (p. 65). These stages are referred to as "prolonged tension; turning point; problem solving and seeking educational opportunities; changing relationships and changing practices; and intensive continuing interaction" (p. 65).

"Prolonged tension" represents an enduring problematic state resulting from low literacy such as sense of shame or some compensatory way of dealing with life issues related to print mastery that have not become sufficiently acute to require focused attention. This typically requires a "turning point," some crisis or opportunity that precipitates an adult to consider turning to a literacy program as a way of dealing with the issue. According to the authors, "[t]he challenge of a turning point often is to turn a perceived disaster into an opportunity" (p. 74). These initial or background stages are the beginning steps of adults "in the process of making a major life transition from more oral to more literate cultural participation and identity" (p. 74), though further work is required in order to sustain such a shift. These background stages, particularly that of a "turning point," resembles Dewey's concept of consciousness as the breaking in of a

problem that disrupts the homeostasis of a given social ecology, even one characterized by "prolonged tension" that up to then has allowed one to cope, but which no longer works.

These initial stages take place *before* the individual enters the program. Once the student begins to view literacy as a way of resolving the crisis (a hypothesis in Dewey's term) continued involvement requires that the program become increasingly effective in meeting the identified and/or perhaps new needs, interests, and aspirations that emerge. Such development of progressively improving on present capabilities through education as applied within and outside the program is synonymous with Dewey's concept of growth.

Thus, once invested in the program students shift to a "problem solving and seeking educational opportunities" stage. The authors draw on Strauss (1976) to explain this stage consisting of an element of "creative bumbling:"

> The individual seizes on potential opportunities for discovering a way of transforming his life within his sociocultural and circumstantial environment. As he acts, his self-conception as a "seeker" develops and he builds up an array of seeking tactics. Upon locating a promising means of life-change, he proceeds *creatively to exploit* (original emphasis) its potentials by developing a further array of tactics…conceived here as intentional, utilitarian moves toward his goal of changing himself and his life (p. 253, cited in Fingeret and Drennon, 1997, p. 76).

Such creative bumbling shares parallels with what Dewey views as an early stage in moving from problem identified to problem resolved where a potential solution is first stumbled upon that then becomes subject to critical scrutiny through hypothesis formation and experimentation. As Dewey (1933, cited in Archanbaullt, 1964) puts it, "[j]ust because you do not know the solution of your problem, you have to grope toward it and grope in the dark or at least in an obscure light" (p. 245). Once a potential solution

is hit upon, it becomes subject to critical scrutiny through hypothesis formation and experimentation as to its viability in meeting the needs of the problem or situation. "Each step forward, each 'means' used, is a partial attainment of the 'end'" (Dewey, 1926, cited in Archebault, 1964, p. 155). That is, the goal in part is embedded in the means of achieving it. The progressive attainment of literacy is both ends and means.

Thus, as adult literacy students begin to focus on the program itself, they engage in "problem solving and seeking educational opportunities" through literacy both within and outside the program and within private and public contexts. Typically, students feel more secure initially in private situations within the program while working with their tutor and the supportive environment of the small group instructional setting. As Fingeret and Drennon (1997) put it, "[m]any students are seeking a program in which they feel valued rather than devalued, central rather than marginalized, part of a team rather than isolated" (p. 77). As confidence and competence expand students sometimes take a public role within the program through publishing their work, participating in support meetings, or advocating for the program with new tutors and other constituents. Until a certain threshold is crossed, "[s]tudents often feel stigmatized by their problems with literacy *outside* (emphasis added) the program" (p. 77) where:

> They know that they are viewed negatively by the larger social world, and often feel scared, isolated, exposed, or devalued when literacy is used in a situation. There is often less predictability outside the program, and higher levels of stress and anxiety. Students often feel the societal pressures for independent action and individual achievement keenly, and they suffer emotionally over their inability to meet those perceived demands" (p. 79).

As students continue to progress and as their confidence expands they begin to confront the literacy challenges in the outside environment. Situations feel more private when emerging literacy learners "are controlling the information being communicated about

them to others as well as the identities of those other persons" (p. 77), typically family, friends, or close associates. "Situations feel more *public* (original emphasis) when other people are involved who are not known and trusted, or when literacy use is open to the scrutiny of such persons" (p. 78), for example, when filling out a job application at a company. It is at this stage that students begin to work out problems in various social settings while continuing to learn in the school-like environment of the program.

Fingeret and Drennon next point to "changing relationships and changing practices" as adult literacy learners continue with their work and increasingly move toward the embrace of a literate identity. Changing relationships include those inside the literacy program, tutors, administrators, and fellow students (p. 78), as well as those outside the program, family members, friends, and community associates, and employers. Relationships change because through enhanced literacy, the individual begins to shift in some of his or her social roles, which requires a degree of adjustment for the individual as well as for those with whom he or she is in relationship. Whether such relationships are supportive or not of the individual's emerging literate identity, they require negotiation in order for the adult literacy learner to successfully maintain and strengthen his or her literate identity. The authors point as well to "changes in self-definition and inner confidence" (p. 79) that also influences role identity. Thus, an essential aspect of growth is the reconstruction of the self within the social setting, whether at home, work, or the community. From a Deweyan concept of "ends-in-view," what is significant is not so much the changes in themselves (though they often are significant). Rather, it is to that to which they point as "means" in the longer-term evolution of identity, where the impact of literacy results in important development both in self-perception and in role

relationships for nearer *and* longer term life planning. As Dewey (1922, cited in Hickman andAlexander, 1998) puts it, for growth or "reconstruction" to take place, "old habits must perforce need modification, no matter how good they have been" (p. 38) when meeting the challenges of a new situation.

Closely related are new social practices that often emerge with enhanced literacy. Such "[c]hange is taking place inside and outside the program simultaneously," though changes inside "provide(s) a foundation for change outside" (Fingeret and Drennon, 1997, p. 81) The authors refer to such change in social practices as boundary crossing.

> As in any social system, the boundaries change as people and situations change. Sometimes the boundary-crossings feel like major changes, such as the first time an adult actually engages in any new literacy practice outside the program. At other times boundaries are pushed, rather than crossed, as part of a process of moving on the continuum to engage in practices that are progressively more public and feel more standardized (p. 81)

Such boundary crossing is not always pleasant and at times the result is negative whether due to lack of attained skill or negative self-perception which erodes confidence and modest risk taking. Nonetheless, learners who persist in the effort to achieve enhanced literacy and who are willing to engage in literacy practices outside the program often experience positive results. "As learners become more skilled and confident, their definitions of literacy in specific situations may begin to change, their demands on their own performance may shift, and their general feeling of vulnerability in public situations may decrease" (p. 81). As the authors put it, "[e]very boundary is an opportunity for growth" (p. 81). This focus on "changing relationships and changing practices" is part of the process of personal reconstruction in the sustaining of a literate identity. In Dewey's (1916a) terms, "t]he cumulative movement of action toward a later result (the application of literacy within contexts that matter to students) is what is meant by growth" (p. 41).

Fingeret and Drennon (1997) point to “intensive continuing interaction” as the final stage in the five-stage cycle in the shift from a non-literate oral to a literate identity, a transition, the authors acknowledge, that most adult literacy learners do not fully make. For those that do, however, “[r]eading and writing become more than a set of skills or tasks practiced in a literacy program; they become tools these individuals use to bring about the quality of life they desire” (p. 83). The authors link such a shift to what Mezirow (1991, 1996) refers to as a “perspective transformation” to characterize the profound shift individuals experience when they make this transition. Intensive interaction includes extensive literacy work within the program in reading more complex narratives and being more independent in setting the instructional agenda with the tutor, and often writing extended texts of an autobiographical or of a more expository nature. A passion for learning through literacy that seems unfathomable will sometimes emerge among those who have reached this stage. One student, with whom I closely worked, put it this way:

> I see now that even though I thought all I wanted for myself was reading and writing, I wanted more than that. A lot of doors opened. When you keep feeding the brain with new ideas, knowledge about reading and writing, and other learning skills, other doors open. Whatever a student has hidden, learning can bring it out. It feel good, because when you learn something of value, you can’t take it away. Learning sets new adventures for me, new ideas, new challenges (Lestz, Demetrion, and Smith, 1994, p. 93)

Similar changes where students engage in regular literacy practices outside the program are also evident. Such practices include succeeding in advanced schooling, mastering print material at work, qualifying for and obtaining a better job, reading mail and writing correspondence. They also include reading the Bible and other religious literature, reading and understanding the newspaper, being able to fill out insurance and

medical forms, reading road signs, maps, and menus. Such practices may also include reading the *TV Guide* and other popular magazines, doing crossword puzzles, passing a written driver's test, understanding school correspondence and help their children with their school work.

While some of these practices may seem mundane, their significance can only be evaluated in light of what they mean for emerging adult learners in their quest for independence, social acceptance, and mastery of life's many challenges. Citing Stein (1995), "Adults seek to develop literacy skills in order to change what they can do, how they are perceived and how they perceive themselves in specific social and cultural contexts" (p. 10), whether at home, work, or in the community. More fundamentally:

> When adults engage in new literacy practices, they also engage in a profound process of reconstructing their definitions of normal and their relationship to the dominant culture. Once the deep sense of shame begins to abate, anxiety over performance changes as well. This facilitates moving across boundaries, from inside to outside the program, from private to public situations, and from practices that feel more flexible to those that feel more standardized. [That is, many adult literacy learners desire to do things that other people do through print communication without being viewed as 'different']. The courage to engage in intensive interaction [with print in a range of social settings] is essential to this movement" (Fingeret and Drennon, 1997, p. 86).

Dewey (1939, cited in Archembault, 1964) uses more complex language in elucidating a similar phenomenon in the process of growth from problem identified to problem resolved, the attainment of what he refers to as an "ends-in-view:"

> In the continuous temporal process of organizing activities into a co-ordinated and a co-ordinating unity, a constituent activity is both an end and a means: an end, in so far as it is temporally and relatively a close; a means, in so far as it provides a condition to be taken into account in further activity (p.106).

Literacy does not resolve all of life's problems and neither does it lead to upward mobility in substantial numbers even among those who gain the most through adult

literacy education. Yet it does open doors to new options and challenges that are as continuous as life itself. That is, literacy is a contributing factor in meeting various needs and sources of satisfaction for those who are able to draw on print communication as an important resource in life management and personal edification. It also represents an important symbolic sense of achievement in a social setting so heavily laden with print communication. Neither of these are small matters even though they do little to negate the reality of the "literacy myth" as linked to upward mobility. Yet the literacy as growth or literacy for life thesis does represent an important middle-ground that is often overlooked in the scholarly literature as well as in policy mandates that link literacy and ABE to the "functional" requirements of a post-industrial society.

A Case Presentation

Elsewhere I have discussed Dewey's concept of growth in relationship to practitioner-based inquiry (Demetrion, 2000) and have drawn upon this pragmatic philosophy in a case study analysis of three adult literacy learners (Demetrion, 20001). In this essay, I will provide an example of how student-generated texts can be reconstructed and grow in potency through multiple use in the interaction of the text, the learners, the instructor, and the broader context that shapes the learning environment.

As the Manager of Community-Based Programming at Literacy Volunteers of Greater Hartford (LVGH), I was asked to give a presentation to a group of mothers associated with the Annie Fisher Family Resource Center in North Hartford where our agency is developing a new literacy program. I did so, in part, by drawing on a wide selection of student-generated narratives that LVGH has collected over the years. Some of these materials are organized in bound volumes; other smaller collections are in the

form of booklets. They are drawn upon for instruction, tutor training, agency marketing, and to help those associated with the agency who do not directly tutor, gain an appreciation of the lives and issues adult literacy students face. They serve as archival material for the agency's history and I have drawn on these materials in my publications. Thus, in going to these materials I was drawing on the rich legacy of our agency's past in order to help expand our current work in program development. Those now anonymous writers of the early 1990s could not have known the impact that their work was still making several years later as prospective new tutors encountered such voices for the first time where their stories came alive.

Part of my work is to create curriculum materials that I develop in hard copy and also place on the internet (Demetrion, 1999). I reorganized the writings used in the presentation and turned it into a unit consisting of ten lessons titled, *Adults Speaking Their Minds on Learning How to Read and Write*. I included vocabulary work, contextual rules of grammar, and questions designed to provoke discussion and writing. As a small group tutor, I field tested these materials during the summer of 2000.

In one of our sessions we drew on the following two stories from Lesson Four, titled, *Reading for Life*:

> I started school January 20, 1988. I could not read or write but now I can read and write. My family is so happy. It's very good to learn to read and write. It's very important for you to learn to read. I wish everyone who cannot read would go to school. You must be able to do for yourself, for no one else will do anything for you today.
>
> I always wanted to learn to read the Bible. Now I can read the Bible. I don't have to ask no one to read for me, so it is very good for you to learn to read for yourself.
>
> It's not good for everyone to know what you do; so you see why you must learn to read and write. It is very important. I am just hoping that everyone can go to

> school. It is a must that you must learn to read for yourself. You know when you cannot do for yourself, it is not good. I urge everyone to go to school.
>
> *****
>
> I've been going to school for three years. And I'm ready to keep going until I can read just like I want to read. I ain't trying to finish or nothing. I just want to learn to read and write good.
>
> You never learn it all. But you learn enough to do what you want to do, though. But you can always learn something new, every day. Like I learn from you, you learn from me. It means a lot. You feel so much better when you can pick up something and read it. It's a pleasure to read all the way through something and not skip the big words. And it's a good feeling, makes you feel good to sit down and read a book.

The first question we explored were the reasons the writers identified for wanting to be able to read, including the most important reason. The group focused on the importance of independence and the concern that other people would know your business if you needed them to read your mail and help you with banking and filling out forms.

We then discussed the following question: "What would you like the American public to know about adult literacy students who are learning to read and write for the first time?" The initial response was organized in a group language experience story. This is what we said:

> We would like literacy classes to be open all day long and in the evening. Make it like a college. (One student wants to make up for lost time). We need school everyday all day long so we can improve ourselves. We have a good program now and study important subjects. We study small words, learn bigger words to make paragraphs. This helps make yourself a good citizen and to work at a good job.
>
> Some of us want our G.E.D. and that takes a lot of work. We would like more subjects, math, history, anything that's going to prepare you for your diploma.
>
> Look how many people are in jail. That costs money. Why not spend money on people who want to improve themselves? A lot of people have diplomas and they think that's all they need. You need to keep on learning and set goals for yourself. Education helps with that.

I was also tutoring a group across town and took this text to them. This is their group language experience story in response to the same question:

> When we come to the literacy program we learn a lot, we learn to write well, and feel good about ourselves. If you learn to read well you can fill out applications, get your G.E.D. and get a job. Without that you can't get anywhere. It's kind of embarrassing not being able to read.
>
> We shouldn't be put down as a low person because we can't read. You have problems, we have problems, we all have problems. We're all human. Some people can't read and write well. Some who can read and write well flash it. They say we don't know much. That's not true. Some say if you can't read you're dark (ignorant). They're wrong. But because they can read, they feel they're right.
>
> I want to be able to learn as much as I can and get my G.E.D. Then I want to be able to help others to learn to read and write and get their G.E.D.

The next day I went back to the initial group. I had given them an assignment to reflect further on the topic and to organize their thoughts for the next session. They commented with the following:

> Students are learning to read for the first time. It gives us a lot of courage to come to school. So if we can come to school everyday like they do at ordinary schools, we will learn just like other students. Or if we can come to school at least three times a week, that would be good.
>
> When I come to class they break groups to their level of reading and comprehension. You build up your words every time you learn new words. This helps me to read a newspaper and understand what I'm reading. When I concentrate on what I'm reading, I get more understanding. Then I enjoy what I'm reading. I enjoy my reading more.

I then introduced what the other group had said and the class concluded its work with these final reflections:

> We couldn't read and write, then we came to school and improved ourselves. When we go to the doctor, we can fill out the forms. We can read safety and road signs. You learn a lot about how you live. You learn how to fix things. You can follow instructions. You can read a newspaper and know what's going on in society. Even though we don't read the whole newspaper, we can read part of it. I feel good about it. If I go to the pharmacy for medicine I know what to buy.

> When you clean and put chemicals together you have to know what can go together and how much to mix. If you put ammonia and bleach together, you better get out of the room. It takes up the air. You can't breathe.
>
> So far, coming to school, I've learned to read and write a little. I went to New York to spend a weekend with my brother and had to take a train. I was able to read a schedule and I found my way. I felt proud about myself.

The following observations about another program would be an appropriate representation of what these two groups of students said:

> *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* (Original emphasis, Fingeret and Danin, 1991, p. 45).

I put all of these materials together in a single document titled, *A Sample Lesson*, which is now incorporated into our tutor training. Its purpose is to illustrate how student-generated texts evolve and expand through interaction among students, instructors, and the broader social context that informs adult literacy education in program like ours. This new document will also be shared with other students that will await other responses, yet untold. Many such other responses will emerge from additional training and tutoring sessions as part of a broader quest to make sense of the experience of adult literacy education from the perspective of students themselves. As put by Dewey (1916a):

> The essential idea…of education as continuous reconstruction…is that it identifies the end (the result) and the process….It means that experience as an active process occupies time and its later period completes its earlier portion; it brings to light connections involved, but hitherto unperceived. The later overcome thus reveals the meaning of the earlier, while experience as a whole establishes a bent or disposition toward the things possessing the meaning. Every such continuous experience or activity is educative, and all education resides in having such experiences" (p. 78).

Continuous reconstruction of learning through the dynamic interaction of the text, the students, the instructor, and the social context is an achievable accomplishment in an

adult literacy setting where instructional materials are viewed as tools rather than as ends. "[T]he question is how well they do their work, and how they can be reshaped to do it better" (Dewey, 1916b, p. 56) in order to achieve the ends-in-view, highly significant learning as defined by the participants in a particular learning context, especially, but not exclusively, the students themselves.

Exploring the Middle Ground

As an adult literacy practitioner and scholar, I have primarily turned to Dewey for interpretative insight rather than to Freire (1970), Auerbach (1992), Fingeret and Jurmo (1989), Chisman (1989, 1990), Sticht (1997), or Fingeret and Drennon (1997), though, as indicated, I share a close affinity with the latter. Nonetheless, in various direct and indirect ways my work encounters these authors sometimes in dialogue, sometimes in a more confrontative stance. What compels me to Dewey is the philosophy of experience that pervades his work, particularly his quest to grasp "the intellectual content of experiences" (Dewey, 1938, p. 86). As stated in arguably his most profound treatise, *Experience and Nature*:

> Thus there is here supplied, I think, a first rate test of the value of any philosophy which is offered us: Does it end in conclusions which, when they are referred back to ordinary life-experiences and their predicaments, render them more significant, more luminous to us, and make our dealings with them more fruitful? Or does it terminate in rendering the things of ordinary experience more opaque than they were before, and in depriving them of having in "reality" even the significance they had previously seemed to have? (Dewey, 1925, p. 7).

This desire to create an "intellectual organization…worked out on the ground of experience" (Dewey, 1938, p. 85) has been one of my most consuming passions in the field of adult literacy education. Such an ambition is congruent with my broader life search for meaning making, a quest shared by many adult literacy students who express

their own search for meaning through idioms and outlooks of their own. Dewey's philosophy of growth based not merely on the desire to grasp, but to reconstruct experience, is an essential aspect of this quest.

A related factor also draws me to Dewey. Notwithstanding certain radical pronouncements within Dewey's large body of work, his pragmatic philosophy may be more appropriately understood as a form of meliorism or gradualism moving from the given to what is possible to construct within the context of concrete historical time. This project shares close affinities to the developmental perspective of literacy scholar Myron C. Tuman (1987). Specifically, Tuman draws on the French psychologist, Piaget in identifying psychological, social, and cultural tensions between the forces of "*accommodation*-wherein we alter ourselves so that we conform to the demands of the world" and to "the principle of *assimilation*-wherein we attempt to change the world either in thought or reality to conform to our wishes" (original emphases, p. 79). Adopting a reformist impetus, Tuman seeks a "progressive deepening" of both tendencies by making accommodation "increasingly deliberate" and assimilation "increasingly constructive" (p. 80) within the context of what is feasible among the subjects of a particular time and place in a given historical context.

This perspective contrasts with the critical pedagogy of Freire (1970), for example who begins with a utopian vision of human liberation which then requires tempered *strategies* in response to concrete historical conditions. While I view Freire's vision as an important utopian boundary grounded in unrealized ideals of freedom, liberty, and social inclusiveness, I interpret Dewey's democratic ideal for "full and free communication" leading to "the fullest possible realization of human potentialities"

(Dewey, 1939/1989, p. 100) a nearer term utopian project. Rather than "liberation" as an ultimate value, Dewey sought "reconstruction" or growth by building on what he viewed as an open national identity in an effort to draw out the untapped potential of Jeffersonian democracy through the "new individualism" (Dewey, 1930) of the twentieth-century. More specifically, he sought the idealization of the American political culture through individual and communal fulfillment as the "moving force" of freedom, the founding value of this nation's history embedded in the ideology of the American Revolution on his interpretation (Dewey, 1938/1989, pp. 45-48).

Thus, in his vision of democracy, Dewey's political philosophy represents the outer perimeter of the idealism of American society and culture premised on its founding myths. His concept of "growth" as the enhancement of experience (its reconstruction) through critical reflection and thoughtful practice served for him as the pedagogical dynamic by which to progressively move toward the idealization of society that he would refer to as democracy. In his vision individual selves are most realized when they are linked in community for the enhancement of society and culture. Dewey also stressed the importance of the voluntary ethos to American democracy. He pointed to:

> [t]he liberation of individual potentialities, the evocation of personal and voluntary associated energies....Our faith is ultimately in individuals and their potentialities. In saying this I do not mean what is sometimes called individualism as opposed to association. I mean rather an individuality that operates in and through voluntary associations. If our outward scene is one of externally imposed organizations, behind and beneath there is working the force of liberated individualities, experimenting in their own ways to find and realize their own ends (Dewey, 1928, cited in Hickman and Alexander, Volume 1, 1998, p. 322).

As an interpretive ideal based upon James' "live hypothesis," I find much in his vision of individual and collective self-realization linked to the most basic myths of

American society and culture, of freedom, local community, and the imagery of the open road. In his words, "[l]iberty is that secure release and fulfillment of personal potentialities which take place only in rich and manifold association with others; the power to be an individualized self making a distinctive contribution and enjoyment in its own way the fruits of association" (Dewey, 1927, p. 150). Dewey realized there was no inevitable movement toward such a trajectory, but he did view it as the representation of the most fruitful of national ideals, of what the fulfillment of American democracy *would* be like if allowed to realize its "full" potential.

Such myths, grounded in Dewey's vision of growth, are believed by many adult literacy students and fit as well with Fingeret's and Drennon's concept of "literacy for life." They also shape much of the idealism of those many volunteers who seek to "give back" to the community for what they have received. There is much in these myths that is problematic as Graff has demonstrated in debunking any direct correlation between literacy and upward mobility. Yet Dewey's vision carries considerable resonant power in galvanizing motivation and energy to push beyond given current realities. His vision gives shape to an undetermined new social ecology that would not likely be created without the pragmatic impetus not merely to *interpret* experience but to construct and reconstruct it notwithstanding powerful constraining influences that inhibit any full flowering of Dewey's notion of growth.

In this essay I have linked Dewey's educational and political meliorism to a pragmatic trajectory of moving from the given to the potential within a political culture whose dominant ideology is that of liberalism, notwithstanding marginal radical strains of political and social thought stemming particularly from minority voices. It is within the

context of this liberal tradition, particularly in a reconstructive quest to progressively humanize it, that I locate Dewey's concept of growth as a viable alternative to structural-functionalist and Freirian variants of adult literacy education (Demetrion, 1997). Garrison (1998) defines this Deweyan space as the following:

> The aim of education is growth. To live, the student must learn to conduct successful transactions with his or her environment. To grow, the student must create novel forms of recognition and response, which he or she must then refine in ways that make them more discriminating and in ways that integrate them into his or her experience (p. 80).

While there may be "false consciousness" in this argument viewed from a Freirian perspective, there is more than merely irony in the "literacy myth" as discussed in this essay. This middle ground philosophy of literacy as growth provides a fruitful angle of vision for the field of adult literacy education by which to explore other discourse perspectives that shape the field as well as to be critically scrutinized by them.

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