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Priya Darshini Kurup  
*Texas A&M University*

Merlissa C. Alfred  
*Texas A&M University*

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# Expanding Stakeholder Base: A Model for Social Value Creation through Collaboration in Workforce Literacy Development

Priya Darshini Kurup, Texas A&M University, USA  
Merlissa C. Alfred, Texas A&M University, USA

***Abstract:*** Here, we present a conceptual model for a holistic approach to workforce literacy development. In this model we argue that the adult literacy development process is influenced by multiple stakeholders – literacy providers, government agencies, businesses, and communities. Interaction and interdependence between stakeholders results in emergence of the four Es of social value creation: Expertise development, Economic development, Engagement and Empowerment.

## Introduction and Problem Statement

The benefits of a literate workforce on a nation's economy have been well documented (NCES, 1997). There are a plethora of literacy program models that strive to meet the demands of the economy; yet, program outcomes often fall short of expectations (for workplace literacy approaches and program expectations, see Jurmo, 2004). One of the challenges is that the focus is on *workplace* literacy programs respond to specific business needs by providing the basic skills necessary for job performance (Imel, 2003). Unfortunately job skills are not uniform or standardized across all workplace settings. As Askov (2004) notes, "literacy is contextual; it is not a one size fits all curriculum or list of skills" (p. 275). Given this observation, some consider the contextual customization of literacy programs as necessary for effective transfer of learning on the job (Askov & Van Horn, 1993). However, this functional-context instructional approach which focuses on developing skills and competencies specific to a work setting may limit their application in a different setting. The drawback of focusing on functional-context skills is that workers may be incompetent outside of that specific setting. Researchers have thus called for other alternative approaches to work literacy development. Wilson and Cervero (2001) argued for refocusing adult education as a means of social change. Nash (2001) advocated for a participatory approach that is rooted in the belief that the purpose of education is to "expand the ability of people to become the shapers of their worlds by analyzing the social forces that have historically limited their options" (p. 188). The link between lifelong learning, citizenship, and governance is evident, yet programs are created to develop workplace literacy rather than a literate workforce.

Programs that focus on workplace literacy have emerged out of economic pressures (Imel, 2003) as business performance is linked to workers' basic skills. According to the American Management Association (1999), many companies test their prospective employees on basic skills, but only 13% of businesses offer any form of basic literacy or remedial training. Companies invest heavily in employee training, but shy away from basic skills education for multiple reasons, including the elevated costs and resources necessary to provide such training (Bassi, 1994). This is even more apparent in present times of economic uncertainties. Therefore businesses rely on literacy providers to develop a literate workforce. However, by definition, workplace education programs are partnerships between literacy providers and employers, and are supported by government grants (Garner, 2004). Partnerships and collaborations are integral

part of literacy development. There are reports of successful collaborations in literacy practices between organizations and local nonprofit organizations (Casner-Lotto, Rosenblum, & Wright, 2009), and in general, the collaborative practices are considered as effective and practical approach to addressing adult literacy issues (Gouthro, 2009). On the other hand, partnerships and collaboration are nuclear practices. That is, collaborative practices occur in isolated localized units because programs are functional-context focused, thus ignoring the importance of cross-sector collaboration in creating social value.

Therefore the purpose of this paper is to present a conceptual model for social value creation through collaborative workforce development practices. This is accomplished by dissecting and extracting the various components in collaborative literacy practices through theoretical lens. Through collective examination and exploration of collaborative literacy practices, here we identify various components that can enhance learner experiences and lead to social value creation. We begin by exploring the theoretical orientation and frame underlying this approach, followed by detailing the various components and how their interconnectedness leads to the emergence of the elements of social value creation.

### **Theoretical Conceptualization of Workforce Literacy Development**

The influence of environmental factors and context in learning and development is noted (Bronfenbrenner, 1986, 1994; Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky's theory is foundational to many adult education curriculums practiced today. This theory is based on the premise that the socio-cultural context influences development. Here we examine the forces that influence adult learner using Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory and apply it to workforce development. In ecological theory, the learner is central in the developmental process, which is influenced by a set of complex environments. According to Bronfenbrenner (1994), the ecological environment of a developing person consists of a set of interlocking structural levels: the innermost level is (1) the *microsystem* – is the “pattern of activities, social roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person” (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; p. 39) which interacts with the immediate context such as family members or teachers; (2) the *mesosystem* – is the linkage between many settings, such as between school and workplace; (3) the *exosystem* – is the linkages or processes between settings, in which at least one context does not directly interact with the learner, but may influence him or her, such as board members, the community or social networks; (4) the *macrosystem* – consists of local norms and beliefs that steer development. It is considered the blueprint of ecological development and consists of shared values; (5) the *chronosystem* – encompasses changes over time caused by environmental events. Each of these systems plays an important role in human development.

The influence of the external systems is also evident in workforce development process, where the external systems are represented by stakeholders. Stakeholders are groups or individuals who can affect or are affected by the organization's objective (Freeman, 1984). Stakeholders usually represent a particular system or structure. For example, literacy is considered to be a universal right (UNESCO), but the responsibility of developing a literate workforce lie in adult educators, public sector entities and/or non-governmental organization. Corporations and the community as a whole also have a stake in developing a literate workforce and collaborating with multiple stakeholders is essential for workforce development. Each stakeholder group - service providers, government, business and community have their own

agenda for developing a literate workforce, but interaction and interrelationship between them can result in creating social value.

### **A Model of Social Value Creation through Stakeholder Collaboration**

Thomson, Perry and Miller (2007) define collaboration as a process in which multi-sector actors work together to create rules, structures and ways to act or decide on issues. They note, “It is a process involving shared norms and mutually beneficial interactions” (p. 25). Within the learning context, collaboration is defined as a process where knowledge is developed “through co-participating, co-cognizing, and co-problem-solving within linguistically, culturally, and academically heterogeneous groups” (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, Alvarez, & Chie, 1999). In an organization context, collaboration is defined as “a process of joint decision making among key stakeholders of a problem domain about the future of that domain” (Gray, 1989, p. 11). As used here, we define collaboration as a process problem-solving by sharing and developing mutually beneficial actions among stakeholders. Literacy literature converges to four key stakeholder groups whose shared interest lie in developing an educated workforce. They are (1) the service provider or the non-governmental organization advocating for literacy; (2) the corporation or business whose financial performance depends on employing a competent workforce; (3) the community at large which benefits from literate members; and (4) government whose economic validity depends on literate citizens.

Partnership between the each sector can yield results that are mutually beneficial. As Weiss, Anderson, and Lasker (2002) state, “when partners effectively merge their perspectives, knowledge, and skills to create synergy, they create something new and valuable” (p. 684). However when there are multiple actors in play, what and how value is created has to be agreed upon, because what may be a valuable outcome for one stakeholder may hold no relevance for the other, but each stakeholder has the potential to create social value and to benefit from it. Explained below are the stakeholders’ role and their desired outcome from a literacy program.

*Corporation/business as stakeholder:* According to Saiia and Cyphert (2003), businesses are powerful players in the “larger realm of public affairs” (p. 48), because of their ability to influence public policy and even public opinion. Their own performance is dependent at local, national or international level depends on having access to a literate workforce, thus making them a prominent stakeholder of literacy issue. Corporations expect a competent workforce that possesses the skills relevant to their operations and has the ability to adapt to new innovations and technologically advancements.

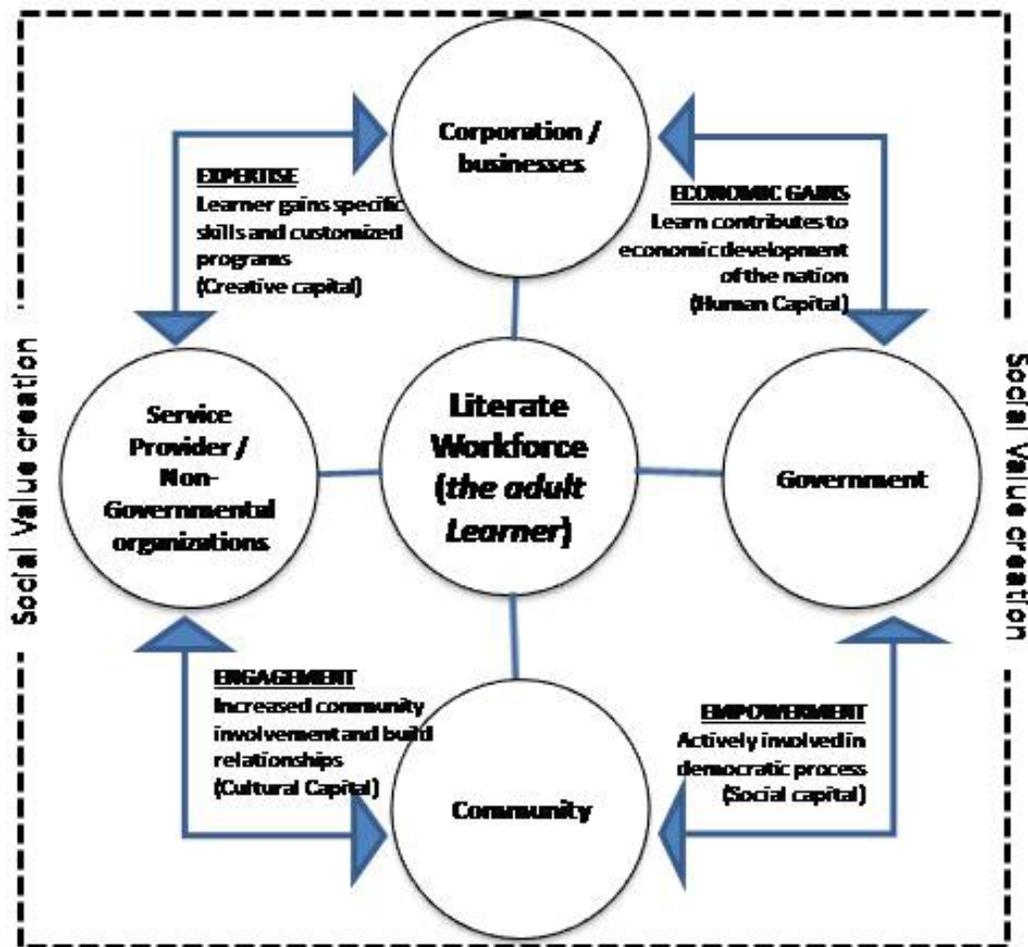
*Literacy Service Providers/Non-governmental organizations as stakeholder:* This group is held the most accountable for developing a literate workforce and raising funds to sustain the programs. They expect the learner to not only be competent but also develop critical literacy skills that help adult learners to identify the social structures that hinder their development.

*Government as stakeholder:* The government’s economic status and progress depends on a literate workforce and thus making them a critical stakeholder. They develop national level policies, provide funds and evaluate programs on a regular basis. They expect the adult learner to be empowered and add to the nation’s human capital.

*Community as stakeholder:* A community with a literate workforce is prosperous and attracts businesses. They expect the learner to be actively involved in the democratic process and community.

The collaboration between the stakeholders is not an either/or process, rather maximization of the outcome depends on their interaction and shared vision that can facilitate social value creation. Social value is broadly defined as “that which enhances well-being for the earth and its living organisms” (Brickson, 2007, p. 866). According to Lepak, Smith and Taylor (2007) value creation refers to both content and process. It is also considered as measurable streams of benefits (Burke & Logsdon, 1999). In the literacy context, the social value creation embodies development of a workforce that is competent, engaged, empowered and contributes economically to the society. Figure 1 shows how interaction between the stakeholders results in human capital, creative capital and cultural capital.

**Figure 1: Conceptual model depicting the social value creation through collaborative literacy practices**



***Emergence of Four Es: Elements of Social Value Creation***

The interaction and interdependence between the stakeholder groups is beneficial to each individual group as well as the collective whole. Together, their interaction results in outcomes that create social value as depicted in Figure 1. We call these outcomes as the elements of social value creation, as they are essential for development of literate workforce:

(1) *Expertise*: The interaction between the business entity and literacy service providers results in increased knowledge sharing, expertise and synergy by combining perspectives. As the adult learner develops additional skills, knowledge and expertise, they become part of a creative class and begin to add to the creative capital of the society (Florida, 2002).

(2) *Economic gains*: In the realm of business and government interaction, a literate workforce is an indicator of human capital. An educated workforce is an asset to an organization and contributes to the nation's economic growth.

(3) *Engagement*: The local culture and community may already hold cues for sustainable practices. Collaboration with the community helps develop the learner's knowledge and awareness necessary to appreciate, respect and evaluate cultural values and practices (Gouthro, 2009; Hawkes, 2001). This facilitates participating in and building relationships for the common good.

(4) *Empowerment*: An educated population contributes to a successful democracy. When government and community are actively involved in the literacy process, adult learners are empowered to participate in the democratic processes. For example, literacy programs that develop critical skills empower individuals to analyse communications for underlying beliefs and inherent power relations (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Street, 2003).

## Conclusion

In this paper, we have theoretically explored collaboration in literacy practices which is becoming increasingly popular. Through this exploration we have discovered that collaboration between various players can result in social value creation. Human, social, cultural and creative capital of a nation is likely to be enhanced through economic progress, shared expertise, increased civic engagement, and empowering individuals to actively participate in the democratic process. This holistic model will help find new ways of conducting research, develop programs and evaluate programs based on desired outcome for developing a literate workforce.

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