

Literacy Practitioner

Student Involvement



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“Less Teacher, More Friend”

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Both in my work in El Salvador as a literacy teacher and in Chicago as a literacy coordinator and English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher, I became keenly aware of the power inherent in my relationships with learners. Although I urged students to call me “Esther,” they frequently addressed me as “maestra” (teacher, or literally, master), making me aware of the power I held as a teacher, and denoting a sense of formality and respect – almost reverence – for authority with which I felt uncomfortable. Despite my efforts to equalize my relationships with learners, I still struggled with my role as an educator: specifically, how to use power in ways that benefited learners while strengthening my relationships with them.

To continue exploring these issues, I chose to interview an adult educator, with the intent of learning from his practice. After asking several adult education professionals whom they considered to be an exemplary teacher, I decided to interview Paul Miller of LVA Broome – Tioga in Binghamton, NY. In the interview, we explored how he characterizes his role as an educator and his relationships with adult learners, how power affects these relationships, and which strategies he uses to diminish the effects of power.

In this article, I have selected excerpts from the interview that reflect the complexities of the teacher-learner relationship. Initially stimulated by my experiences as a practitioner, this article integrates my reflections, the interview, and research related to power in the teacher-learner relationship.

How educators perceive their role influences the nature and character of their relationships with learners, and how they respond to the issues that arise. Educators may assume a variety of roles including those of expert, facilitator, friend (Collins, 1991), midwife (Belenky, Clinchy, Golderberger, & Tarule, 1997), manager, co-learner, or provocateur (Cranton, 1994). Each role reflects a distinct philosophy of education and influences the ways in which educators perceive and exercise power. For example, the teacher who views herself primarily as an “expert” may create a very hierarchical, traditional relationship between herself and learners (e.g., *she* controls the curriculum because she knows best) while one who sees himself as a “friend” may try to interact with learners as he would with peers (i.e., as *equals*), encouraging and allowing them to exercise some form of power in the relationship, for example, deciding what and how they want to learn. Paul related how he perceives his status as a teacher:

Well, I think it’s a dialogue. I don’t see my role as a conventional teacher, but it is a dialogue and that’s very important. That’s a way of building up trust and respecting your student. Respecting who they are and not being

condescending in any way just because their reading or their math skills aren’t as high as yours. So, I guess I see myself with a little bit of knowledge, a way to teach somebody, and them as a learner who wants to learn. But, [there are] a lot of people I can learn from and who can bring a lot to the experience. I have a lot of respect for my students. I’ve got some students who are up at 3:00 in the morning to do work. And they’re here at 7:00 at night. So, I really respect that commitment. And so I see it as this kind of role- less teacher, but more friend, or someone who has an understanding of [them] and can help them.

Dialogue is simply a tutoring condition in which the student and the tutor collaborate in planning lessons and setting goals. When a student is really motivated and really comfortable, he/she takes a more active role. This is good. This is something that I try to encourage. Tutoring usually starts out as a monologue with a tutor doing all the work. Later, some of the responsibility for setting goals and planning lessons is handed over to the student. When you have a better dialogue with your student then she/he feels comfortable making mistakes and will be more willing to explain to you what it is that he/she is having a problem with – like, “words seem backwards to me.” I nourish a dialogue by asking students to identify goals and help select materials, and remind them that I’ll be doing homework too. Respecting your students, allowing them to be more than ciphers, is a step toward empowering them, not just teaching them to read.

Paul envisions education as a “dialogue” between the teacher and learner. Using the term “dialogue” communicates his desire to create teacher-learner relationships that involve a mutual exchange with learners who, although they do not share the same *knowledge* (e.g., literacy), are capable of *knowing* and worthy of respect. Some educators have criticized the concept of “dialogue”

as a potentially repressive myth that masks the powerful position of the educator. For example, Ellsworth (1989) writes:

Dialogue in its conventional sense is impossible in the culture at large because at this historical moment, power relations between raced, classed, and gendered students and teachers are unjust. The injustice of these relations and the way in which those injustices distort communication cannot be overcome in a classroom no matter how committed the teacher and students are to “overcoming conditions that perpetuate suffering” (p. 316).

While invoking “dialogue” does not ensure its practice, I believe that communicating and collaborating with learners as individuals from whom one can learn is a worthy goal. The fact that distortions will occur does not negate the value of trying to communicate with learners and attempting to approximate a mutual exchange.

Paul’s role incorporates his vision of education, his view of himself, and his view of learners. He sees himself as “a person with a little bit of knowledge,” who has “an understanding” and “a way to teach,” and can learn *from* his students. Minimally, Paul is a facilitator who enables students to reach their goals. However, when trust and comfort are “built up” over time, he may assume a different role, that of a friend, co-learner, or helper.

The idea that it is possible for the teacher to be a student’s *friend* –and that this is a legitimate, even desirable role–contradicts traditional, hierarchical notions of the teacher-learner relationship. Friendship implies a certain measure of mutuality and equality (not of *position* but of shared humanity); however, the teacher-learner friendship is not based on personal affinity, but on learning together.

Forester’s (1993) discussion of how practitioners learn as we more commonly learn from friends suggests that friendship can also be an appropriate metaphor for the teacher-learner relationship. When teachers act as “critical friends” – “in ways [learners] can respond to” (ibid., p. 198) – they gently challenge learners to think differently, to see new angles. The process of creating disequilibrium can stimulate learning and growth.

On the teacher’s part, being a friend involves many of the same practices we see in our “everyday” friendships. These include expressing active concern for many aspects of learners’ lives; striving to create a psychological environment of trust, respect, openness, and support (Knowles, 1985, cited in Ennis et al., 1989); balancing challenge with encouragement and support, which is particularly important for women as described in the landmark book, *Women’s Ways of Knowing* (Belenky, et al., 1997); and learning together through shared experience.

The role of teacher as “expert” and learner as “other” creates distance, maximizing the teacher’s power. Collins (1991) suggests that the “friends educating friends” metaphor allows educators to redefine their role and relationship with learners:

A shift away from concentration on the adult learner as the target of categorization and transformation through technique to an emphasis on clarification of the adult educator’s role in the context of friends educating each other opens out prospects for adult education as a vocation

concerned with nurturing egalitarian values and commitments. In retrieving the idea of “friends educating each other” as a prime characteristic of adult education practice, it is possible to sustain a concern for competence without distorting...the fragile dimension of a caring relationship (p. 49).

In being a “friend” to learners, Paul does not sacrifice his competence as an educator, but rather broadens his role to include learning from students’ lives and experiences and sharing personal power in the relationship.

While Paul typically initiates conversations at first and expresses wishes for “more dialogue,” he went on to describe how the relationship and dialogue change over time:

Well at first, I have to be the initiator because I need to know things about them and I want to be the initiator too because I want to try to create an environment that they feel comfortable in...and that’s a little different than what they’re used to. And also I need to be the initiator when it comes to lesson plans and things like that. This dialogue that I want to try to create with students doesn’t happen at first and I try to get students involved [gradually]. So first, it’s almost a kind of conventional student-teacher relationship. I’m the initiator; I’m setting the rules outside of lesson plans. Well, a student might have a goal they’re working toward, so in that sense they set it, but I’m more active at first. And then hopefully I hand some of that over to *them*.

Most learners have grown up in the “teacher-student mode,” common in K-12 education, in which the teacher makes the decisions and students dutifully obey. In the adult education setting, learners don’t necessarily *expect* the teacher to use his power any differently (e.g., allowing them to guide the learning process).

Ironically, Paul initially uses his power to “*create* an environment that they feel *comfortable* in” – one in which *he’s* the initiator! This suggests that too much initial discomfort could scare learners away. Once they feel comfortable, he slowly shifts his approach. He chooses to use his power to prompt students to be involved in decision-making; he “hands some of that over to them.” From a seemingly simple suggestion such as selecting materials, learners begin to sense that the teacher is not playing the familiar role and that he hopes they will learn a new role, too.

While some learners may relish the opportunity to exercise some control in their relationship with teachers, others may resist unconventional roles. Ironically, in their enthusiastic attempts to foster an egalitarian relationship, educators risk telling learners, “I *order* you to participate!” Demetron (1993) warns against “imposing a participatory ideology on learners” (p. 42).

“The teacher-learner friendship is not based on personal affinity, but on learning together.”

Encouraging the “Student Voice”

Janice Cuddahee
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It is no secret that LVA has undergone a tremendous metamorphosis during this decade. Whether by design or default, the face of LVA is not what it was. A few examples? We have adopted new management approaches and systems. Technology has supported huge strides in communication, management, and instruction. The “new” LVA affiliate director is often an experienced not-for-profit manager and no longer the upwardly mobile tutor. The list could go on...

Today, buzzwords such as collaboration, accountability, measurable, and participatory are again altering LVA. Words and phrases such as Accreditation, AERG, Welfare Reform, Peer Review, Certification, and Learning Standards will change the face of LVA in ways yet to be seen.

Just as the volunteer pool, budgets, staffing patterns, and record keeping have changed – so, too, has the LVA student population. As administrators, we are just beginning to see both the impact and the potential of that change. In 1998 ESL students outnumbered Basic Literacy students for the first time. Agencies refer students we haven’t served in the past – students that we aren’t certain our volunteers are equipped to help. We know that students coming to LVA often have many issues to deal with beyond reading difficulties.

But something else is brewing. Something that could change the face of LVA much more dramatically than any staff change or data collection system ever could. It’s the “Student Voice.”

From a management perspective, LVA is realizing and struggling to find meaningful ways to integrate the Student Voice

into the organization. It is not about placing a student on the board. It is not about scheduling an annual student recognition event or picnic. It is about a sustained commitment to enabling students with interest, potential, or need to be meaningfully involved in the organization – and giving them the opportunity to do so.

From a student perspective, many are realizing that they have a voice and could be valuable players in the literacy movement. They want the opportunity to develop the skills they’ll need to be a part of an organizational community. They are asking for legitimate opportunities to bring something to, and take something from, the LVA table. Will all students want to be involved in addition to tutoring? Obviously not. Will all students be valuable board or committee members? No – but no more nor less than the percentage of valuable traditional board or committee members.

Fostering, supporting, and integrating a Student Voice consumes time and energy – two rare commodities in affiliates these days. It is not easy to do, and the best intentions aren’t enough. It will require strong commitments to partnership and collaboration, and the changes that will result.

But, imagine for a moment an LVA affiliate that has student involvement in recruitment, tutor training, public speaking, student groups, in-service workshops, newsletters, lobbying efforts, committee and board meetings, and planning for the future. I suspect many of us would wonder how we survived as long as we have without it. ■

LVA-New York State’s Student Involvement Project

In January 1997, LVA-NYS began a Student Involvement Project that promotes leadership development. Through participation in a series of workshops, students learn the skills they need to become more involved in their local programs. Projects are awarded based on an evaluation of student-written proposals. During the first six months, Beth Broadway, a skilled facilitator, helps groups plan and design a project, select participants, and develop materials.

During the second phase, site managers and student leaders receive the training and technical assistance they need to get their projects up and running. Throughout the project, the groups experience team building and conflict resolution. They

develop skills in time and project management as well as grant writing. They learn about how the funding process works and how proposals are evaluated.

Some of the benefits for student leaders include a heightened awareness of organizational development, leadership issues, and good communication skills. Model program descriptions will be disseminated throughout the LVA system.

For a brief look at one successful project, see Arthea Minnamon’s article on page 10. For more information about the Student Involvement Project, contact Janice Cuddahee, LVA-NYS, (716) 631-5282 (cuddahee@aol.com). ■

“Less Teacher, More Friend” *continued from page 2*

If adult learners express little interest in exercising “active control” of literacy learning and program management, then at issue is the extent to which the educator can and should foster an ideology of direct participation. The pragmatic need, then...is to create opportunities for increased participation, while establishing familiar and stable learning structures upon which the neophyte literacy learners can rely (p. 28-9, 47).

What the educator interprets as “little interest” could, of course, mean something entirely different to the learner. Teachers should be careful not to mistake a learner’s silence or initial reluctance for final rejection of their attempt at participatory education. Some researchers (Giroux, 1983; Gowen, 1991) interpret learners’ resistance to externally imposed definitions, roles, and structures as an *exercise* of power. Educators must be prepared for learners’ *persistent* resistance to the “friends teaching friends” relationship. In the adult teacher-learner relationship, participation that ceases to be voluntary becomes coercion, and that is an abuse of a teacher’s power.

If educators truly believe in sharing power with learners, they must strive to encourage and support learners, even as they challenge them to learn and relate to the teacher in new ways, or to do things they might not have chosen without some “prompting.” Paul’s comments suggest that relationships gradually shift from the conventional to the unfamiliar. If educators push learners to participate with inadequate emotional support and *no* familiar structures, they risk frightening learners, particularly those who have had negative school experiences. However, if they don’t suggest *new* possibilities for the teacher-learner relationship, both teachers and learners will be more likely to reproduce the “expert-other” roles, reinforcing the stereotype that teachers possess and adult learners lack knowledge.

While adopting a “friend” role has certain benefits for educators, it also involves potential frustrations and dangers. Diminishing power differences requires a new conception of teacher-learner roles and the educational process. For educators, this entails changing behaviors, the way in which we think about education, how we perceive learners, and how we view ourselves. ■

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Recalling the Shame

By Dale Christianson
LVA Illinois

Dale Christianson, a former student and recipient of the 1998 LVA Chairman's Award for exemplary service, describes his early experiences as a literacy learner.

Fear and shame – I'm so afraid that my being dumb will be proven – What am I doing?

I had known about literacy programs for some time. They were for people who couldn't read. How could such a program help me? Their public relations materials spoke of helping people *learn to read*. I could read and pretty well at that. I had kept my poor spelling and writing skills hidden from others for most of my life. Besides, I had a high school diploma, even though I probably didn't deserve it. I had lived for so long as a "con," always hiding the truth about my literacy abilities, people would believe me to be better educated than I really was.

Going to the door of the literacy program was traumatic. I walked down the hall and by it three times and then even went back to my car. My fear of the unknown was that strong. But I really did need help. My wife and daughter had tried to help me sound out words, but I always felt dumb. They would tell me, "You can do it. It's easy." My frustrations would come out and I would walk away. I'd hide out in our big home or go to a motel to avoid facing the world or even facing up to my being me.

The lies and pretending to have skills beyond what was true became too much for me time after time. There were always so many words that I could not pronounce, although I knew their meaning. In my business I always had secretaries who transcribed tapes into reports and letters that made me look good. Yet, my business had failed.

After walking away from the literacy office and going to my car, I turned the key, listened to the engine start, and put the car into gear to leave. Although I wanted my needs kept a secret, I had an appointment. Someone was waiting for me behind that fearsome door. I was frightened that someone important to me might find out my terrifying secret, that I, a church deacon and Sunday school teacher, couldn't write. But I had an appointment, and I had to go back to that office.

As I walked slowly and reluctantly back into the building, I reflected on what was to be done. I was to be tested and then matched with a tutor. "*Could this really help me? Was this all just a waste of everyone's time...mine and theirs?*" Now I was again outside that office door. I was grateful that I had met no one that I knew as I walked down the hallways. Finally, I put my hand on the doorknob and turned it. With the door open, it was too late to run away again.

Thankfully, the office was empty, except for the woman who waited for me. Hat in hand, I felt like that little boy in the classroom so long ago. No matter how polite she was while getting the necessary information, I was extremely uncomfortable. Of course, she had to have some information; that was required. I told her that I didn't want my name, my *name*, in those records! She assured me that my name would be a coded number. The woman asked about my school background while I looked furtively around the office and often back to the

door. The lady told me that no one else would be in that late in the afternoon. It was still scary.

The testing followed and it seemed simple, maybe too simple. "*Could they learn anything from those tests?*" Then I was shown what materials might be used in tutoring me. At that point, I didn't care about those materials because I just wanted to get out of there. My mind kept repeating the same queries, "*Could a tutor help me? Professional teachers in school hadn't been able to help me. Was it me? Would I finally 'try' harder than the teachers had said I did in school?*"

I was informed that my tutor would be the wife of a retired baker who was in her 70's. She had worked successfully with others and would soon be meeting with me. The staff person told me that she would call her for me. The woman also said that it did not appear that I needed much help, that in fact, I was barely qualified (6th grade level) to receive tutoring. "*Barely? When I could hardly spell or write? I knew I could read, but writing...!?*" Once again the old tape played in the back of my mind, "*Can a stranger help me?*"

That first meeting at the library was the worst! Many people were there, and I knew that I stuck out like a sore thumb while I waited nervously for my tutor. I had to tell the person at the information desk that I was waiting for Mrs. Dixon. Fortunately, she arrived shortly. She was a little woman with a great smile who told me we would be a "team." Mrs. Dixon also said that based on my schooling background and the problems I had shared, we would be a successful team. She also told me that our sessions would be confidential and that she would handle getting all information back to the program. After we had talked for a while, I asked her the one question that I could not still, "Are you sure that you can help me? My family has tried and they didn't succeed."

Mrs. Dixon reached out, took my hand and reminded me that we were going to be successful because WE were a team and that I was safe with her. I wasn't alone anymore. I cried tears of shame, but those same tears spoke of hope as well. Did this small, elderly woman have the "magic key" that would unlock my inability to spell and sound out words? She told me immediately that I was a successful sight word reader and that that was a good start. Then she asked me to write. I was so ashamed of my problems in writing...how could I write for this stranger? Mrs. Dixon explained that I needed to show her where we should begin working on my writing skills.

So, reluctantly and fearfully, I wrote a little and misspelled a lot. She had no idea what I had put down on paper, but she smiled and asked me to help her read it. Again, she offered hope and once more assured me that our partnership would make all the difference.

It would take both of us putting in tremendous effort for the journey to be successful, but we had taken the first shaky step

that night. She gave me some homework. I was to do some writing daily at home. I quickly told her that I was much too busy to write at home! She said that I would soon see that writing a little every day would help me to succeed. At last we shook hands and she smiled up at me and again told me that we would succeed...we, not just me. Mrs. Dixon also reminded me that I had much to build from; I wasn't starting at zero. At the end of that first strained session, I thanked her and together we committed to starting on this journey together.

That journey and our partnership took time to succeed. Many months and years were needed, and no "magic key" opened the door. But week by week, with work and much effort on my part, the journey continued. Mrs. Dixon stayed by my side, encouraging and pushing when she needed to do so.

In the years that followed, I began doing the intake for new adult students. I gave the tests and matched learners with tutors. Almost all of those learners came with past shame and fear. They were as afraid as I was to admit needing help in order to be successful in a new life...an emerging world of which they had only dreamed.

Varied pressures in the adult learners' lives had forced them to seek help. In many years of welcoming literacy learners, I never met a person who came willingly. This was not the case when I spent a year registering persons for GED classes. Although many would still be unsure about being successful in the classroom, they did not feel forced to come forward. (This was prior to welfare reform.) Because of my personal experience, I could be confident that they would be successful and that there

was hope, for I never forgot the importance of my own partnership in learning.

Our society and many in the adult education field can never understand the hurts that struggling learners experience in those growing years in school. I turned my "hurts" into shame. Many others have turned those "hurts" into anger. Those of us who later became adult learners were separated from the rest, even though we may have shared classes with those who were successful. When my learner friends say that no one understands, they are right. We are individuals with individual difficulties. Many of us have anger against the school system that failed us and parents who did not understand. And we may never share your joy of reading and writing.

For many it will always be a struggle, but through that struggle we can feel success beginning. Most of the time we cannot describe to those from whom we seek help just how afraid, unsure, and tense we are about the process. Nor can we articulate that we are, after all, seeking a "magic key."

Never take away a person's dream of future goals. Those goals may be far off, but never quell them. Let us go on working as tutor and student partners and adjust the goals together. Together we can reach most goals and dreams, even if reaching these goals takes many years. Meanwhile, offer the best of your knowledge and give learners the assurance that together you are able. As time goes on and our learning barriers are broken, you will see us change and gain the confidence that working together *we will succeed!* ■

From Student to Staff

A Brief History of My Involvement in Literacy

Dale Christianson

My journey in literacy started as a student being served by a one-to-one tutor. About four years later, the area literacy coalition sought to hire a VISTA worker for outreach into parts of their service area where they had few students or volunteers, so I applied. I used my background in agri-marketing to secure the position. Unfortunately, if my background as a learner had been known, I believe that I would not have been selected.

I worked 18 months in two counties creating literacy awareness activities. I was then selected to work for one year under a federal grant to create literacy awareness and establish tutoring sites in 18 libraries in the coalition area. During my VISTA service and under the federal grant, I also created two student support groups and a correctional peer-tutoring program that served over 175 adult inmates. I then joined the office staff for three years as Director of Outreach activities. I continued my activities with students and with the peer programs, as well as doing intakes for the literacy program and the local community college GED program.

During the time I spent in literacy activities, I attended LVA training workshops for 50/50 Management, Small Group

Tutoring, and Basic Reading. Almost four years ago, I joined the LVA-Illinois staff as the program coordinator for *Jump Start*, a volunteer program which provides literacy tutoring at three Illinois Department Of Corrections (IDOC) Youth Centers. The IDOC State School District #428 currently funds this program. I serve as program director for *Jump Start*, which is recognized as a model intergenerational tutor/mentoring program serving youth (15-18 years of age) at seven centers throughout the state of Illinois. Two VISTA workers help me do all recruitment, orientation, training, testing, record keeping, and reporting on the program's activities.

I helped form New Readers for New Life of Illinois over seven years ago, and I continue to serve as coordinator for their conferences, which have grown from 28 participants to over 170 from 17 states. I helped plan the founding meeting of a national organization known as VALUE (Voice for Adult Literacy United for Education) and I serve on their governing board. I will continue to be an "advocate" for adult learners in Illinois and across the nation. ■

Overcoming Program Barriers to Student Involvement

Phil Rose and Beth Broadway
Syracuse, NY

Increasingly, adult literacy programs have discovered that getting students involved as volunteers or staff can improve the quality and quantity of programming. While this process is not easy or without real problems and challenges, the programs that successfully involve students seem to be more vibrant and productive.

Every program has its strengths and weaknesses. The overall strengths of a program will support the work needed to increase student involvement. The weaknesses will become barriers. Any program can do a good "self-check" in the areas discussed below. Anticipating problems will allow staff and volunteers to better prepare for this programmatic shift.

Consider New Approaches to Confidentiality

Confidentiality remains a key to recruiting and keeping adult new readers in the program. The advantages of confidentiality are many. Programs are often cautious about starting student involvement projects because they want to protect the rights of students to remain anonymous. This means that they do not share the names of the students outside the program.

Students, staff, and volunteers feel this is a good policy, as it protects students from job losses, public humiliation, and blame. Many adult learners feel shame and embarrassment about their lack of reading skills. Only after they gain confidence and have improved their skills, might they be willing to tell their employers, friends, church members, or family.

When a program wishes to encourage students to become more involved, a rigid approach to confidentiality becomes problematic. For example, if a student leader wants to start a support group, he or she will want to contact other students. This means releasing the names and phone numbers of students to another student. If the confidentiality policy will not allow this, the student is in a difficult situation. On the one hand, the student is willing and eager to volunteer his or her time to benefit the adult learners in the program. On the other hand, the program is preventing this volunteer from attaining his or her goal.

Suggestions:

1. At student orientation and testing time, new students should be asked if they are willing, now or later, to be contacted by another student about student activities. A separate list of these names should be kept.
2. Students can be asked this same question again when they are re-tested or after completing six months in the program. If they say "Yes," then they are added to the list. If "No," their names remain confidential.
3. Think of a student leader as a "volunteer" for the program, just like board members and tutors. This person may have

the "responsibility" of calling other students to get them into appropriate activities. This means a job description, training, and support must accompany this volunteer job.

4. Student leaders and staff need to sit down together and talk about confidentiality. Together, they can define what it means and how to protect students and encourage participation.
5. Remember that if a student participates in a support group or event that is being held within the literacy family, there will be confidentiality at all times.
6. If a student does not want to be contacted directly but is interested, tutors can relay information to their students. In this case, student leaders can be given the names and phone numbers of tutors to contact.

Examine Your Management Style

No one wants to admit that they are patronizing to students.

"When a program wishes to encourage students to become more involved, a rigid approach to confidentiality becomes problematic."

Some of this is just the result of age-old patterns of the haves and have-nots. Students come to programs in need of help.

They do not have literacy skills. They also may not have much money or self-esteem. Clearly one of the great gifts of literacy is the increased self-esteem in the lives of new readers. The staff and volunteers have these skills and so are in a position of being the "helper."

Suggestions:

1. Encourage new tutors to have lengthy talks with students before they start tutoring. On-going training can be required for all tutors during which initiating dialogues with students can be discussed and modeled.
2. Protect student leaders and volunteers from criticism and attacks. All staff, board members, and trainers should try to intercept criticisms of students.
3. Have a staff member or volunteer who has a strong and positive relationship with students meet with a group of students. Ask the students if they notice patronizing attitudes on the part of staff, trainers, etc. This information should be kept confidential and used only to help design on-going training for staff members and not as a source of criticism of existing staff and volunteers.

The opposite extreme of patronizing students is to let them go on their own without the training and support that they need.

Because staff members do not want to be patronizing, they may err on the side of having a hands-off policy. This, too, is not helpful.

If for example, staff see that a student group is floundering, it is important for staff to get involved and figure out what needs to be done. A staff person may want to attend the group meetings until they are successfully up and running. This could take several months or it may be on-going.

The skills and strengths of each student leader must be realistically evaluated. Needed support should be given, which will help student-led projects succeed.

Improve Training and Orientation for Students, Staff, and Volunteers

So many problems can be avoided with good training and orientation. Training must be seen as an on-going process. When tutors and other volunteers join the program, for example, they should commit to participating in at least one major training session a year. In this way, not only can new techniques in literacy skills be addressed, but also areas such as increased student involvement can be discussed.

Suggestions:

1. Develop training modules for both students and tutors on the topics of student awareness and race and class differences. Recruit trainers who have developed expertise in these areas.
2. Review current orientation procedures for tutors and students and see how they encourage or inhibit student involvement.
3. Involve students increasingly in the training and orientation of students, volunteers, and even staff.
4. Support and train students who take on any training and consulting roles.

Reduce Paperwork

Despite most programs' best efforts, the level of paper work in literacy programs can be staggering for students. As student leaders become increasingly involved, the program can naively expect them to handle increasing amounts of reading and writing related tasks. This needs to be guarded against.

Suggestions:

1. Be realistic with each student volunteer as to her or his reading and writing level. Ask those who communicate with a student to do so at appropriate levels. For example, when a general memo goes to an audience including students, the author should write at a level that all can understand.
2. Have someone who can help the student screen out unimportant information and act as a direct support person for the student.
3. Attend to the on-going development of students' literacy skills. Sometimes student leaders get so caught up in volunteering that they let their literacy work slip. This will cause resentment and hardship later on. It is important that tutors and teachers continue to work with students

even though they may look successful and independent.

Avoid the "Numbers Game"

Having lots of students involved is not realistic. In most programs, even at the height of involvement, there will be a small core of those who are involved. To expect large numbers to come out to meetings, events, support groups, special tasks, and other

"A small, dedicated group of active students can be very helpful to programs when there is a funding or political crisis."

such projects is unrealistic. The occasional awards dinner or summer picnic may draw a good percentage of students, but many students have busy lives outside the

program. They may already be volunteering at their church or local fire department.

Several students will emerge over time as leaders. Group activities may recruit half a dozen students. Support groups are usually small. Too many students mean that not everyone gets to talk. Groups often regulate themselves.

Often a program will have a kick-off event, for example, which twenty students might attend. With a request for on-going involvement, however, the numbers may quickly diminish. This does not reflect poorly on the staff, volunteers, or student leaders. It is simply the nature of organizing students.

A small, dedicated group of active students can be very helpful to programs when there is a funding or political crisis. The reality is that pressure may need to be exerted to maintain funding or visibility. A small group of students can mobilize a large group in a short period of time.

Stay Committed for the Long Haul

Staying committed to the involvement of students in leadership takes time and attention. If students recognize that staff and volunteers are committed to them, then problems can be examined as only short delays in making the entire literacy program better and better.

From the beginning, as many people as possible should take part in supporting student involvement. Each segment of the program plays an integral role in the delivery of literacy services. Each component will be affected by student involvement, and proper education, discussion, and buy-in will be necessary for the success of your efforts to incorporate students into your program.

Suggestions:

1. Hold a special gathering at which a student and administrator from another literacy program, which has successfully involved students, speaks and answers questions.
2. Bring a state staff member to a board meeting to share successful program models from around the state and to do some initial board training on student involvement.
3. Have staff and board develop a "statement of purpose" and overall goal for student involvement. Use a structured group process. Publish your results in your affiliate's newsletter.

4. Have people list problems they foresee and strategies to address them.
5. Role-play situations that show students involved in certain organizational activities. Attempt to resolve a problem in the role play, and then have a discussion about it afterward.

Time, money, and resources are needed to successfully involve students. Underestimating these essential program considerations will bring student involvement to a halt. It is essential that a student involvement component be built into annual budgets and fund raising campaigns. Of course, once on the road to student involvement, keeping all practitioners involved and informed will be critical.

In addition, students need support as they enter a program and confront an organizational milieu that is quite foreign to them. The other side of the equation is working with staff and volunteers to build awareness and sensitivity towards students who are already involved. ■

Phil Rose and Beth Broadway are literacy and community involvement consultants from Syracuse, NY. This article is an excerpt from the manual, "Students Working for Literacy – Practitioner Edition."

Who Says Student Involvement Isn't Important?

Phil Rose

In the opening scene of Mike Nichol's film "Primary Colors," John Trivolta, who plays the role of the president, visits an urban adult literacy program. The room is packed with the press, secret service, aides, and public officials. In the center of all the hoopla, however, is a large table with about ten adult literacy students sitting with the president.

As the conversation grows, all eyes turn to one middle-aged African-American man who begins to tell his story of what it has been like not being able to read or write. By the end of the story everyone, including the president, is brushing tears from their eyes. It is a very powerful moment. If literacy students were still closeted away in secrecy, this moment would never have reached millions of people through the creative medium of the movie screen.

When I helped organize the third National Adult Literacy Congress in Washington DC in 1991, I worked with First Lady Barbara Bush. I remember we had gathered 150 adult literacy students and 50 practitioners from every state in the U.S. at the elegant Decatur House across from the White House. Jinx Crouch, then President of Literacy Volunteers, and I had just greeted Mrs. Bush as she arrived for the brunch. I escorted her to the podium. While speeches were being made and Mrs. Bush was introduced, I stood off to the side next to Mrs. Bush's chief aide. The aide was a wreck. She checked her watch every few minutes and kept asking, "How long will this go on?" She had Mrs. Bush scheduled to the precise minute (no exaggeration).

At the end of her remarks, Mrs. Bush said, "While I'm here, I'd like to personally greet every student." So 150 students started filing past the podium while she shook hands and talked to each one individually. The aide standing next to me went ballistic. Suddenly secret service men were jumping hedges and talking into their cuff links and the aide was tearing her hair out. Yet there in the middle of all the official madness, stood the wife of the president of the United States calmly talking to every literacy student.

Is student involvement important? If these students and so many others whom they represented had not become leaders in their literacy programs in their states, and now nationally,

there would never have been a National Adult Literacy Congress. The issue of adult literacy would not have been raised to national attention in such a powerful, yet personal, way.

If we are serious about ending illiteracy in the U.S., and I think we are, then student involvement remains an essential and integral part of the solution. If we want students influencing presidents, governors, mayors, corporate and civic leaders, and the minds of all Americans, then students must become involved beyond the learning of literacy skills. Their involvement will help galvanize the kinds of support, money, and resources that it will take to solve the problem.

The article, "Overcoming Program Barriers to Student Involvement" is an excerpt from a set of manuals written by Beth Broadway and me for practitioners and student leaders. The manuals examine six types of student involvement: student as learner, helper, spokesperson, group leader, policy maker, and staff member.

In these manuals, we take a hard look at the problems and challenges of involving students successfully. While the content of both manuals is fundamentally the same, one edition is written for practitioners, and the other is written for student leaders. In this way, each group can have access to the ideas and activities, which are written from different points of view.

In addition to looking at the different types of student involvement, each manual offers a chapter on how to organize a conference for and with students. Increasingly students are asking for training and programs are responding with workshops, seminars, and conferences for students. These events may be local, regional, or statewide. Many tips on how to work collaboratively with students are included in the manuals.

While there is no easy path to student involvement, there is a path nonetheless. The path will lead to the effective inclusion of students at all levels of program design and management. Along the way, I'm confident that your program will grow to appreciate and benefit from increased student involvement. ■

Getting Students Involved: One Student Leader's Experience

Arthea Minnamon
Literacy Volunteers of Wayne County
Lyons, New York

Arthea Minnamon is the Student Leader and Vice President of the Board at Literacy Volunteers of Wayne County. She led a legislative education project in Wayne County that included transporting four other students to Albany, putting them up in a hotel overnight, paying for their food, and arranging for a tour and introductions on the New York State Assembly floor. The results were marvelous, with both the legislators and the students visibly moved. Two students were regarded by the others to have "come out of their shells" by the time they spoke with the second legislator. An accompanying volunteer said it was "one of the best things I've ever done in my life." Here is an excerpt from the booklet Arthea wrote to show other student leaders in New York State how to duplicate her project.

Every year, sometime around March, your New York State legislators set aside time to listen to special interest groups (their voters) to see what is on their minds. LVA-New York State sponsors a Legislative Breakfast to coincide with this time, where staff and volunteers from each affiliate can make a trip to the state's Capitol. There, they visit our legislators to express the need for ongoing funding and proper legislation to keep LVA on track toward each of the individual affiliate's goals.

It is a good idea to take advantage of this opportunity and organize a student-driven project for students from your affiliate to make the trip and speak one-on-one with your legislators. At the same time, students can educate themselves on how the legislative process works, see the Assembly and/or the Senate in action, and take a short guided tour of the Capitol building.

Selecting Students

You will find students at many different levels. For our student-driven project we chose those who were willing to participate in some form of public relations for the local affiliate and who showed some commitment to the project and the affiliate. We started out with a list of all students and their phone numbers and the numbers of tutors for contacting those students who had no phone. We called everyone on the list to determine the level of his or her interest, if any.

Students who were at a point where they were no longer timid or shy about getting help from an LVA tutor were most receptive to the idea of a student-driven project. Keep in mind that even then, some students may be slightly shy and need coaxing and encouragement to get them to participate. Do not force students into doing something they really don't want to do, even if they're too shy to tell you. As a student leader, you should be at a point where you can tell the difference.

Also keep in mind that there must be enough support to make saying "yes" easy. If your affiliate staff and board are not behind you, it will be difficult for students to make the first step. If students have to pay for a lot of expenses out of their own pockets, even for indirect costs such as baby-sitting and gasoline, they are more likely to view the project as an inconvenience than as the fun, rewarding experience it should be.

There are several ways to go about choosing the students who will be involved. If you have many students who show an interest in the project, you may need to narrow them down. You could do this by having those interested write a letter stating the reasons they would like to go on the trip. Then, if needed, get help from a trusted LVA staff member or tutor to select the ones who will participate. Set a time limit for the letters and a deadline to pick the final list.

If you lack interested students, you may have to resort to hand picking those who you know are interested and go with only a few. Even a few students can be very effective in getting your local affiliate recognized by your legislators. ■

Taken from "A Comprehensive Guide for Student Leaders" by Arthea Minnamon.

Value on the Web

In March 1998, 41 adult learners and a small group of practitioners from around the country gathered at the Highlander Center near Knoxville Tennessee to start a national adult learner organization to create a united voice for learners as leaders in literacy. Voices of Adult Literacy United for Education (VALUE) is the result of that meeting. Serving as a resource for adult learners, literacy practitioners, and policy makers, VALUE's mission is to expand the role of adult learners throughout the nation.

VALUE has a new website at (<http://www.literacynet.org/value>). This website contains information and background on the organization, links to some excellent adult learner resources, and a copy of the latest newsletter. Paul Heavenridge, Director of the Western/Pacific Literacy Network (Hub IV of NIFL-LINCS) and his staff are designing the VALUE homepage. For more information about VALUE, contact Archie Willard (e-mail: millard@netins.net) or VALUE, c/o Learning Partnerships, 14 Griffin Street, East Brunswick, NJ 08816-4806. ■

Student Involvement Impacts Retention

Toni Cordell
Laubach Literacy Action
Syracuse, NY

In 1994 Laubach Literacy Action took a major step in “walking the walk” in their commitment to involve students in programming. They hired me, a former literacy student, to be on staff as their Student Involvement Coordinator.

I know first hand the benefits of student involvement. When I was a student in Oklahoma City, improving my basic reading skills was very rewarding. But I received another wonderful gift from the program director when she asked me to tell my story to a reporter. It opened up all kinds of new experiences. She also asked me to serve on the Board of Directors. I was surprised how those responsibilities accelerated additional learning.

Laubach’s strong historical commitment to student involvement dates back to 1988 when they established the LLA New Reader Committee, a group of literacy and ESL students who serve as policy advisers. In 1989 they co-sponsored with Literacy Volunteers of America, United Way, and other national groups the first of four student congresses held in Washington D.C. Students began to play a significant role in shaping adult literacy policy.

One of the most exciting developments of the past year was the formation of a national literacy student organization called Voices for Adult Literacy United for Education (VALUE). I am one of ten students who serve on the Board of Directors. One purpose of VALUE is to insure that student voices are “at the table” when decisions about adult education are made. Another is for students to be full partners in all levels of adult education. Laubach and LVA, as well as numerous other organizations, have been very supportive of this effort.

With positive results such as these, I believe that local programs can benefit (and HAVE benefited) from increased student involvement through leadership in volunteer and staff roles. We expect that Laubach councils will improve their effectiveness in public relations, fundraising, student retention, and instruction by consulting with and involving students – the experts on their side of the issue – in deciding how literacy programs should operate.

I am working with Mark Cass, Laubach’s Program Management Coordinator, in an exciting project that looks at student orientation. One of the most common concerns that we hear from the field is the need to improve student retention. Programs that have improved their student retention rates report that student orientations have made the difference. We believe that if students are involved with the development of those orientations, they’ll be even more effective. To test this concept,

we are working with a team of students and one staff person from The Learning Place, a Laubach program located in Syracuse, N.Y. The

“Programs that have improved their student retention rates report that student orientations have made the difference.”

team is developing a handbook for student orientation. We are capturing the process used to develop the handbook and will share that information with the field. We will also highlight other models of student orientation around the country.

Just as I am giving input to the work here at Laubach’s national office, so your students can help you to improve the quality of your program and services. The key to maximum benefit is a team of program managers who remain open and committed to a philosophy of student involvement. Involving students takes both effort and resources, especially in the early stages. I believe the dividends received will more than repay your initial investment.

There is another important benefit of student involvement—a very personal one. Students who have had their lives improved dramatically by learning to read better also want to help their programs. Many want to “give back” with a grateful heart. If you give students the opportunity to become part of the solution, they will stay more committed to the learning process, they will help recruit other students, and ultimately your student retention will improve. It is definitely a win-win situation. ■

Adult Literacy Learners and the Internet

Jaleh Behroozi
National Institute for Literacy

One of the National Institute for Literacy’s (NIFL) goals for this year is to make LINC’S (Literacy Information and Communications System) user-friendly and useful for adult learners. Using the multi-media, interactive capabilities of the World Wide Web, NIFL will provide high quality teaching and life skills materials using a format that will encourage the independent use of LINC’S and the Internet by beginning level adult learners. NIFL plans to provide instruction on the use of Internet-based resources for adult learners, who will increasingly need to deal with the new technology on a daily basis in the workplace and as parents, citizens, and consumers.

Last year, through a concerted effort of the states and regional LINC’S, and the National Institute for Literacy, LINC’S

provided access to a wide array of instructional, policy, research, and other resources for teachers and other literacy practitioners. This year, by focusing on beginner literacy level resources and communication tools, NIFL hopes to fill a critical need within the literacy community. The National Institute for Literacy is in the process of organizing a national committee of adult learners, practitioners, subject specialists, and Web experts to help us to think about ways we can achieve our goals in the area of adult student information and access. If you or one of your students is interested in participating on this committee, please contact Jaleh Behroozi, NIFL (jbehroozi@nifl.gov) or Chip Carlin, LVA-NYS (ccarlin@lightlink.com). ■

From the Editor's Desk

Resources for Student Involvement

If you have access to the Internet, you can find a summary of LVA's philosophy of student involvement, a brief history of student involvement in LVA, and a summary of a recent survey of affiliates. The report, "Student Involvement - A Cornerstone of our Mission" can be found at (<http://www.literacyvolunteers.org/about/faqs>).

The LVA publication, "Growing Together - Improving Your Literacy Program Through Student Participation" by Craig Riecke is available from the LVA catalog, or contact LVA, 635 James St., Syracuse, New York 13203, (800) LVA-8812.

Other publications from the LVA National Student Advisory Board include "Student Groups: How to Start One and Keep It Growing," "Student Advisory Groups: Breaking New Ground," "Supporting Students on Boards of Directors" (available soon), and "Tutor Retention and Student Retention" (available soon).

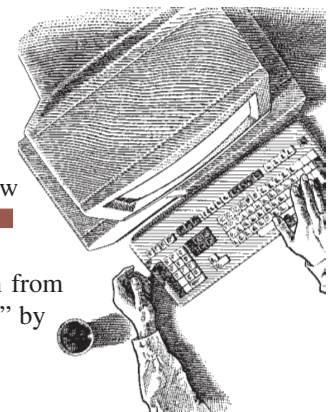
Other resources in print include "Forming a New Reader Support Group" by Anna Mae Kuchta & Beth Valentine-Pellegrini. Contact: Pittsburgh Literacy Initiative, 2600 East Carson St., Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15203, (412) 481-9005.

"Let's Get Together" A guide for students to help their programs and run meetings. Contact: Guidance Center, 712 Gordon Baker Rd., Toronto, Ontario, Canada M2H 3R7, (800) 668-6247, (416) 502-1262.

"Talking to the Media" A video and book for students working with the media. To borrow, contact the Information

Center, Laubach Literacy Action (LLA), Box 131, 1320 Jamesville Ave., Syracuse, New York 13210, (315) 422-9121. ■

List of printed resources taken from "Student Working For Literacy" by Phil Rose and Beth Broadway.



Upcoming Student Conferences

VALUE is planning a national Adult Learner Leadership Institute to be held in Indianapolis in June 1999. The goals of the Institute will be to help participants be effective leaders in their states and communities, and to build VALUE as a national organization. Participation by application. For more information, contact Archie Williard (e-mail: millard@netins.net) 515 / 448-3213.

A New York State Student Conference is being planned for early fall 1999. Call Harold Lockwood at LVA Allegany County, 706 / 268-5213, for more information.

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