

Adult Literacy and the American Political Culture

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ABSTRACT

Through John Dewey's concept of "growth" and art, this article establishes a "middle ground" between Forrest P. Chisman's human capital vision of adult literacy and Paulo Freire's critical *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Dewey defines growth as the enhancement of experience through critical reflection and art as the "consummation" or fulfillment of experience as an ongoing temporal phenomenon within the stream of time. This position does not uncritically embrace the status quo, but takes a developmental rather than transformational view of change as the "limit-situation" of the politics of adult literacy education particularly with mainstream programs in the United States. Within such constraints, Dewey's pragmatic space provides considerable opportunity for individual and programmatic "growth."

...no educational practice takes place in a vacuum, only in a real context—historical, economic, political, and not necessarily identical to any other context.

_____ Paulo Freire

In the 1980s, the problem of illiteracy has gained national prominence through the advocacy of Barbara Bush and the perceived "crisis" in education which links the failure of contemporary schooling with a declining ability of the United States to compete effectively in a global economy. In response, the U.S. Congress passed the National Literacy Act of 1991. This legislation provides evidence of the value, whether rhetorical or more fundamental, that the U.S. government places on achieving the stated national goal "[t]o eliminate illiteracy by the year 2000..." (S. 1310: An Act, 1990).

Non-readers nationwide have enrolled in adult literacy basic education and community-based organizations with thousands of volunteers and part-time instructors contributing hours of valued time. In addition to such national agencies like Literacy Volunteers of America (LVA) and Laubauch Literacy Action (LLA), regional literacy resource and research centers have

sprung up to help coordinate efforts and to provide intellectual coherence and practical support for practitioners.

On the face of it, there appears an overwhelming national consensus on the problem of illiteracy that transcends issues of class and ideological persuasion. But, that is far from the case. In fact, wide gaps exist between policy elites and the viewpoints of progressive and radical literacy scholars and practitioners. The national discourse system is further complicated by the perspectives of adult literacy learners who, as a new body of research is beginning to document (Beder and Valentine, 1990; Eberle and Robinson, 1980; Fingeret and Danin, 1991; Ziegahn, 1992), seek inclusion into the mainstream. They seek approaches to literacy that integrate practical, personal, aesthetic, and cultural knowledge in ways that correspond to the concrete particularity of each learner.

In this essay I examine the prevailing discourse through an exploration of the two key “voices” that structure the current debate. First is the work of policy advocate Forrest P. Chisman, whose structural-functionalist ideology played a pivotal role in shaping the U.S. government's literacy policy in the early 1990s. Next, the essay explores the radical critique of functional literacy through Paulo Freire's “foundational” opus, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970).

Freire's early work presented a compelling countervoice to a pervasive post World War II “modernization” theory wherein the “developed” world would provide aid to the “underdeveloped” world in part by linking literacy to national economic development (Graff, 1987, Street, 1984). Freire's text is still widely drawn upon by radical and progressive educators intent on resisting the hegemonization of a structural-functional ideology, currently expressed through a “post-industrial” vision reflecting the contemporary “realities” of an “information-age” society (McLaren and Leonard, 1993).

As a progressive educator in the Deweyan tradition, I share a certain affinity with some of Freire's views, including the inextricable connection he identifies between pedagogical theory and political ideology. My progressivism, however, is more firmly linked with the Progressive

Movement of the early twentieth century and is clearly reformist rather than radical in scope. I value both individual consciousness and collaborative efforts to enact change within capitalism as, to use Freire's term, the "limit-situation" in which mainstream literacy programs within the United States operate. While I share with Freire his quest for "humanization" through the *transformation* of limit-situations, I remain critical of his overall "revolutionary" political project as it may pertain to adult literacy education in the United States. I also dispute the emancipatory/oppressive polarity that shapes the core of his utopian praxeology.

For a portion of the essay will focus on the values that students at the Bob Steele Reading Center in Hartford, Connecticut ascribe to literacy. Although it is not my intent of to privilege the "naïve" interpretations of learners, I take their views seriously. Through this, I question Freire's concept of "false consciousness" that the "oppressed" lack sufficient knowledge to act in their best interest and, instead, are compelled to internalize the "voices" of their oppressors. Rather, I adopt the position that adult literacy learners in "mainstream" programs are embedded in ambiguous historical milieus that simultaneously contain emancipatory and oppressive dimensions. I argue that their essentially "individualistic" aspirations reflect less an apolitical ideology than an acute "reading of the world" based upon "horizons of possibility" within their reach (Lestz, Demetrion, and Smith, 1994; Demetrion and Gruner, 1995).

Rejecting the utilitarian reductionism of Chisman's structural-functional vision and Freire's radical "pedagogy of the oppressed," the students throughout Literacy Volunteers of Greater Hartford (LVGH) articulate a "middle-ground" quest for *inclusion* into the American mainstream. This consists not only in the desire for enhanced functional competency in ways that have application in the real world of adult literacy learners. The middle ground also includes a focus on personal and aesthetic development and a broad understanding of culture and society in ways that make sense to new readers. My thesis, therefore, is grounded in the progressive educational theory of John Dewey, particularly his notion of "growth."

A Structural-Functional Vision: Forrest P. Chisman and the Federal Politics of Literacy

Forrest P. Chisman presents far from the most sophisticated view of functional literacy. Yet, his interpretation is important because his policy advocacy exerted a significant influence in shaping the National Literacy Act of 1991. His “voice,” therefore, is amplified through the federal government and indirectly plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions. According to Chisman:

There is no way in which the United States can remain competitive in a global economy, maintain its standard of living, and shoulder the burden of the retirement of the baby boom generation unless we mount a forceful national effort to help adults upgrade their basic skills in the very near future (Chisman, 1989, p. iii).

At the core of Chisman’s view is a post-industrial, “human resource” vision whereby the nation's economy will be enhanced by creating more productive workers for the “informational processing” economy of the present and foreseeable future. Stated negatively, *unless* the nation resolves the problem of worker readiness in the near future, the U.S. will no longer compete effectively in the global economy. In Chisman’s cataclysmic dystopia, the nation has until about 2010--when the baby boom generation will retire—to get its economic act in order (Chisman, 1989, p. 3). Otherwise, the gap between the demands of an increasing technological workplace and the numbers of those ill equipped to master the skills necessary to function effectively will result a national crisis. In order to establish a competitive workforce to equip the nation to compete effectively in a global economy, Chisman believes the government needs to play a direct, pro-active role:

Federal leadership is required because of the enormous social and economic stakes involved. The problem of adult literacy poses a severe threat to the well-being of the nation as a whole, and only government at the national level can lead a nationwide attack in a problem of this scale (Chisman, 1990, p. 221).

In order to address this economic crisis, Chisman argues that the federal government must shift more resources from the unemployed to “the most seriously neglected national priority in this field: basic skills of the workforce” (Chisman, 1989, iv-v). While Chisman seeks not to “abandon” other literacy efforts, he argues for a major reallocation of resources from the

unemployed to the employed as the most efficient means of revitalizing the flagging American economy. It is with such a national goal in mind that Chisman articulates a “definitional tour de force” (Chisman, 1990, p. 3). Chisman is concerned not about literal literacy, but as he says:

functional literacy: mastering basic skills well enough to meet individual goals and societal demands....[T]he terms *literacy* and *basic skills* will refer to functional literacy, understood in this sense" (original emphasis) (Chisman, 1990, p. 3).

Chisman continues:

Unless *we* take steps to upgrade *their* skills in the very near future, all of us will be very worse off. Our rate of economic growth will stagnate, welfare costs will escalate, foreign competition will make more rapid inroads, and our national standard of living will fall (or at least it will not keep pace with increased standards of living elsewhere in the world) (Chisman, 1990, pp. 8-9, emphasis added).

In response Chisman laid out a plan of action for the federal government, much of which Congress drew upon for the National Literacy Act of 1991. At the center of Chisman's proposal is a “leadership role” for the federal government. Specifically, he calls for a “federal coordinating body” (Chisman, 1990, p. p. 239) to decide on how “to improve the effectiveness of the nation's literacy system as a whole.” He also advocated for this body to “set measurable nationwide goals for upgrading basic skills;” to “monitor progress toward those goals,” and to “refine the guidelines of federal programs” (Chisman, 1990, p. p. 239). Chisman recognized the inherent political tensions between a uniform policy and “a robust, pluralistic system,” but felt such a coordinating body would at least “provide a high-level forum in which tensions in the field can be aired and, hopefully, channeled in constructive directions” (Chisman. 1990, 240).

Because of such pluralism and limited fiscal resources, Chisman proposed that the federal government should also mandate state governments to deal with illiteracy at the local level in accordance to the purposes established in Washington, linked to national economic revitalization. Chisman’s recommendations and policy formulations had a major impact on the National Literacy Act (NLA) of 1991 in which the utilitarian values of functional literacy were pervasive. Title II of the NLA focuses on workforce literacy and is intended to encourage small and medium-sized businesses to offer basic skill literacy programs to employees “to advance the

productivity of the laborforce” (National Literacy Act, 1991, sec. 202). Each state is expected to develop a literacy plan, “especially with respect to the needs of the labor market [and] economic development goals” (National Literacy Act, 1991, sec. 332). The National Literacy Act also established the National Institute for Literacy to conduct research, identify and disseminate information on promising practices, facilitate staff training and in general, to help coordinate the field (Quigley, 1991, p. 114).

The NLA also provided a definition of literacy that in certain key respects emulated the “self-evident” utilitarian ethos of the functionalist paradigm. At the prompting of literacy educators in the field, Congress developed an expanded definition. Specifically:

Literacy means an individual's ability to read, write, and speak in English, and compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job and in society, to achieve one's goals, and develop one's knowledge and potential" (Amendment in the Nature of a Substitute, 1991, p. 2; quoted in Quigley, 1991, p. 112).

A far cry from Paulo Freire’s “emancipatory” vision of literacy, the expanded definition at least legitimizes personal development and moves beyond the narrow utilitarian functionalism espoused by Chisman. While recognizing that the NLA of 1991 provided certain windows of opportunities for progressive literacy educators, Quigley wonders whether such “centralized, more systematized models of federal and state support...will really bring us closer to what we so desperately need in the field” (Quigley, 1991, p. 116). Perhaps a certain skepticism is warranted that any sophisticated understanding of literacy that seriously takes into account the experiences and world views of adult literacy learners, can come out of Washington D.C.

Chisman played a significant policy role in defining literacy as a major national problem. His “demand” for high professional standards in the field and the need for major gains in basic skill development among learners, point to certain challenges that require some type of resolution; however, Chisman’s thinking on literacy remains problematic on a number of key respects.

Most poignant, perhaps, is the seemingly enduring gap that Chisman fails to realize between the vast preponderance of adult new readers and the skills required to enter into even the

lower strata of the “informational processing” sectors of the post-industrial economy. According to the federal government's own statistics, literacy programs reach only about nineteen percent of the potential adult student body that might benefit from such services (National Literacy Act 1991, sec. 2). Of those, a sizable proportion leave (“drop-out,” or “resist,” depending on your ideology) before making significant progress toward sustainable literacy, which based on current standards is approximately one and-a-half grade levels of reading improvement per year (Chisman, 1990, p. 15). For those who do stay, it may take between three to five years for a lower level student to achieve anything resembling fluent, independent, functional literacy. Without continual involvement by students in learning, a significant degree of atrophy occurs. Of those who do “succeed,” very few enter such informational sectors of the economy such as banking, insurance, and financial institutions. Chisman's proposals for a major reallocation of resources is meant to mitigate these problems, but the extent to which even a *major* infusion of resources can significantly alter these *current* realities remains questionable.

In Chisman's approach, more resources would be extended to individual's most likely to enter into the post-industrial economy; employed learners perhaps at the G.E.D. level of reading and writing proficiency. Chisman might better have placed more emphasis on lower level skills and the implications of policy formulation that would affect people who may never enter into the “informational” sectors of the post-industrial economy.

An equally troubling implication is Chisman's assertion that the major burden for developing a competitive economy rests with the skills of the workforce. That might be the case for a potentially booming economy based upon extensive internal and external markets for American products and services. Yet the economic crisis that the nation has experienced since the 1970s is not so much due to the lack of sufficiently trained employees. It is characterized, rather, by the failure of a market reconstruction based upon emerging “post-industrial” realities that could match the vitality of the post World War II boom period which carried the nation through the 1960s.

With the precipitous decline of manufacturing, the rising “service” economy (whether of low or high tech) has lacked sufficient vitality to keep the nation at the competitive edge that it enjoyed in the 1950s and 1960s. Tremendous “downsizing” of major corporations over the past several years and the more enduring problem of unemployment and *underemployment*, lead one to conclude that the current workforce is both sufficient and sufficiently well trained to meet the employment needs of a somewhat flagging economy in the present and foreseeable future.

The more perplexing problem with the economy, therefore, is the lack of sufficient jobs. On this reality, upgrading the skills of the marginally literate is much less of a concern than is the need for a more diversified economy to meet the many challenges of a complex society. Instead of focusing on the single track of the post-industrial utopia offered by popular forecasters like Alvin Toffler (1971) and John Naisbett (1984), policy makers need to concentrate systematically on reconstructing a diverse economy based on manufacturing, building trades, service, and “information.” Such an economy not only would better match the various skills and aptitudes of our increasingly diverse population. It also could provide the infrastructure for the stabilization of a more vibrant *internal* market which is essential for economic revitalization, even in a trade oriented economy that requires an expanded complex of products for increasingly diverse world marketplace. Given this more realistic framework, human resource development could take on other patterns than those suggested by Chisman and his “post-industrial” cohorts.

A final dilemma with Chisman's view is the narrowness of his utilitarian focus. In *Leadership for Literacy* (1990) he acknowledges the “humanitarian” and “civic stake” the nation has in promoting literacy. He alludes to “[t]he pathos of people unable to read stories to their children or covering up their lack of basic skills on the job, the isolation of people with limited literacy skills...” (Chisman, 1990, p. 5)— stereotypes that Hanna Fingeret, for example, has worked so diligently over the years to deconstruct. Chisman also bewails the civic cost in his difficulty “to imagine how people with limited literacy can be well-informed voters or how they can even learn enough about the issues of the day to be motivated to vote at all” (Chisman, 1990,

p. 5). On this point he dismisses the importance of oral communication and the ability of people to think critically, even without possessing extensive reading and writing skills.

For Chisman, though, the *primary stake* is utilitarian. While “humanitarian and civic concerns...lead us to *care* (emphasis added) about literacy,” clearly that is not “enough to make the United States mount a substantial response to the problem” (Chisman, 1990, p. 6). Rather, there is a concern of more fundamental proportions:

Why should we do something about adult literacy? The most persuasive answer appears to be that literacy is a life-and-death economic issue for the United States, both now and in the coming years, because it is closely linked to economic productivity (Chisman, 1990, p. 6).

I would argue against any direct relationship between adult literacy and the economic imperatives that Chisman foresees. I place the humanitarian and civic consequences of literacy, which Chisman tends to patronize, at a higher level of national importance in order to establish a more enlightened society and to extend a more participatory democracy into the body politic. Furthermore, I question Chisman’s bureaucratic imperative that personal needs, interests and aspirations of individual literacy learners should be subordinated to a “national interest” as defined by policy elites. Essentially, I agree with David Harman that:

Literacy itself cannot be forced upon a people. A demand for its acquisition - on the part of the people to be taught - is a necessary precondition. Such demand is not born in a vacuum. It reflects people's social, cultural, and individual needs; it is intricately interwoven with the learners' past and their vision of the future; it occurs only when the learner feels an inner need for it; it is self-reinforcing; it is accepted only because the learner wants it, not because some other person says it is important; and it relates to time and space. Unless these conditions are met, literacy will not be acquired...A strategy based on the needs of the people - as they themselves perceive them - can transform the vision of universal literacy into reality (Harman, 1987, 73).

I will examine some of these issues below after exploring countercurrents in the work of Paulo Freire.

The Radical Critical Pedagogy of Paulo Freire

Paulo Freire wrote that the task of the humanists is to see that the oppressed become aware of the fact that as dual beings, 'housing' the oppressors within themselves, they cannot be truly human (Freire, 1970, p. 84).

Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Freire, 1970) is clearly a foundational text among contemporary progressive literacy educators. Freire's engaging persona greatly aided the dissemination of his ideas. He traveled the world to promote them. Translated into many languages, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* has served as a potent source of stimulus among all educators seeking to promote "bottom-up" literacy programs. That is, programs whose premise is based on the inherent intelligence of even "illiterate" adults, an intelligence, often blocked by years of domination by social and political elites. More than anyone else, Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire has drawn out the inextricable connections between political ideology and pedagogical theory. Whether or not we agree with his views, all of those concerned about these issues owe Freire a profound debt of gratitude for his pioneering work.

In the United States, Freire has achieved a "founding" role on the school of "radical, critical pedagogy" and has stimulated the scholarship, among others, of Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren, Ira Shor and Donaldo Macedo (McLaren and Leonard, 1993). These theorists have drawn on the political critique of Freire and the role of the educator as a "transformative intellectual" to develop a so-called "radical" pedagogy that challenges the fundamental assumptions of the "normative" political culture of the United States. Adult literacy educators also have drawn on Freire's work as a basis for developing participatory approaches to instruction and program management (Fingeret and Jurmo, 1989). The political assumptions out of which they operate are more reformist than radical in that they "privilege" the "lived experiences" of learners as the foundational basis for program development.

It will be useful to explore Freire's core assumptions and develop a critique grounded in a contradiction between Freire's concept of false consciousness and his quest for a participatory model of education. Specifically, I question the oppressive/emancipatory polarity on which

Freire's politics of literacy is premised. That is, I argue that at least within mainstream programs within the United States, the consciousness of adult literacy learners as well as the "objective" historical situation in which both learners and teachers are engaged is more ambiguous than Freire was willing to allow. On these grounds, the "duality" of consciousness that Freire sought to transform among the "oppressed," represents an acute "reading of the world," one that deserves considerable respect.

In the four passionate chapters of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire laid out the core framework for a politics of literacy that with some important modifications, has remained consistent in its fundamental direction over 25 years. In his opening salvo, Freire declared "humanization" as the true vocation of all people. With that he laid the foundation for his highly charged polemic, drawing deeply on the European intellectual traditions of existentialism, humanism and neo-marxism, to create a Latin American text analogous to Frantz Fanon's anti-colonialist work, *Wretched of the Earth*.

For Freire, *humanization* refers less to a completed state of being than a process of continual "becoming" through "praxis" wherein people, both individually and collectively, critically reflect on their on-going experiences. This is for the purpose of constructing a more liberated society and culture that frees the "oppressed" and the "oppressor" from an "unauthentic" existence. While only "humanization," is "man's [true] vocation" (p. 28), dehumanization remains a distinct possibility, which reflects much of the actual socio-economic conditions in Latin America among the rural peasants and the urban proletariat.

At the core of such dehumanization is the oppressive force of "objective reality," particularly crushing poverty that keeps intact the dominating power of social, political, and economic elites. Such power not only includes a vastly unequal distribution of material goods between the elite and impoverished, which Freire never minimized. More perniciously, the oppressed have incorporated the image of the elite within their own consciousness and lack the power within themselves to expel the invader from within. "Freedom would require them to eject this image and replace it with autonomy and responsibility" (p. 31).

Viewing freedom more as a process than an accomplished fact, Freire placed a larger degree of responsibility on authentic revolutionary leadership to play a liberatory role. For this reason, the place of a critical, dialogical pedagogy plays a central role in Freire's conception of a cultural revolution. Although radical educators have a more accurate sociological understanding of the sources of oppression than the "people," enduring political, social, and cultural transformation can only take place through a constructive dialogue that attains their full participation. In Freire's vision, leaders and the people are embraced in an epiphany of mutual love and interdependency. In their present condition the people need the leaders to begin the arduous process of ejecting the invader from within. Without the full participation of the people, in turn, the leaders are subject to "vanguardism". In Freire's utopian view:

...the teacher-of-the students and the students-of-the teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is not merely the one who teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teaches. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow....Here, no one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught. Men teach each other, mediated by the world, by the cognizable objects which in banking education are 'owned' by the teacher (p. 67).

Freire posits a sharp dichotomy between "banking" and "dialogical" education that conforms precisely to his polarized political ideology. On Freire's reading, banking education enacts "communiqués" wherein those *with* knowledge bestow it upon those who lack it:

Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, [the banking educator] negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry. [Instead, t]he teacher presents himself to his students as their necessary opposite... (p. 58).

In the banking model, the curriculum reflects the values of the educators and, more broadly, the dominant elite for whom education serves a normative function to "fit" students into their "appropriate" subordinate roles. As part of this "oppressive" ideology, the banking model mirrors the social hierarchy. Thus, teachers talk while students passively listen; teachers select content materials which students unquestionable accept, and most perniciously, in a parallel

structure to the broader macro world, “the teacher is the Subject of the learning process, while the pupils are mere objects” (p. 59).

The opposite of the banking model is not the “celebratory” voices of students, though they serve as a critical starting ground for a dynamic “pedagogy of the oppressed.” The problem is that the people are so oppressed that they have incorporated the ideology of the elite inside their own heads. The opposite of banking education, therefore, requires the expulsion of those “inauthentic” voices by the embrace of a new praxeology wherein people progressively enact their authentic vocation, “humanization,” through identification with the cultural revolution. To accomplish this, the “people” and the leadership of the cultural revolution need to work in a close, synergistic relationship through a “problematized,” and thoroughly dialogical critical pedagogy. This will establish the climate where the oppressed may expel the invader from within and to initiate concrete action to overcome the oppressiveness of any given “objective” reality that masks the contingent nature of all historical experience.

As a postmodern Deweyan progressive there is much in Freire’s work that I seek to emulate. Like Freire, I believe that the connection between politics and education is ineradicable. Moreover, I share his passion for praxis, that education has the capacity to *change* reality as he puts it, “however small” (Freire and Macedo, 1987, p. 126). I share his belief in dialogue and the importance of student voice in the development of an instructional program so that education is *with* rather than *for* students and agree that “humanization” is a fundamental human vocation that education should facilitate. Similarly, I am in accord with Freire’s understanding that literacy is fundamentally a “meaning making” process whereby we “read the word” in order to more fully “read the world.” Finally I agree with him that the educator plays a fundamental role as a change agent by encouraging students to exercise a critical intelligence in their exploration of the world.

My fundamental disagreement resides in the oppressive/emancipatory polarity that still characterizes Freire’s project, notwithstanding certain modifications of his earlier views such as his diminishment of revolutionary rhetoric and his acceptance, where necessary, of pragmatic,

reformist tactics. It is not his utopian perspective, *per se*, that is at issue. Rather, it is its radical/revolutionary *framework* that pits “critical intelligence” and “lived experience” in basic opposition to each other. This opposition is often the case in adult literacy programs within the United States, when they reflect a prevailing ethos of “late” capitalistic formation in the consciousness of the vast majority of students and instructors. Freire and more generally the Girouxian school of radical critical pedagogy have retreated somewhat against such simplistic antipathies. Nonetheless, the overwhelming impetus of their work is still characterized by a hegemonic/counterhegemonious polarity with “resistance” playing more of a role than “revolutionary” praxis as a prevailing mode of operating in a profoundly non-revolutionary society.

Such polarities remain coherent within traditional Marxian and neo-marxian perspectives with theory playing predominantly a critical rather than praxeological role. Given Freire’s respect for the lived experiences of the “oppressed,” and the extreme unlikelihood of any sustainable significant social movement toward radicalism in the United States in the foreseeable future, it seems unlikely that the radical stance can result in a meaningful “transformative” praxis. This is particularly the case within “mainstream” adult literacy programs, however progressive in tone they seem.

Middle Ground: Literacy as Growth and Art

Dewey wrote:

[Growth] is essentially the ability to learn from experience; the power to retain from one experience something which is of avail in coping with the difficulties of a later situation. This means power to modify actions on the basis of the results of prior experiences, the power to develop dispositions. Without it, the acquisitions of habits is impossible (Dewey, 1916, p. 44).

I set this essay in a “hermeneutics of hope” rather than in any foundational position, on the assumption that such space provides the best chance of realizing an “emancipatory” pedagogy in a profoundly ambivalent, at best reformist political culture. This culture contains

both untold opportunities and incredible constraints, unevenly distributed across the social landscape. My intention is not to replace radical critical pedagogy with my own reformist project as it remains uncertain whether even this more temperate political ideology contains sufficient potency to reconstruct the field of adult literacy education within a more realistic, yet reconstructive paradigm. Given the limitations of both the post-industrial vision of functional literacy and the radical camp of Freire, I argue that this reformist temper for a middle way represents “the last best hope” for adult literacy within the United States for the foreseeable future.

In the effort to chart such a course I embrace certain of Freire’s key ideas such as humanization, dialogue, critical reflection, ontological openness, and the ineradicable connection between political ideology pedagogical theory. On my reading of the world I interpret these core characteristics through a reformist vision as the horizon of possibility, as the force field of potentiality which allows us to move “forward” into being and becoming. Therefore, from such a reading I shall attempt to reconstruct Freire’s emancipatory pedagogy through the progressive gaze of John Dewey’s philosophy of education. It is Dewey’s core concept of growth enunciated at the height of the Progressive Era optimism at the beginning of this century that I seek to appropriate in the more pessimistic climate of this century’s end. Dewey characterized growth in the following way:

If education is growth, it must progressively realize present possibilities, and thus make individuals better fitted to cope with later requirements. Growing is not something that is completed in odd moments; it is a continuous leading into the future. If the environment, in school and out, supplies conditions which utilize adequately the present capacities of [for our purposes, adult literacy learners]... the future which grows out of the present is surely taken care of. The mistake is not in attaching importance to preparation for future need, but in making it the mainspring of present effort. Because the need of preparation for a continually developing life is great, it is imperative that every energy should be bent to making the present experience as rich and significant as possible. Then as the present merges into the future, the future is taken care of (Dewey, 1916, p. 56).

Dewey’s philosophy of education was undergirded by a broad consensus that the American political and social landscape had the capacity to create a progressively better society.

It is more difficult to be sanguine about that now and the collective work of Freire, Giroux, McLaren, and Shor have made an important contribution in deconstructing the benign influence of liberalism on educational theory and practice. In pointing to the broad structural inequalities of life in the United States, the school of radical, critical pedagogy remains compelling, although far from totally convincing.

I cannot provide a path through the wilderness that leads to or even progressively moves toward the promised land of justice and emancipation, the hallmarks of Freire's utopia. There is no evolutionary teleology implicit in my appropriation of Dewey's progressive, pragmatic philosophy for our times. I draw on it almost symbolically, simply as the most compelling intellectual and praxeological space available, from my reading, for making progress at all in any sustainable cultural and institutional sense; and my reading admits considerable pessimism.

I draw, therefore, on Dewey's notion of growth as the primary hermeneutical space available for mainstream adult literacy programs within the United States. This assumption, in turn, is based on the belief that the gap between the "literacy myth" (Graff, 1979) and what literacy actually delivers for people who persist in the effort long enough is not so wide so as to prevent the kind of growth to which Dewey refers. One of the key dimensions to this is "making the present experience as rich and significant as possible" with the ultimate goal of transforming lived experience into an art form that leads to a felt sense of transcendence. Whether this is an innate human capacity or an especially pronounced phenomenon of the American cultural landscape, we nurtured such an aspiration at the Bob Steele Reading Center, particularly through a variety of student narratives where learners become authors. These narratives were incorporated into the curriculum for other learners who then were challenged to engage in similar art forms. Thus the synergistic relationship between experience and art represents an essential component of growth and can be incorporated into a reformist adult literacy curriculum, particularly on Dewey's notion of art as the "consummation" of lived experience. Cultural critic Giles Gunn provides keen insight on Dewey's philosophy of art:

The point he [Dewey] was emphatically interested in defending is that aesthetic experience is no different in kind but only in degree from all other experience. It is an attempt to refine, intensify, and subsidize the satisfactions potential to, but not possible for, nature itself. These satisfactions are at least potential to nature because all natural processes contain within themselves, as essential to their continuation and development, the capacity to convert obstacles or impediments into instruments for further growth. Yet these satisfactions are still not possible for many natural processes because they do not include within this capacity the ability to create new experiences out of meanings derived from earlier experiences. What enables the transformation of the one into the other, according to Dewey, is the agency of the imagination which he understood to be an element in all conscious experience (Gunn, 1992, pp. 88-89).

Such stimulation of the imagination through the enhancement of new experience represents an important, often overlooked component of adult literacy education. When such enhancement crosses a certain threshold, experience, according to Dewey, is transformed into art. Admittedly, this transformation is subjective, because art is a matter of taste and is understood more through intuition than cognition. Still, consider the depth of expression articulated by one of Hartford's former "illiterates."

Sun set and the night roll around, I can feel my emotion come down, but now as I pull back the cover of my bed saying to myself tonight I'll forget tears falling like the rain, tears—another hardly knows my pain—tears—pall the tears your heart wouldn't hide—tears—now the tears become a good nice rain. If I could go back and change the hand on the clock, my heart would be saying you heard it, tick dock. For the one I love has gone far away. It gets harder and harder to face another day--tears falling like the rain, tears—another hardly knows my pain—tears—all the tears you wouldn't hide—tears—now the tears become a nice good rain, every night when I lay my head down to sleep (Smith, 1991, p. 15).

Although this piece is particularly poignant, it is far from unique in the depth of emotion it depicts within the emerging genre of student-generated material created by adult literacy learners and their tutors. This growing body of literature portrays a vehicle that can enable new adult writers and readers to achieve provocatively innovative art forms through powerful acts of reading and writing that at least on Dewey's reading, is as aesthetic, if not more so, than in engaging the so-called "classics" of any traditional canon.

In addition to transforming experience into art, what Dewey refers to as a "consummatory" experience, the other purpose according to Dewey, of making "present

experience as rich and significant as possible,” is that such a focus serves as the best grounds possible for preparing people to meet the varied exigencies of the future. It is difficult to accept Dewey’s notion that given such an approach, “the future is taken care of,” considering the unstable economy of the contemporary period and the persistence of acute poverty in the nation’s urban areas. Without profound structural change, the future likely will remain precarious for many adult literacy learners. Yet, in starting with the present rather than with a utopian ideal, this approach offers a way to help people prepare for the future by establishing opportunities for them to enhance their aesthetic sensibilities through literacy. This in turn, might enable them to develop the wide array of skills, aptitudes, and perceptions needed to meet the varied the challenges of coping with a complex and ambiguous social world.

Consider David, a Guyanese student who entered the Reading Center program at age nineteen. When he entered the program he possessed virtually no reading and writing skills; but he had obtained a job stocking shelves at a supermarket. He was offered a new position there loading trucks, but turned it down because of his inability to read meat labels which would have prevented him from performing his job adequately. Later, as David increased his literacy (as well as his work experience) he was able to take a better job at a meatpacking company (Smith, Ball, Demetron, and Michelson, 1993, pp. 14-24; Demetron, pp. 1994, 25-31).

Although David’s new job may not require much reading becoming literate played an important role in enabling him to seek and obtain the new position. That is, literacy had an *indirect* effect that advocates of competency-based programs need to ponder. There is not always (perhaps not even typically) a direct correspondence between measurable increases in reading and writing aptitude and the ability to function more effectively in society. The critical and somewhat mysterious intervening variable is the concrete particularity by which individuals mediate affective, social, and cognitive development through the emerging social construct of the self. Some of the factors that enabled David to seek and obtain the new position included the ability to read maps and road signs which expanded his knowledge of local geography; the ability to fill out job applications, thereby, increasing confidence in communicating more

effectively. What also emerged was an overall expanding self-perception which was the result of a combination of increasing literacy, the empathy of his supportive family, and general maturation. David's future goals include obtaining his GED, becoming a nurse's aide, and to "communicate good with my wife and my son" (Gruner and Demetron, 1995, p. 42). It is clear that David is future oriented and wants to accomplish a variety of important objectives through literacy. But, the primary way that he has developed his aptitude has been through concentration on more immediate interests.

Among the topics that David enjoyed were oral history texts, an abridged volume of *Moby Dick*, and news stories such as the Clarence Thomas Supreme Court hearings and the O.J. Simpson trial, all of which provide abundant opportunity to enable him to develop his critical reflectiveness as well as basic skills (Demetron and Gruner, 1995, pp. 36-42). Interestingly, none of these topics have any direct relationship to increasing functionality within society, the primary objective of competency-based adult education. Yet they all potentially may play a pivotal role in the enhancement of his "growth," if their educational value is exploited, to help David develop a variety of skills, aptitudes, and perceptions which then may be transferred to "real world" settings.

Of particular interest is David's affinity for science. It is the sheer wonder of it stimulated his curiosity. Although his precise understanding of science still is vague--he defines it as, "how something is situated"—he senses that it represents a world of knowledge that could expand his own horizon; and he has learned enough to realize that there are "different ways to put science on my level." Even though "I don't have a clear picture of what I want to say," it is evident that he is intrigued by a body of knowledge that apparently has little or no direct application to any functional goal that motivates him. Yet, he insists, "I want to experiment with science. That kind of science I like" (Demetron and Gruner, 1995, p. 36).

By tapping into his curiosity and wonder, the horizon of David's learning possibility may be expanded, enabling him to develop broader capacities to "function" more effectively in other areas. This is what Dewey meant by *growth*; "to utilize adequately the *present* [emphasis added]

capacities” (Dewey, 1916, p. 56) in order to expand on experience and to stimulate further learning as the most effective way possible of preparing for the future. The key for David’s ongoing literacy development is the stimulation of his current interest. As he puts it, “If the story is interesting, I read better. If not I put it back” (Demetrian and Gruner, 1995, p. 36). These simple sentences capture the essence of David’s learning history which is remarkably congruent with the sophisticated pedagogical philosophy of John Dewey.

We have abundant documentation of the value that learners at the Bob Steele Reading Center attribute to literacy in areas that are mid-way between the epistemology and social reductionism of Forrest Chisman’s conception of functional literacy and the radical cultural revolution that undergirds Paulo Freire’s utopian praxeology.

I define this middle ground through the ontological openness of John Dewey’s vision of growth. In such space the quest for community plays an important supportive role, but only within a context wherein each person’s individual goals are enhanced through literacy. On this I am turning Dewey’s social theory on its head on the grounds that in the late twentieth century, “post-industrial” era, the quest for the “Great Community” has considerably eroded. What is left, I argue, is an individualism that nonetheless seeks “completion” through what I would like to call “the better” community. It remains individualism, by and large, and with notable exceptions, which drives the quest for community in much of contemporary life in the United States and certainly within mainstream adult literacy programs. If that becomes obstructed, a fundamental source of motivation for participating in the program—some form of self-development, albeit, often for profoundly social purposes—is eroded. As part of a broad ideology of “growth,” adult literacy learners also are predominantly motivated by a quest for inclusion into the mainstream rather than by any radical restructuring of the social institutions and cultural assumptions of “late” capitalism.

On the latter point, I take the position that the quest for inclusion represents a powerful “reading of the world” rather than a manifestation of “false consciousness” in an *utterly* non-revolutionary, neo-conservative society with limited options for fundamental structural change,

yet, with windows of opportunity, however small at times, for enhancement and growth. In arguing thus, I take a praxeological rather than a “critical” stance from the vantage point of practitioners and participants in “mainstream” programs, trying to improve the situation from within.

I do not deny the value of Freire’s “reading of the world” as critique and as possessing a certain praxeological value in given places and certain periods of time. However, I contend that *development* over radical structural transformation represents the *current* “limit-situation” and “force field of potentiality” that characterizes the primary opportunity structures of mainstream adult literacy programs in the United States at this time. And even this limited reformist space remains precarious at best.

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