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# **It Must Be Told: Stories of Hope, Dreams, and Possibility from The Open Book (Oral Histories from the NYC Adult Literacy Community)**

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**Abstract:** This study chronicled the history of The Open Book, a community based organization in NYC. In this oral history project, the co-constructors of this story analyze the successes and struggles of a grassroots literacy program through the lens of critical theory/liberatory education.

## **Introduction**

“It was just so unusual for an adult literacy program to see its job as working with a person’s soul...to start from people’s strengths rather than see students as something that needed to be fed knowledge. You know, the experience of it still feeds me up to this day.” Virginia, one of the instructors at the Open Book, a former adult literacy community based organization, in Brooklyn, New York shared these words regarding the power the Open Book experience continues to have on her even though it no longer exists and hasn’t for the last six years. John, the teacher-coordinator adds, “Many of us came into adult education because we believed in the transformative power of adult education. We believed learning to read and write had the potential to give students the skills to understand and act on their world more effectively...to act in concert with others to change the conditions of life in their communities.”

The purpose of this study was to document, through participants’ voices, in their own words, the history of an adult literacy program in NYC, rooted in participatory models. Chronicling this story is an effort to support the movement of other programs towards a sustainable dialogue centered on fostering democratic spaces and pockets of resistance within their own agencies aimed at changing adult literacy policy. The goal is not to “export” the program to the field but to contribute to a collective conversation grounded in deconstructing regimes of truth, to engage, as students and staff did at The Open Book, in a pedagogy of resisting and contesting sacred truths about mainstream literacy ...and eventually to become a field about transforming the word and the world. (Macedo, 1994). Honoring that knowledge/power was tied to communities was one of the critical cornerstones upon which this community based organization was built.

The questions guiding this research were: What principles were embedded in the practices of the Open Book? What role did the program play (or could have played) in affecting change in the lives of participants and the community? What factors have prevented the replication of programs built on the principles of the program?

## **Conceptual Perspective**

According to the 2003 National Assessment of Literacy Survey, 93 million people in the US are at either basic or below basic levels in prose or quantitative literacy. Today in America and much of the world, the politics surrounding literacy and gate keeping – who decides who reads, what they read, and for what purpose is still very much maintained and perpetuated. (Purcell-Gates, & Waterman, 2000; Macedo, 1994). Hoyles (1977) adds that history has clearly

demonstrated that when the purposes of literacy are considered too radical and threaten the status quo, active measures are taken to marginalize or abolish that threat (p.190). This study chronicled the history of a community based organization that exemplifies this.

The Open Book at its core represented a critique of the dominant ideology. Giroux (2001) states one aspect of that dominant ideology penalizes and alienates its most vulnerable ...and that literacy is neither neutral nor objective but is inscribed in the ideology of domination. In such a culture, space to address social inequities, structures of domination and multiple oppressions are obliterated. (Luttrell, 1997). Stuckey (1991) adds that the questions of literacy are essentially questions of oppression. When societies dissolve the forms of oppression against their own citizens and other societies, they will also dissolve the questions of literacy. The Open Book was located in a long history of freedom/human rights struggles with and for marginalized communities. Its philosophy was deeply impacted by Paulo Freire, Myles Horton, and other popular educators. The instructional philosophy was grounded in a development of an exchange around student ideas about what was happening in their communities and society at large. This informed the pedagogy which focused on taking what students articulated and developing themes/units around those issues.

Freire's approach (1970) essentially articulated the premise that people's collective issues were the foundation for building knowledge and skills which opened up the possibility of collective social action for change. Participatory models establish a space that honors students as producers of valuable knowledge. In this paradigm it is possible for people to realize that their circumstances are not the result of individual shortcomings but instead can be attributed to larger socio-political realities that support structuralized racism, oppression, and other inequities (Allman, 2001). This can lead to scrutinizing whose agendas and interests currently get privileged and who benefits. Heaney (2000) echoes the importance of collectivity by pointing out that in our society poor people are marginalized and ignored in a myriad of ways and the only real power they have to effect change is through numbers. Brookfield (2005; Purcell-Gates, 2000) are among those who have argued that Freire's work has tremendous relevance in an American context.

In New York City, publicly funded adult literacy programs (programs funded under the Workforce Investment Act) privilege dominant interests and agendas. Nowhere on funders' checklist is there acknowledgement that literacy education is connected in any way to social change. (Macedo, 1994). Instead, currently, adult literacy funding is intricately tied to perpetuating and maintaining a human underclass (Stuckey, 1991). By only recognizing programs' success in terms of gains students make on standardized tests, an extremely limited and deficit driven definition of literacy is being privileged. E. Peterson (personal communication, September 30, 2006) points out; the system uses numbers inappropriately to maintain itself. Freire (1970) points out that the solution is not to integrate the oppressed into the current structures of oppression but to transform that structure (p. 74).

At the Open Book, there was an understanding that literacy funding was seeped in the politics of oppression. One of the central tenets of the program was that ordinary people, as defined by the dominant culture, were valuable and collectively had the power to be agents of change both in their communities and society at large. Cecilia, a counselor in the program, says, "We're each tiny grains of sand but together we can make a beach." The program's philosophy was grounded in egalitarian visions of a more just and equitable world, where collectively people could co-create visions of what could be. In that vein, the program strove to place students at the center of both instructional and program wide policy. This effort ranged from creating structures

for students to give input to what was being studied in the classroom as well as who was hired. A culture supporting democratic learning was born and collectively nurtured in different ways throughout the program's sixteen years of existence. Students were honored as organic intellectuals who had important things to say about their worlds. Gramsci, (1971).

### **Research Design**

*There are many statues of men slaying lions, but if only the lions were sculptors there might be quite a different set of statues. Aesop n.d.* ( J. Elias, personal communication, April 24, 2003).

This study was an oral history project. Slim and Thomson (1995) point out that research which doesn't build on localized values/truths is unlikely to succeed. Instead, Thompson (2000) adds when community knowledge is recognized, there are opportunities to recover experiences of the silenced and to offer new ways of understanding the history of oppressed groups and open up important areas of inquiry. The cooperative nature of oral history has led to a radical questioning of the fundamental relationship between history and communities. This in turn has led to recognition that history need not be taken away from the community for interpretation/presentation by outsiders. Instead, communities should be writing their own history. Oral history challenges the dominant concept of credibility –What is truth? Whose truth? Who gets to tell that truth? It argues for the importance of examining history from multiple perspectives. Cecilia, a counselor in the program said, “This story is like a sand dune. It looks one way in the morning but the wind blows and it shifts during the day, looking entirely different by evening.” How the story looked depended on whose perspective was privileged and while it was almost impossible to condense 16 years of rich and textured history in a single document, the collection of conversations reflected many representative moments in the program's journey.

Participants in this project consisted of 16 people (students and staff) from the Open Book with a range in socio-economic status and race. The primary source of data collection was eleven 3 hour tape-recorded small group interviews with many participants being interviewed more than once. The setting providing the backdrop for the interviews was people's homes which added an intimacy to the words that were spoken. Since I had worked at the Open Book and was considered by many as an insider, I was always attentive and respectful to the fact that these conversations were grounded in a level of richness and complexity that was born of trust. Other sources for triangulation included relevant literature, journals, and speaking with other practitioners in the literacy community in NYC. I also had access to articles and other artifacts written by program staff and students which provided another level of depth. In developing a mind-map of major themes, I checked with the co-constructors of this story to ensure these resonated with them. During each interview, it seemed as though we had entered a portal and were collectively transported back in time, yet it wasn't really “back” because everyone was telling the history through each of their own lenses, shaped by her/his current lived realities. Participants, unwavering in their commitment and support of this study made this process a true honor and privilege.

### **Findings/Conclusions**

The Open Book was a program that strove to fashion its existence and relevance around the needs that emerged from the community of South Brooklyn where it was located. Within four walls in Brooklyn, the seeds to a counterculture were sown. The following five findings are all different but related aspects of these seeds:

### *Adult literacy represents a site for profound transformation*

Adult literacy programs offer the possibility to unpack people's histories and redefine the dominant culture's expectations imposed on them. For many students, returning to a place fraught with pain and struggle signifies a desire/quest to gain visibility, voice, autonomy and respect. Adult literacy represents an effort to rewrite one's imposed identity. The field can support democratic efforts that are intimately connected to people's hopes, dreams, and collective transformation. Hazel, a student says, "At the Open Book, we took care of each other and brought each other up. I always thought I was at the bottom of the barrel. But by the time I left the Open Book, I knew I could climb out." Edami, another student says, "The Open Book changed my whole life. I felt like I opened a door and found everything I was looking for on the other side. It was a place I could go and learn to let myself be me. There was a sense of safety and trust within the program." Antonia, a third student adds,

*I was in and out of programs for a long time. I ended up leaving because they weren't giving me what I was looking for. Most of us at the Open Book would say they didn't have someone who cared and encouraged them. We need someone to say you're not just another number passing through here; you're a human being. I think that's why the Open Book was so special. They focused on our needs and how to fill those through education. I felt like we got strength from each other... It was not just education by the book.*

In these three women's words, there is a remaking of themselves in new, more complete ways – to become authors and reject the pre-authored script imposed by the dominant culture. When students are respected and their efforts legitimized in the way they were at the Open Book, possibilities open up in how they perceive themselves and how they're perceived by others; worlds are transformed, shackles unchained.

### *Community is essential in the culture of adult literacy programs*

A second theme that emerged from people's words is the strong sense of community that was embedded within the Open Book. Cecilia, a counselor at the Open Book says, "The program was not just a place but a group of people who were interested in participating in the life of the community. Whoever came to the Open Book became part of a family and the ones that didn't get involved, they left." Virginia, an instructor adds "From the beginning, the classes were extremely intimate. I loved the emphasis on people's lives...Here students were writing their own lives. I had never been in a place where students were in charge of the atmosphere." From the very beginning, the idea that people would eventually become a family to each other was articulated.

### *Education is political*

Another theme that emerged from people's stories was that education can never be neutral. As Horton (1998) said, neutral is a codeword for the existing system...being what the system wants us to be. Everything we do/don't do or say/leave unsaid reflects a political stance whether we ourselves recognize it or not. John, the teacher-coordinator says,

*We tried to build the curriculum around the ideas and concerns that the students were raising in the classroom. In the first two years after the program started, the neighborhood where we were located was changing very fast. Landlords were letting buildings run down, trying to force tenants out. Some students were living in buildings that had all been abandoned by landlords. Still others were on the edge of homelessness. So we started studying about the housing crisis. One day Maria said, 'John, why don't we do a play? We know a lot about this.'*

This model connects the classroom with larger socio-political contexts in society and shifts the dynamic from students being further marginalized. Making space for people to tell/record their experiences becomes a powerful, political act for previously suppressed/ignored voices to be heard.

*Sharing power through decision-making supports democracy*

At the Open Book, alternative decision-making structures were put in place, affecting the flow of power in order to support people in seeing their voices and perspectives mattered. They mattered. Some of these structures included student committees (the women's group, the student teacher council) student hiring committees, retreats, and town hall meetings. John says, "This is how we work at the Open Book. When we have important decisions to make, we bring them to students. It's not always easier that way. Sometimes it would be a lot quicker to have the teachers make the decisions but we believe that in the long run, decisions we make as a community will be better ones." Earle, a student and member of the hiring committee, adds,

*At the Open Book, I was given the opportunity to be a leader... In the hiring committee, staff and students would come together and make a decision on who we thought would fit our community. I was never involved in a process like that before. Each student would ask the candidate questions, different scenarios. Once the person left, we would talk about it, compare notes, etc...I would like to encourage teachers and directors in literacy programs to listen to students. Let them drive the vehicle.*

Part of the underlying assumption of those words is that administration and students have to be fully committed to this vision if it is to have any hope at survival. However, the Open Book was operating in the midst of mainstream culture. How could it hope to withstand this dominant cultural invasion which wrapped its toxic tentacles around the pockets of hope which were being nurtured and protected?

*The interests of the field and funding policy are at war with each other*

People's words highlight the tension between practitioners and funding policy's agendas. Whose definition of education is being privileged? What is the purpose under that definition? John, in an excerpt for an article entitled Welfare and Literacy (1995) says,

*Literacy funding is primarily aimed not so much at education but at re-education, not so much at giving people the tools they need to better control their destiny...but rather to convince them that they have no choice...no matter how bad..." And later, during this project, "We live in a society that dehumanizes people so tremendously. I saw the Open Book as an effort to create an environment that in some ways was an alternative to that. But, if the field is a creation of the government, how can it be about social change.*

If literacy programs spend countless hours collecting requirements to maintain funding, where is there time to focus on the people's needs? On conversation which could subvert the status quo? Who benefits by things staying the same? This program's history is located within a larger social and political context, one that involves institutionalized economic inequities directed at stripping poor communities of color of their basic human rights and dignity.

**Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice**

For adult education to be consistent with fostering democracy/collective action, space must be made to include/listen to students' voices at every level of program planning, decision-making and policy. In addition, policy must reflect and be connected to the interests of the field.

Adult literacy programs must engage in emancipatory models of education which focus on social justice and equity. Only under such models can students become agents of change which can foster a more equitable society.

It is essential to situate adult literacy's long history within other freedom/human rights struggles that are connected to class, race, gender, and other inequities that seek to exploit, imprison, and oppress certain segments of our society. Now is no time to nurture historical amnesia or promote revisionist forms of history.

Adult literacy in large is about redefining what's possible in people's lives. Students' concerns and selves should be at the center of the program. In that vein, adult education practices must legitimize learners' lives, perspectives, discourses, and voices. For many, many students adult literacy represents a last glimmer of hope at education and at redefining what's possible in their lives and for us as a society. Writing and publishing oral histories is one way to make space for people to tell their stories in their own words. This forum honors that students have powerful things to say that demand to be heard.

Critical pedagogy (scrutinizing concepts of truth/realities as being particular, provisional and subjective by certain groups) should be explicitly connected to adult literacy instruction. This can offer an opportunity to scrutinize unseen voices/underlying agendas that are rarely visible in texts. Unpacking these concepts can lead to deconstructing issues regarding power (who benefits by status quo being maintained?) as well as students' own histories regarding schooling and issues related to self blame imposed by the dominant culture.

Engaging in emancipatory/participatory models in a sincere and committed way demands that we scrutinize our underlying assumptions so that we don't inadvertently replicate/perpetuate current power relationships rooted in paternalistic colonization (however well intentioned).

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