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VOICES, VALUES, VIEWS: A NARRATIVE ETHNOGRAPHY OF A VOLUNTEER
LITERACY PROGRAM STUDENT INVOLVEMENT GROUP

A Thesis in Adult Education
By

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ABSTRACT

Employing a narrative ethnography methodology from a theoretically critical perspective, I studied a student involvement group at a federally-funded volunteer-based literacy program in Central Pennsylvania. By eliciting narratives from participants and taking part in a range of group activities over a nine month period in 2004-2005 and then returning to the field for follow up interviews in early 2006, I am able to juxtapose the benefits, challenges, and contradictions that arise as literacy students, English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, and the volunteer coordinator work together to create and sustain this group.

Specifically, I found that individual members benefited from participating in the group in several ways: individual members felt emotionally supported, were provided opportunities to enhance and expand their literacy practices, exercise varying levels of power within the program, and become more aware of and to become involved in macro-political issues via discussions of the 2004 Presidential elections and involvement with the adult learner national organization, Voice for Adult Literacy United for Education (VALUE). By tapping into the members' rich social networks, ideas and resources, Sunnydale Literacy Program benefited in terms of gaining greater public awareness and recruiting more tutors and learners. In turn, when learners helped the program, they gained skills, confidence, and a sense of ownership.

Challenges in sustaining the group arose as members confronted the cultural, lingual, ideological, and ability-related differences among them. One example is that the ESL learners (all Spanish speakers) and literacy students were frustrated by the language barrier between these two groups. Members also struggled with giving up their traditional roles as defined by the typical federally-funded program. The practitioner still tended to be the professional caregiver and students at times still acted as clients seeking services.

I conclude with several pages of reflections on my experience of researching this group, suggestions for working through these challenges, and recommendations for future studies.

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PREFACE

Coming to the Question: The Narrator's Narrative

No one denies that [adults enrolled in literacy programs] are primarily the working poor and public assistant recipients, and they are disproportionately represented by people of color and immigrants. (D'Amico, 2004, p. 17)

I have very little in common with most people who enter into adult basic education (ABE) programs. I enjoy the privileges of being a middle-class, white woman of western European descent. I speak, read, and write fluently the unquestioned dominant language. I have always had access to adequate health care, reliable transportation, and comfortable housing. I have neither been forced to take a minimum wage paying job that required me to stand on my feet hours at a time while breathing in toxins, nor had to wait for the next welfare check to buy groceries or purchase my child a pair of glasses. The chasm between me and the typical ABE learner is indeed great.

People described by D'Amico in the quote above are stigmatized (Beder, 1991; Quigley, 1997; Suave, 2001). The stigma does not come from the differences themselves but from a society that determines what is normal and acceptable. "Stigma exists when elements of labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination occur together in a power situation that allows them" (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 14). Despite the very different socio-economic status between the typical ABE learner and me, I do know what it means to be stigmatized. I can only reason that it is because of my own life experiences that I have become so impassioned about working with adult learners, gotten involved with working with the national organization Voice for Adult Literacy United for Education (VALUE), and ultimately taken up this doctoral study.

Growing up in suburban Minneapolis in the mid 1970s, I was like every other elementary school child at Immaculate Heart of Mary: white, middle class, and Catholic. We were a homogenous set in our white button down shirts and brown loafers. I was noticeably different, however, in one respect: I sustained mild brain damage at birth. Consequently, I limped; my fine motor skills were below grade-level (I recall my first grade teacher crumbling up my news print sheet filled with wobbly w's and shaky "y's" while sharply instructing me to "try harder"); and my eyes did not always focus correctly. I wore eye patches and leg braces. I was also overweight and careless in appearance, with untied shoes and wrinkled shirts. With my deviation from the prescribed norm at IHM, I was at times the object of pity, derision, and indifference. Art instructors never asked if I wanted help with my art projects, people just assumed I would want them to look "nice," (i.e., like everyone else's); my misshapen, crookedly cut snowflakes were not good enough. Gym teachers never asked if I liked being placed in the far left field where rarely a ball would fly; they just assumed it would be easier for me. And I became passive, just accepting authority figures' help, suggestions, ideas, thinking they knew best. Peers were more overt in their disregard and disrespect. Frequently I was teased, at times hit or spat on, and once beaten up in the third grade because a boy was fearful that I "liked him." I learned from these early childhood experiences that I must minimize my difference, deny my deviation.

By the time I reached junior high, I got into the habit of lying about my uneven gait. When people inquired as to why I was limping, they often offered readily understandable explanations, "Did you twist your ankle?" "Are you tired?" "Do your shoes hurt?" I only had to smile and nod. In their minds, my difference was temporary—a brief aberration from the norm—that time would heal. After a period of a day or so, I would again be like "everyone

else.” I always avoided organized sports; never took another art class once it was no longer a requirement; and dropped out of the behind-the-wheel portion of driver’s education in high school, convinced that I could not maintain control of the car. But all through high school, I felt these self-imposed restrictions were better than being seen as different, being labeled as the girl with brain damage.

My friends were stigmatized as well. For example, when I transferred to a Catholic college in Texas my sophomore year, among my friends were an inter-racial gay couple, a senior girl with moderate scoliosis and severe facial acne, and a heavysset Freshman who was raised by her working-class grandparents. I was just happy to be with a group of people who did not judge me, a group with whom I felt comfortable and accepted.

Yet the older I got, the less my physical disability seemed to matter. I did learn to drive a car by the time I was 20 years old with the help of modification. I had also lost weight, achieved academic success, grew physically attractive; I was well aware I had become a far more acceptable female within mainstream society. Although I no longer lied about why I limped, I still considered it a “minor bodily stigma,” an imperfection that I hoped others would not notice or at least refrain from mentioning (Ellis, 1998).

After graduating from college in 1991, I served as a volunteer tutor at a literacy program. This was during the height of the national campaign for adult literacy; volunteerism had been popularized by the media and politicians. George H. Bush’s “A Thousand Points of Light” and the televised public service announcements helped convince me that volunteering to help teach others to read was something I could do. The barrage of articles heralding the literacy crisis in the daily newspaper and weekly magazines convinced me that tutoring was something I *should*

do. Like so many volunteers, I felt good about myself, helping the “unfortunate,” and sharing the gift of reading and writing.

The satisfaction derived from tutoring coupled with the struggle to find gainful employment with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Theatre led me to change career paths: I decided to teach. I returned to school for a Masters in English with some vague notion that I could one day be an English professor. I abandoned that idea after “TA’ing irresponsible, ungrateful undergraduates.” When I finished that program, I decided I wanted to be an *adult* educator.

I then took a position as a Volunteer in Service to America (VISTA) in 1996-1997 working as a tutor/adult learner coordinator at an adult education center in Kentucky. As a member of the staff, I gained a better idea of how adult literacy programs operated and of the underlying assumptions. I was also more mature and reflective about my experiences as a literacy worker than when I was a volunteer tutor. What I remember most vividly about this experience was how learners were regarded; they were the outsiders. Even though the learning program existed for them, it was not “of or by” them. Students were “TABE’d” (assessed using the instrument Test for Adult Basic Education), assigned tutors, given workbooks, and discussed during staff meetings. Learners were partitioned into little cubby holes so they could meet in secret with their tutor—no one must know the shameful secret that they are low-level readers. We staff members felt confident that students were served adequately. If they dropped out or did not make gains on the post-test, it was because of lack of motivation or lack of ability. As Cunningham (1993) observed:

We blame [learners] with our language of deficiency, e.g. lack of motivation, poor self-esteem, inability to delay gratification. Our values of individualization teach our students to blame themselves because success depends on the individual. If you don't get somewhere, then who is to blame? Not the system, not the educators; you are (p. 6).

Still, it bothered me that we never asked learners what they wanted to learn, found out what they thought of the program, or provided a forum for them to get together to encourage and learn from each other. We did this for the tutors via in-services, but not the learners. I wondered about this and began to think about the feasibility of bringing learners together. Finally, I gained enough courage and asked my supervisor if I could plan a get together just for the literacy learners at the center one evening. She supported the idea in so far as providing me money to buy food and beverages. I made very simply-worded post cards inviting them to a “pizza party” and mailed them to the learners. I thought a pizza party would be non-threatening. I made follow-up calls asking people if they had received the invitations. I asked learners if they were coming when I saw them in the learning center. Many times in the days leading up to the event, I wondered if it would be just me surrounded by a boxes of cold pizza and cans of warm soda. What if no one is interested or just too embarrassed to come? After all, I often heard about the elaborate lengths that adult literacy learners go to in concealing their difficulty with reading so others would not think they were “dumb and stupid.” This reminded me how often in school I lied about my limp wanting to be perceived as less than others.

But my fear was relieved that evening; students did come. My second fear—that there would be a lot of awkward silences—was quickly allayed as well; learners did talk to me and to one another. Larry told the group how frustrating it was when he was in special education classes in junior high school where all they did was listen to music and bake cookies; Tracy said she did not think her tutor was helping her very much since they spent many sessions talking about the tutor’s problems; Linda worried that her daughter would “end up like [her].” I listened attentively. I learned much that evening, more than I had in all the previous months I had served as a VISTA; however, by that point, my year of service had come to an end, and I was preparing

to return to graduate school to pursue a doctorate in adult education. Thus there were no more student meetings.

Even if I had stayed at the learning center, I would not have known how to implement change or would have appreciated the broader political implications of this “pizza party.” At that time, I thought of it as a nice idea, a way to get learners to support and encourage each other in their reading endeavors. I was like the practitioners described by Quigley (1997) who are “maternalistic humanists,” believing that adult literacy programs are primarily for students feeling better about themselves (p. 122).

In my doctoral studies at Penn State, I read Paulo Freire’s (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in which he contrasted the “banking model” of education (the teacher deposits bits of discrete information that students dutifully, unquestioningly memorize) and emancipatory education in which student and teacher enter into a dialogical relationship to co-create knowledge. I learned about Eduard Lindeman who believed adult education is an essential factor in the creation of a democratic society. Its absence leaves critical decisions in the hands of educated elite, promotes a cult of experts, and erodes democratic social order. I studied the history of Myles Horton who helped oppressed groups, such as exploited workers and African-Americans solve socioeconomic and political problems by critically reflecting upon their own experiences and then taking collective action.

But I still wondered about—and even was skeptical of—this kind of education occurring within the kinds of programs with which I was familiar. The federally-funded programs where I had worked consisted of individualized, standardized curricula; management was strictly top-down. Learners were seen as deficient, needing to upgrade their skills so they could function within society and be self-sufficient.

In 2000 I returned to the adult education field to work full-time as a tutor coordinator. In 2002, I became aware of and involved with Voice for Adult Literacy United for Education (VALUE), a national organization founded in 1998 by, for and of adult literacy learners. VALUE's mission is to "strengthen adult literacy efforts in the United States through learner involvement and leadership" (www.valueusa.org). I also became acquainted with a volunteer-based federally funded literacy program located in central Pennsylvania that was making changes within its structure to encourage learners to become more involved within the organization. In 2004-2005, I conducted a nine-month ethnographic study of this literacy program, which I document in the following pages.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Some of the most respected adult educators dedicated their lives to the practice of adult education for democratic social change. Founder of the famed settlement house, Hull House, Jane Addams believed that democracy is fully realized when “a bunch of ordinary people...contribut[e] their own experiences and beliefs to the discussion of the subject at hand” (quoted in Adams, 1975, p. 18). For Eduard Lindeman, adult education was simply about the business of social change (Heaney, 1996). Myles Horton, founder of the Highlander Folk School, believed that “what people need are experiences in democracy, in making democratic decisions that affect their lives and communities” (Horton, 1990, p. 133). Paulo Freire’s (1970) philosophy of education is intended to help learners question the status quo, not conform to it.

Over the past 50 years, however, the adult education field has become increasingly concerned with individual skill acquisition and professionalization rather than critical analysis and social transformation (Brookfield, 2002; Cunningham, 1993; Heaney, 1996; Miller, 1995; Welton, 1995). This turn has been especially pronounced among federally-funded literacy and adult basic education (ABE) programs (Miller, 1995; St. Clair, 1998; St Clair & Sandlin, 2004). Although recent federal legislation is focused exclusively on job training, quantifiable outcomes, and standardization, the emergence of the adult learner movement—as evident by state-wide student groups and the national organization Voice for Adult Literacy United for Education (VALUE)—continues to address this broader, more important mission of ABE. Within the context of this growing student movement and concurrent narrowing focus of government funding, I conducted a critical narrative ethnography of a student involvement group at a federally-funded volunteer-based, literacy program.

Statement of Problem

Broadly speaking, the adult literacy field evinces a strong commitment to adult learner leadership. In its document *From the Margins to the Mainstream*, the National Literacy Summit 2000 Committee—comprising representatives from organizations such as the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and the National Institute for Literacy—outlined three top priorities to guide the field over the ensuing ten years. Priority number one is student involvement: “As the field’s primary stakeholders... students must participate meaningfully in every aspect of the system that exists to serve them” (p. 3). Under outcome F, Action 2: one reads, “[Programs should] provide for student leadership by offering appropriate training” (See http://literacynet.org/value/whatsnew/2000_10/summit.html for a complete list of the goals that pertain to student involvement). ProLiteracy International, the largest nongovernmental literacy organization (formed when Laubach Literacy and Literacy Volunteers of America merged in October 2002), has an adult learner advisory board, a former adult learner on its Board of Directors, and an accreditation system that requires local literacy programs to provide opportunities to students to take on decision making roles within their literacy programs (Cass, 2004, p.1). States such as Delaware, New Mexico, and Massachusetts have state-wide student organizations that are involved in curriculum development, advocacy, and professional development (Tracy-Mumford, 2000, p. 18). Additionally, the National Council of State Directors of Adult Education adopted a focus on student leadership as a goal by providing technical assistance to states to help organize adult learners for leadership and advocacy (Tracy-Mumford, 2000, p. 18).

Upon closer inspection of the daily workings of many literacy programs, however, one is much harder pressed to find this democratic ethos in practice. Researchers have studied the

problems and resistance surrounding the implementation of student involvement (Boutwell, 1989; Campbell 1994; Demetrio 1993; Horsman, 2001). Several adult educators (Demetrio, 1993; Drobner, 2001; Jurmo, 1989; McGinnis, 2001) have found that implementing participatory practices within hierarchical, bureaucratic programs is difficult, given their “administrative ethos of elitism, hierarchy, and the marginalization of the nonreader” (Demetrio, 1993, p. 47).

Traditional ABE programs do not give students a voice in the programmatic decision making; students are viewed as passive clients in need of services (Campbell, 2001). Purcell-Gates and colleagues (1998) reported that the majority of the programs surveyed in their study were both decontextualized from students’ out-of-classroom lives and teacher-directed. In their 2000 study, Beder and Medina found that in 16 of the 20 classes, there was little focus on student-directed involvement. Based on this research and her own, D’Amico (2004) asserts that students resist participatory practices because they realize their involvement often amounts to little more than tokenism. The teachers still maintain tight control. Differences in class and culture between students and teachers can impact student willingness to participate in ABE as well (D’Amico, 2004). Moreover, programs are constrained by demands for accountability from funders. This is all the more true with the advent of WIA. All of these factors point to the need for a study examining how adult learners have taken on roles of greater involvement within federally-funded literacy programs.

Defining Participatory Education

When I typed in “student involvement” in Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), I received two responses, neither of which related to adult literacy programs. “Adult learner leadership” resulted in zero citations whereas “participatory education” rendered 38

sources. Among these was a 1989 collection of articles, edited by Fingeret and Jurmo, describing the theory and practice of participatory literacy practices within the United States. In the introductory chapter, “What is participatory approach?” Jurmo describes a model of participatory education showing four levels of learner involvement conceptualized as a ladder: At the bottom rung, learners are simply physically present in the program. The second level indicates learners who cooperate with the rules, activities, and procedures developed by the program staff. At the third level learners have some input and finally at the top of the “ladder,” “Learners have greater degrees of control, responsibility, and reward vis-à-vis program activities” (Jurmo, 1989, p. 18). Jurmo concludes that “a participatory approach aims at getting the learner to function as much as possible at the highest level of the ladder” (p. 18).

Jurmo based his model on Arnstein’s (1969) “ladder of citizen participation.” Writing during the height of the 1960s War on Poverty, Arnstein conceptualized her model in terms of federal programs, but foresaw that her typology could just as easily be applied to a church organization, public school, city hall, or corporation: “The underlying issues are essentially the same – ‘nobodies’ in several arenas are trying to become ‘somebodies’ with enough power to make the target institutions responsive to their views, aspirations, and needs” (Arnstein, 1969, *Types of participation and nonparticipation*, ¶ 4).

Fingeret (1989) calls participatory education a “philosophy as well as a set of practices. It is based on the belief that learners—their characteristics, backgrounds, and needs—should be at the center of literacy instruction” (p. 5). Learners ought to have input in defining, creating, and maintaining the program (Fingeret, 1989, p. 5). Campbell (1994) defines participatory practice as the “active involvement of students in the operation of one or more components of an adult literacy effort” (p. 5). Examples include serving on executive boards, fundraising, acting as a

program representative at media events, participating in tutor training, peer tutoring, and forming student groups.

For this study, I define participatory education as the practice of providing openings for learners collectively and individually to be involved in decision-making. Administrators and practitioners seek learners' opinions, suggestions, and ideas in all aspects of the program's operations. I do not assume that all learners within a program will avail themselves of these opportunities. What is crucial in my thinking about critical participatory is that practitioners are truly willing to share power and enable learners to exercise authority. In a critical participatory program, practitioners regard learners as partners because learners are viewed as capable of making meaningful contributions. I agree with Burnaby (2001) who asserts that the "main point of participatory education is to alter some of the socially taken-for granted ways learners and practitioners interact with each other" (p. 312).

Rationale and Purpose of Study

Multiple rationales for implementing participatory literacy practices have been cited in the literature. One rationale stems from important research conducted in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Scribner and Cole (1978), Graff (1979), Heath (1980), Fingeret (1983), and Street (1984) all published studies debunking the popular notion that people from oral traditions lack logical thinking and abstract reasoning skills. These "New Literacy Studies" (Merrifield, 1998) underscore the dignity, diversity, and intelligence found among what historically had been called the "illiterate population." Furthermore, these researchers began to describe literacy as a social practice, rather than the acquisition of discrete skills (Street, 1984). Over the past 20 years, numerous ethnographers have studied how various communities have different kinds of literacy

(see for example Heath, 1983; Merrifield, Bingham, Hemphill, deMarrais, 1997; Purcell-Gates, 1996; Street, 1984). Literacies are located in the social, emotional, and linguistics context that give them meaning (Tett, 2005, p. 28). Educators should understand that literacy learners are not “tabula rasas”; they enter literacy programs with a lifetime of experiences and capabilities. Thus instructors should seek to build upon the range of literacy activities that students currently engage in. Learners can then experience different kinds of literacies in a variety of contexts as they actively seek meaning in print (Jurmo, 1989, p. 19).

A second rationale for participatory education is to enhance personal development (Jurmo, 1989). Humanists believe the educational process should be concerned with the individual’s affective and emotional, as well as cognitive, dimensions (Norton, 2000). By providing opportunities for learners to set goals, create learning content, and assess their own needs and progress; the educator can help the learner achieve her or his full potential. Concepts of humanistic education that are reflected in participatory approaches include learner-centeredness, experience-based and cooperative group learning and a reciprocal teaching-learning relationship (Norton, 2000).

A third rationale for participatory practice is based upon the premise that literacy instruction can help learners transform personally *and* socially (Auerbach, 1993; Campbell, 2001; Cunningham, 1993; Fieldhouse, 1996; Fingeret, 1989; Freire, 1970; Heaney, 2000; Horton, 1991; Jurmo, 1989; Quigley, 1997). According to Campbell (1994) “Social relations structure literacy programs. Participatory literacy practices are the locus for transforming roles of and relationships between literacy workers and students” (p. 3). Moreover, critical educators maintain that “changes in teacher-student roles are not ends in themselves but a rehearsal for changing power relations outside of class” (Auerbach, 1993, p. 544). Sometimes called

emancipatory or liberatory education, the aim of this approach is to help adult literacy learners understand how oppressive social conditions (e.g., poor-quality education, inferior social status, lack of economic and political power) shape their lives (Jurmo, 1989, p. 22). The adult educator problematizes these oppressive aspects of the learners' lives through dialogue and critical reflection, ultimately leading to collective action.

Although I find participatory education compelling for all of these reasons, I do believe that adult literacy education should strive to help realize a more just sociopolitical structure (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2005, p. 308). My involvement with VALUE over the past several years has convinced me that I want to help with the project of expanding opportunities for learners to unite, to draw strength from each other, to be heard, and to be regarded as capable agents within the civic and political sphere.

I am a critical educator; therefore, I uphold that educational systems are inherently political. Decisions about whom to hire, what curricula to use, which books to buy, and what language to use within the classroom are all political decisions because various values, interests, and beliefs are negotiated and validated with each choice made (Degner, 2001). When learners are truly allowed a voice in the decision making process, they realize their world views are just as valid and important as practitioners, despite the disparity in educational or economic levels between themselves and educators. Participatory education is premised on the notion that learners should share power, authority, and ownership of all aspects of the program with administrators, teachers, and tutors.

As a critical theorist, I also believe that people inhabit a world of contradictions and asymmetries of power and privilege (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2005). Individuals may be simultaneously oppressed and privileged based upon their class, race, gender, sexual, cultural,

religious, colonial, and ability-related identities (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2005, p. 306). For example, in my personal narrative in the preface, I recognize the privileges I receive daily simply by virtue of my skin color, economic status, and educational background. At the same time, I have come to understand the oppression I have encountered because of my “disability.”

Adult education programs are neither entirely critical nor noncritical, but rather fall somewhere in between. Degner (2001) recommends that researchers conduct in-depth studies on programs that are in the process of changing their structure to reflect a more critical practice to gain an understanding of what precisely is happening within these programs. With the formation of its student involvement group in 2002, Sunnyside Literacy Partnership is one program that appears to be moving towards a more critical stance. My work contributes to the research by providing an in-depth study of one adult learner involvement group within a volunteer-based, federally-funded ProLiteracy program. By eliciting narratives from participants and taking part in a range of group activities over a nine month period in 2004-2005 and then returning to the field for follow up interviews in early 2006, I am able to juxtapose the benefits, successes, and challenges of creating and sustaining a student involvement group.

Given that ProLiteracy, the National Literacy Summit 2000 Committee, the National Council of State Directors of Adult Education, and VALUE are all urging local literacy organizations to embrace participatory practices, research is warranted to discern what is both beneficial and problematic in making these kinds of changes. Research on implementing critical participatory educational practices within a literacy program would benefit the program, literacy workers and students as well as increase the general knowledge base on literacy practices. Information regarding the benefits of and barriers to student involvement may lead to discussion among literacy workers, students, administrators and policy-makers and, possibly, to changes in

the rationale for, and assumptions behind, student involvement in literacy programs. For example, current policy concerning adult education with its emphasis on standardized assessments and national standards is in conflict with critical participatory education because it does not consider learners' interests, needs, and backgrounds. Documenting the greater use and comfort level of literacy practices among learners in a participatory program may provide policy makers with compelling rationale to employ non-standardized assessments.

My research questions are as follows:

- How does the student involvement group enable learners to exercise power within the organization?
- How does the student group foster critical participatory practices?
- How do individual group members benefit by taking part in the group?
- How do the individual members and the group itself benefit Sunnydale Literacy Partnership?
- What are the challenges of sustaining an adult student involvement group in an adult literacy program?

List of Acronyms

ABE: Adult Basic Education, serve learners ages 16 and over who are not formally enrolled in school and who have educational skills below the high school completion.

EFF: Equipped for the Future. Begun in 1994, the National Institute for Literacy's Equipped for the Future (EFF) initiative started the development of a framework for adult learning content standards.

ESL: English as a Second Language

LLA: Laubach Literacy Action, a national organization for volunteer-based literacy programs established by Frank Laubach in 1968.

LVA: Literacy Volunteers of America founded in 1962 by Ruth J. Colvin. LVA trained tutors to teach adults and teens to read, write and speak conversational English.

NIFL: National Institute for Literacy. Federal agency established in 1991 as part of the National Literacy Act. NIFL was originally established to conduct basic and applied research and demonstrations on literacy, in adult basic education, workplace, and family literacy.

NRS: National Reporting Standards. National accountability system with five core outcome measures: increased educational gains as determined by a standardized assessment procedure, entry into the workforce, retention of employment, entrance into postsecondary education or training, and receipt of secondary school diploma or GED

PAVE: Pennsylvania's Adult Voice in Education, Pennsylvania's state-wide adult learner organization established in 2002.

PLUS: Project Literacy U.S. A public service campaign established in the mid-1980s by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the Public Broadcasting Service and Capital Cities/ABC.

PAACE: Pennsylvania Association for Adult Continuing Education

ProLiteracy Worldwide: The nonprofit international literacy organization based in Syracuse, NY, that was formed by the 2002 merger of Laubach Literacy International and Literacy Volunteers of America, Inc.

TLC: Tutors of Literacy in the Commonwealth. A statewide organization of adult literacy providers in Pennsylvania

VALUE: The national adult learner organization, Voice for Adult Literacy United for Education

WIA: Workforce Investment Act. In 1998, Congress repealed the Adult Education Act and placed adult basic education (ABE) within the purview of the workforce development system. Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA) is Title II of the Workforce Investment Act.

Organization of Dissertation

In chapter 2, I trace the federal government's funding and legislation of adult basic education since the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act as I examine the political agenda undergirding adult policies over the past forty years. I also highlight historical episodes around adult literacy learner involvement on a national level and the creation of VALUE

In chapter 3, I provide a rationale for my research methods. In chapter 4, I share the history of Sunnydale, the site where I conducted my dissertation study, and its involvement in student-leadership activities locally and state-wide over its twenty-five year history. This background is crucial to understanding how the creation of its current student group came about. Chapter 5 consists of biographical sketches of the 2004 officers of the group who were the participants in my study.

In chapter 6, I discuss my findings. Specifically, I found that individual members benefited from participating in the group in several ways: individual members felt emotionally supported, were provided opportunities to enhance and expand their literacy practices, exercise varying levels of power within the program, and become more aware of and to become involved in macropolitical issues via discussions of the 2004 Presidential elections and involvement with the adult learner national organization, Voice for Adult Literacy United for Education (VALUE). By tapping into the members' rich social networks, ideas and resources, Sunnydale Literacy Program benefited in terms of gaining greater public awareness and recruiting more tutors and learners. In turn, when learners helped the program, they gained skills, confidence, and a sense of ownership. Challenges in sustaining the group arose as members confronted the cultural, lingual, ideological, and ability-related differences among them. One example is that the ESL learners (all Spanish speakers) and literacy students were frustrated by the language barrier

between these two groups. Members also struggled with giving up their traditional roles as defined by the typical federally-funded program. The practitioner still tended to be the professional caregiver and students at times still acted as clients seeking services.

In chapter 7, I conclude with several pages of reflections on my experience of researching this group, suggestions for working through these challenges, and recommendations for future studies.

CHAPTER 2: BRIEF HISTORY OF STUDENT LEADERSHIP

From 2002-2004, I took part in many adult learner involvement activities in order to explore how learners became involved in federally-funded volunteer-based adult literacy programs at the local, state, and national levels. I have found in researching documents, reviewing literature, and interviewing founding members of VALUE that it was during the height of the adult literacy campaign in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when learners found spaces and were afforded opportunities to organize and move towards collective action. Learners in these programs began attending national literacy conferences, addressing the media, and taking roles of leadership on local, state, and national levels. In 1998 adult learners were organized well enough to found the first and only national adult learner organization, VALUE. Critical education theorists have rightly pointed out that the 1980s literacy campaign and federal literacy initiative were financially inadequate and theoretically misguided because they failed to address structural injustices (e.g., poverty, homelessness, and unemployment), projected dehumanizing images of adult learners in the media, and provided insufficient funds and human resources (Fingeret, 1989; Heaney, 1993; Merrifield, 1998; Quigley, 1997). With an emphasis on individualized curriculum intended to teach a prescribed set of skills, federally-sponsored programs are tailored to fit the ends and interests of those in control.

Literacy programs promoted by our government are more likely to reinforce dependency, internalize failure, and ultimately leave unaffected the distribution of wealth and resources...graduates of literacy classes still have no voice in decisions affecting their lives when their problem from the beginning is political and economic powerlessness (Heaney, 1990, p. 4).

I review this history in order to establish the rationale for public funding of adult basic education and to illustrate how completely marginalized adult learners have been. Given this historical

context, one can begin to appreciate how difficult it is to create a more egalitarian relationship within literacy programs operating within a capitalist framework.

I categorize the different literacy eras to underscore the ameliorative effects that have been ascribed to adult literacy instruction. Gee (1988) writes “we all tend to believe strongly in the powerful and redeeming effects of literacy, especially in times of complex social and economic crises” (p. 196).

1960s: Literacy for Self-Sufficiency

In the early 1960s, for example, peaceful protests as well as violent outrage filled the streets of the South. The unemployment rate among nonwhites was 12 percent as compared to a mere four percent among whites and half of the black population was under the poverty line whereas only one-fifth of the white population fell into that category (Zinn, 2003, p. 458). Meanwhile, several economists had introduced the concept of human capital, which links levels of education with economic expansion. The corollary to this was the notion that people were impoverished because they lacked skills necessary to obtain and keep a job (De Santis, 1979, Woolcock, 1998). Then-President Kennedy looked to human capital as an explanation for this gross disparity between whites and nonwhites instead of acknowledging the rampant systematic racism within American industries. In his 1962 education message to Congress, Kennedy reasoned that it was “lack of schooling,” which leads to “chronic unemployment, dependency, and delinquency” (quoted in DeSantis, 1979, p. 9). In 1963, Commissioner of Education Francis Keppel argued for leadership and federal and state government funds to fight this “enemy to economic progress and increased productivity” (quoted in DeSantis, 1979, p. 9). Others were concerned with the abysmal literacy levels among the new

recruits in the military during the Cold War (Sticht, 2002). The following year President Johnson declared a War on Poverty, and Congress passed the Economic Opportunity Act. Title II B of this legislation stated, “the purpose of this legislation is to establish programs for persons 18 years and older whose inability to read or write the English language constitutes a substantial impairment of their ability to obtain or retain employment” (quoted in NACAE, 1980, p. 16). In 1966, when the Economic Opportunity Act was reviewed, the National Association of Public Schools Educators (NAPSE) lobbied to have adult basic education moved from the Office of Economic Opportunity to the Office of Education and advocated a change in name from the Adult Basic Education Program to the Adult Education Act, seeking to encompass multiple levels of education. Congress agreed (Sticht, 2002).

1970s: Literacy for Mainstream Functioning

Some congress members expressed concern that the “least educated” and “hardest to reach” were being passed over with the 1970 amendment of the Adult Education Act, which altered the expressed purpose of the Adult Education Act from “expand[ing] basic educational programs” to “expand[ing] educational opportunities for adults to at least the level of secondary education” (DeSanctis, 1979). These concerned congress members requested that the Office of Education use discretionary monies to fund the Adult Performance Level (APL) study, which defined literacy not by grade-level completion but by levels of functioning within the dominant society (DeSanctis, 1979; Demetrian 2005). The APL defined 65 requirements for adult living covering such disparate areas as home economics, government and law, computation, and interpersonal skills. The study grouped respondents within three categories (i.e., adults who are functionally incompetent, adults who function but lack proficiency, and adults who are

competent) (NACAE, 1985). Despite wide ranging criticisms of the study, government officials and text book publishers embraced the concept of functional literacy heralding it as a clarion call to reform education (DeSanctis, 1979).

The 1970s also became the “Right to Read” decade; President Nixon established the National Reading Council comprising sixty “distinguished citizens” from the fields of business, government, and the performing arts—under the aegis of the Vice President of AT&T and honorary chairperson, Mrs. Nixon—to serve as a “catalyst for the nation in producing dramatic improvement in reading ability for those requiring it and encouraging reading by all our people” (Cleland, 1971, p. 133). In turn, the National Reading Center funded in part by the Office of Education, was directed towards increasing the number of reading volunteers, publishing brochures and monographs on reading problems, and securing or developing “suitable definitions and measures of adult literacy and periodically report progress toward achieving national functional literacy” (Emery, 1971, p. 140).

1980s: Literacy for National Prosperity

By the early 1980s, the argument for literacy as was no longer focused on the need to eliminate poverty or as the ability to function in mainstream society but rather “to prop up America’s economic competitiveness in the new global economy” (Sticht, 2002, p. 38). Under President Reagan’s two terms, the United States’ industries consolidated, deregulated, and relocated: the working class and the working poor lost real wages; inside traders and corporate raiders made outrageous amounts (Merrifield, 1998). In 1980 the average Chief Executive Officer (CEO) made 40 times more in salary than the typical factory worker; by 1989, a CEO received 93 times more (Zinn, 2003, p. 581). Moreover, blue collar employees felt growing

insecurity as companies laid off workers and outsourced jobs to third-world sweatshops while discouraging unionization (Merrifield, 1998). Reagan also popularized the outlandish notion of the “welfare queen” as he approved a budget that cut 140 billion dollars from social programs and added 181 billion dollars in part to fund the equally outlandish Star War program (Zinn, 2003, p. 577). All of these policies contributed to increased long-term unemployment, a growing gap among economic classes, greater poverty both in urban and rural areas, and rising crime rates (Merrifield, 1998; Zinn, 2003). Yet, the public educational system became the scapegoat for a sluggish gross national product and a rising national debt.

In April 1983, *The National Commission on Excellence of Education* concluded that the nation was “at risk.” The report’s rhetoric reflected the ongoing Cold War: “We have even squandered the gains in student achievement made in the wake of the Sputnik challenge... We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament” (<http://www.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/risk.html>). Over the ensuing ten years, government reports such as *Workforce 2000* (1987), *Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills* (SCANS) (1991 and 1992), and *America’s Choice: High skills or low wages?* (1990) left no one to wonder why the government became consumed with literacy levels and standardized testing. In a 1988 *New York Times* article Barbara Holmes, Director of the Adult Literacy Project, part of the Educational Commission for the States, provided her *raison d’etre* in unmistakably human capital terms: “The American worker is the country’s most important resource. If the worker can’t produce, we’re in trouble. So it boils down to how do we save the country?” (Daniels, 1988, p. B8). President Reagan issued his own dire warnings: “The hidden problem of adult illiteracy holds back too many of our citizens, and as a nation, we, too, pay a price” (Reagan,

1983). Thus Reagan promoted the “Literacy Myth” (Graff 1979), the belief that literacy is the determining factor for individual and national progress.

With the introduction of the National Adult Literacy Initiative in 1983, Reagan intended to “erase” adult illiteracy—like his predecessor Nixon—by promoting volunteerism, stimulating private sector involvement, and increasing public awareness. “Let us roll up our sleeves and get to work,” Reagan urged. “Let the lights burn late in our classrooms, our church basements, our libraries, and around our kitchen tables—wherever we can gather to help others help themselves to the American dream” (Reagan, 1983). Hegemonic assumptions are the commonplace views that no one questions and in fact most accept as widely beneficial; however, they are constructed and projected by minority interest groups to maintain their powerful positions (Brookfield, 2000). The American Dream along with other American truisms such as “pull yourself up by your bootstraps,” and “the United States is a land of equal opportunity” is part of the dominant ideology in this country. One only needs to become formally educated, work hard, and practice self-discipline to be as successful as Horatio Alger’s protagonist in his “rags to riches” tales (Heaney, 1996).

Reagan maintained that illiteracy could be “eradicated” through private and faith-based programs that were in keeping with his notion of charity (i.e. private, voluntary, female) (Combs, 1993, p. 79). The president’s proposal was piecemeal, reminiscent of Freire’s (1970) notion of “false generosity,” a kind of charity that maintains the status quo (p. 29).

Thus, unsurprisingly, Reagan supported the National Coalition for Literacy’s awareness campaign and call for volunteers. Spearheaded by the American Library Association (ALA), The National Coalition of Literacy was formed in 1981, comprising 11 national entities including businesses (e.g., B. Dalton Bookseller), national volunteer organizations (e.g., Laubach Literacy

and Literacy Volunteers of America) and literacy associations (e.g., International Reading Association). In 1985, the Coalition launched its national multi-media campaign consisting of print ads, radio announcements, and television advertisements with such tag lines as “Volunteer against Illiteracy”; “The only degree you need is a degree of caring,” and “There’s an epidemic with 27 million victims. And no visible symptoms” (Newman, 1986, p. 25). Implicit in these messages is that the poor illiterate can be cured of his insufferable disease through the ministrations of a caring tutor (Luttrell, 1996).

ABC, Inc. and the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) jumped on the literacy volunteer bandwagon as well. In December 1985, these two media outlets launched a national public service campaign, Project Literacy United States (PLUS). Working through 222 ABC affiliated stations and 313 PBS member stations, PLUS created 366 literacy task forces across the country. Each task force worked at a local level to generate increased community action in literacy efforts and to coordinate resources in advance of the national public awareness broadcasts. The on-air programming phase of PLUS began in September, 1986, with "At a Loss for Words: Illiterate in America," a documentary narrated by Peter Jennings. PLUS public service announcements aired ten to 14 times a week on the ABC Television Network featuring various politicians and celebrities (Alamprese et al, 1987).

The most widely featured and recognized celebrity in the literacy campaign was Barbara Bush. She is was the kindly grandmother who can take care of this read to children, presided over honorary banquets, and delivered hundreds of speeches to Rotary and Lion’s clubs. She is the “moral mother” who will take care of this social ill (Luttrell, 1996, p. 345). As biographer Donnie Radcliffe (1989) notes when Mrs. Bush launched her “literacy crusade” in Philadelphia, she was careful to draw the distinction between her status as “volunteer and that of activist” (p.

36). Radcliffe (1989) quotes the former first lady: “I’m not here to do the president’s job. My job is to encourage the corporate and private sector to help, whether its individuals or agencies” (p. 36).

Towards that end, Mrs. Bush convinced her good friend and text book publisher, Harold McGraw to organize the Business Council for Effective Literacy (BCEL), a foundation established to foster corporate awareness of functional illiteracy and increasing business involvement (Killian, 1990, p. 211). Some of the Mrs. Bush’s interest sprang from the fact that her son, Neil, had mild dyslexia as a child. In a *New York Times* article, she declared that her son was “lucky” to receive the proper diagnosis, but many others were “not so lucky” (“First Lady writes about dyslexia,” 1989, p. A22). One can hardly ascribe serendipity to the fact that the son of a US President received the proper help as a child; rather, it was because his family could afford and had ready access to private tutors, extensive testing, and reading specialists. As Freire (1970) notes, social reality is not a matter of chance, but as the result of human forces (p. 36). Mrs. Bush’s son attributed his reading difficulties to random fortune as well: “A reading disability isn’t a class thing, it isn’t racial. It happens to anybody. Unless a parent is supportive, well-prepared and recognizes the problem, a child can be lost forever” (Radcliffe, 1989, p. 181). The Bushes’ ignorance or denial of sociological factors is staggering and sadly emblematic of the literacy campaign as a whole. The onus is put upon the individual. He or she is expected to overcome the limitations of her economic situation and few viable job opportunities through sheer will and hard work (Heaney, 1990).

Quigley (1997) writes at length detailing the different “illiterate” stock figures commonly depicted in the media. There is the simple immigrant who works humbly for a small piece of the American pie; the overgrown child who seeks guidance from the nurturing wise, grandmotherly

volunteer (a la Barbara Bush); and the backwards African-American who aspires to be accepted into the sophisticated, dominant (i.e., middle class white) society. Moreover, there were banquets honoring learners for their achievements hosted by Hollywood luminaries and PLUS campaign commercials featuring Learner of the Month relating his or her personal stories of how life has changed for them since they have gained reading skills. Many of these public appearances were little more than “dog and pony shows,” with tightly scripted roles put forth in order to provide “gut-wrenching testimonials” (Quigley, 1997) or “formula stories” (Chase, 2005) of the life-changing effect of literacy instruction.

Counter-Narratives

Yet learners were beginning to tell their own stories, instead of being represented by stock figures in the media. In a 1990 presentation at the Pennsylvania State Literacy Initiative Network Conference, future executive director of VALUE Marty Finsterbusch stated that he was not going to give “the typical new reader speech” about how his life has changed and that he is a different person. Instead he exhorts practitioners to recognize that literacy learners are not “slumped over, wearing dirty clothes...[or] have no thought whatsoever” (Finsterbusch, p. 3). They “are getting involved and taking action” (p. 3). He calls attention to programs where learners are coming together, supporting each other and the literacy program. “We can also help run programs...we can be on the board of directors and say ‘here we are, we’re human, we’re not what you thought’” (p. 5).

A smattering of articles in the mainstream press confirmed Finsterbusch’s position. Learners were forming local student groups, tutoring other students, and telling the press that they were not inferior and deserved respect (Sherman, 1984). They identified themselves

without shame as having limited literacy, used their real, full names, and showed their faces. Moreover, many basic adult education programs had long recognized how helpful adult learners could be in recruiting other students. A 1980 publication, *Reaching the Least-Educated: Pennsylvania's Handbook on Recruitment*, funded by both the federal Office of Education and Pennsylvania's Department of Education, encouraged programs to organize local student organizations that can offer helpful suggestions to directors on the needs of the program, and recognized that students are the most effective recruiters (p. 14).

In 1985, Jonathan Kozol published, *Illiterate America*, a widely-read book, which argued that illiteracy is a systematic outcome alongside poverty, and race and gender-related inequality (Lankshear, 1988, p. 375). Michael Fox, founder of Push Literacy Action Now (PLAN), was quoted in the *New York Times* stating that educators must look at their approach to literacy students rather than the learners themselves as problematic (Burnhams, 1984, p. A26). In 1986, the MacArthur Foundation provided funding to PLAN to produce a position paper on the need for a national learner-centered effort (Jurmo, 1989, p. 75).

Moreover, Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* introduced North American adult education researchers and practitioners to terms such as popular education, banking model of education, emancipatory education and praxis. Freire's argument that education is a political act and should work towards conscious-raising against oppressive forces resonated with many. "Throughout the United States and Canada, hundreds of Freirean adult education centers opened in store-fronts, churches, neighborhood organizations, and community colleges" (Heaney, 1996, p. 23). Freirian-based programs are participatory; learners are actively involved in making program decisions. The curricula in these programs lead to analysis and questioning the sociopolitical and economic realities of the learners' daily experiences as teachers and learners

engage in dialogue through which meanings are socially negotiated among all participants (Freire, 1970).

Learners Begin to Gather Together

Finally, beginning in the mid-1980s, the world's two largest adult volunteer literacy organizational networks, Laubach Literacy Action (LLA) and Literacy Volunteers of America (LVA) (collectively comprising thousands of local literacy providers; in October 2002 they merged into one organization, ProLiteracy Worldwide) began to take a strong interest in the participatory approach. These organizations took note of the publicity learners were gaining and efforts among local organizations to involve literacy learners (Jurmo, 1989, p. 75). For example in 1984, Lutheran Church Women offered monies to send 50 learners to Laubach's biennial conference (Jurmo, 1989, p. 75).

The year 1984 was also when Martin "Marty" Finsterbusch, future Executive Director of VALUE, enrolled in a Laubach-affiliated program as a literacy student at age 21. Finsterbusch grew up in a working class home in Philadelphia with five siblings and attended a school just for special education students where he "sat for 12 years and came out with a fourth grade reading-level." After graduating, he expressed interest in applying for college but was told, "No. That's for normal people." Instead he enrolled in his local literacy council. After eight months of one-on-one literacy instruction, Finsterbusch improved his reading well enough to enter a community college, eventually earning an associates degree in Hotel Restaurant Management. He ruefully noted that when an adult learner finishes the program his association with the group ends: "Every level of education has an alumni association except for adult basic education. We say

good bye and don't keep them involved in the program. Yet, alumni of ABE, more than current students, are in a position to help.”

Finsterbusch, however, did stay involved in his program. In 1986, Laubach arranged to have 60 students come to its biennial conference (Jurmo, 1989, pp. 75-76), and Finsterbusch was among the attendees. Although this invitation to the conference was encouraging, the reception towards the adult learner attendees was not equally so. He shared that the adult learners felt patronized; for example, the conference planners placed “foot prints” along the corridor as a way to guide the learners to their hotel rooms. Also, all the learners’ workshops were held in the basement where the ceiling leaked constantly. During one conference session, a small group of learners sat at the front of the room. They were introduced as “adult learner leaders.” But Finsterbusch found these “adult learner leaders” inexperienced:

I started asking all these questions about how other learners could get involved. But [the students at the front of the room] did not seem to know anything. One person sat there with his hands crossed the whole time and didn't say anything. Finally a practitioner stood up and shut me down and turned the questions away from me. So that's how I got involved—out of anger. If you're going to be a student leader, you have to be able to speak up! (personal communication, March 3, 2003).

A few others also spoke up at the conference, and LLA assembled a four-member team of student leaders. Finsterbusch was one of the team members. This team exhorted LLA to encourage local programs to create student groups and expand the roles of learners and also helped plan the first National Literacy Congress held in Philadelphia in 1987 (Jurmo, 1989, p. 75). The first of what was to be a total of four biennial literacy congresses had fifty student delegates, representing all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Each succeeding literacy congress, held in Washington DC, proved to be better attended and more ambitious.

Pat Blackwell, future Vice President of VALUE, attended the second congress in 1989, a year after she entered a library literacy program at the age of 47. She had won a statewide writing contest for adult learners and thereafter was chosen to attend this National Congress. Blackwell described the event as “great. It was nothing like I expected it to be. You just think there are not 100 other adults like me. We found we were alike. We broke up in small groups and there you could tell your story.” I could feel the energy and emotion in her voice when she talked about “telling your story,” so I asked her to elaborate.

Maybe they don't know what their story really is until they start telling it. And then hearing themselves tell it... You could feel their pain, the happy times, how they finally come out and told someone, how their life changed. You got to get on the inside of people when you hear their story. You get to know them.

A recurring theme in the literature on participatory education and what I found in my study, as I discuss in chapter 6, is the importance of creating community. St. Clair (1998) defines community as “a form of relationship” between people who share norms, discourse, and culture (p. 7). Communities provide a space where learners can connect, feel safe, and be accepted. They can tell their own stories, knowing they will be listened to (Campbell, 1994). When a literacy learner is given the opportunity to tell her own story, she can challenge the official narrative of the “illiterate” as it was depicted regularly in the late 1980s in the media (Quigley, 1997). Chase (2005) argues that “[f]or some people, the act of narrating a significant life event itself facilitates positive change” (p. 667). In these circumstances, the narrator is her own audience, the one who hears alternative versions of her identity or life events. Through this telling, the learner can begin to see herself differently and take an alternative path (Chase, 2005).

After returning from the conference, for example, Blackwell established a learner support group at her local program. She had always been frustrated that all information between learner

and her program was channeled through the tutor. “You know what that says to the student?” She rhetorically asked me, “It says ‘we don’t think you’re smart enough to handle this information.’...It’s not like we’re little kids.” Unfortunately, Blackwell was stymied in her efforts to create an adult learner group. The information regarding the group was filtered through the tutors. “I begged my director to give me the names of students,” Blackwell explained. “But she wouldn’t. That’s some of that program control: ‘We’re gonna keep our thumbs here, don’t get too big.’” After several years of trying to establish a local student group, Blackwell realized that she was never going to receive the necessary support from the program in order to create a vital adult learner infrastructure at her local program, so she turned her energies to the state and national level.

Calvin Miles, future Chairperson of VALUE, shared Blackwell’s frustration concerning the creation of a local infrastructure for learners: “It is a constant struggle to make programs aware that students are valuable and have an integral role to play.” Miles, a sixty-year old African American, is in a position, however, in which he can wield greater influence at the local level: He is a tutor coordinator at the program where he once was a student approximately 20 years prior. He knew when he first entered the LVA-affiliated program at age 39 that he had to make his opinion known. Miles felt cheated by his early years in school. Growing up in North Carolina in the 1940s, he felt the sting of separate and unequal policies in his educational history. Fortunately, like LLA, LVA had started to create spaces for his and other learners’ voices to be heard as an adult learner. For example, in the late 1970s, an LVA program in Connecticut hired a student coach to counsel other students and act as a go-between students and staff (Jurmo, 1989, p. 76). LVA shared this idea with other programs and encouraged them to replicate this model. In 1984, LVA published *Student Involvement Guidelines*, and in 1986, author Sidney

Sheldon donated \$10,000 to LVA to be used for special student-related activities. Overall, discussion among LVA affiliates about student involvement became more commonplace. Miles' program hired him and two other learners to serve as paid advocates. In the 1989 article, "Partnership for Change," Boutwell (1989) recounts the struggles and accomplishments of incorporating learner involvement into the LVA-New York City sites.

Calvin Miles attended his first LVA national conference in 1985 and like Finsterbush was equally troubled and galvanized by the reception of some of the practitioners there. He explained:

There were about 2,000 practitioners [at the conference] and five students. And we were settin' in the room that they had reserved for the students. A couple of the people came into the room and stuck their heads through the doorway and said, 'oh that's what they look like.' I swear to God! Right then, I said I'm gonna change that attitude. We five [learners] started talking about [how they could change these attitudes] and then I started meeting other people and getting more involved.

The ability to make social change only comes through collective action. Adult education is not only self-reflection, but equally attends to the common and shared experiences of the group, identifies agreed-upon meanings related to those experiences, and leads inexorably toward strategies which transform both individual and collective behaviors (Heaney, 1996). The problem, however, was that these active, vocal learners only were able to see each other at these conferences once a year, Miles told me, so that even though learners were doing things on a local level, they could not connect with one another outside of these biennial congresses. Finsterbush agreed that these forums were most beneficial in that it was the first time that adult learners from across the nation could meet one another and share their perspectives with one another and the field.

In an article about the 1991 congress, one learner is quoted as saying, “The school system didn’t do its job with me, and my job now is to make sure other children don’t go through what I went through” (Davis & Fitzgerald, 1991, p. 35). Another learner stated, “Funding sources are mainly conservative. To get money to you don’t talk about empowerment because there are people in power structures who think that people who can’t read are lower class and ignorant, why would we want to give them power? When you talk about empowerment, those in power get nervous” (p. 35).

The 1993 congress concluded with a series of ambitious goals and plans to achieve them. One of the goals stated that by September 1995, ten percent of adult learners in literacy programs will plan and participate in their organization (Source Notes/September 1993). The document defines participation in terms of sending learners to conferences, establishing a speaker’s bureau, and having student representation on literacy boards at the local, state, and national level (Source Notes/September 1993, p. 29).

Learners were frustrated because rhetoric was not followed by action. Finsterbusch explained, “We would gather, make declarations, have legislative lunches, tell our stories and then leave. Some of us felt like show horses. We wanted to get involved in the process and make decisions.” Freire (1970) faults those who substitute monologue, slogans, and press releases for dialogue and action. At all stages of collective change, oppressed peoples must see themselves as actively involved.

At the 1993 Northeast Regional conference at Robert Morris College in Pittsburgh, learners formally established Gather, a forerunner to VALUE. The name was taken from the notion of learners “gathering” together as they had done at the National Adult Literacy Congresses in 1987, 1989, 1991, and 1993. The organization dissolved, however, because

learners did not know “how to communicate, didn’t have enough resources, and not enough members” (M. Finsterbusch, personal communication, June 13, 2004). The learners realized for themselves that they needed leadership training. Campbell (2001), Horsman (2001), and Willingham (2001) found that adult learners desired leadership training before assuming roles that they have never had before. “Learners needed an opportunity to learn skills and to learn about the larger picture, or they were being set up to fail” (Horsman, 2001, p. 87).

Positive Change in the Field:

Despite this set back, student involvement continued to grow. By the end of 1997, there were at least 19 state-wide student groups in place (Tracy-Mumford, 2000, p.16). According to Finsterbusch (who received a 1999 National Institute for Literacy fellowship to survey states’ involvement of adult learners), the most impressive of these is Delaware’s Organization of Alumni and Adult Students in Service (OAASIS). OAASIS consists of former and current adult learners as paid staff who meet monthly. Additionally, OASSIS holds annual legislative luncheons where adult learners can directly speak with their representatives. “When it’s done right and there’s financial backing, adult learner organizations can be very effective,” concluded Finsterbush.

LLA and LVA did continue to support student involvement. As noted above, LVA co-sponsored three of the literacy congresses. This organization also created a National Student Advisory Board (NSAB) in the spring of 1992. NSAB planned the “student workshop track” of all the subsequent LVA annual conferences, recommended students for membership to LVA’s board of directors, and undertook a 1996-97 project to identify best demonstrated practices for starting and operating a student advisory group (Demetron, 2005).

In 1997, LLA published a report entitled, *The Impact of Student Involvement in Local Literacy Programs*. The authors surveyed its 950 programs asking if students were currently involved or have been in the past in their programs in ways other than as students. Of the 481 programs that responded, 280 currently did facilitate learner involvement, and another 42 had done so in the past. Areas of involvement included student representation on boards, public relations, student groups, fund raising, instruction, and tutoring.

LLA and LVA also had an influential role from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s in refashioning the Adult Education Act into the 1991 National Adult Literacy Act (Sticht, 2002; Demetron, 2005), which defined literacy as “having the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship” as well as “achiev[ing] one’s goals and develop[ing] one’s knowledge and potential” (National Literacy Act of 1991, sec. 3 quoted in Askov, 2000, p. 247). Although the focus in this 1991 piece of legislation is undeniably still on the individual as worker, there is at least an acknowledgement of literacy for other purposes, including citizenship. The National Literacy Act also established the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL), which was established to “conduct basic and applied research and demonstrations on literacy, in adult basic education, workplace, and family literacy” (Demetron, 2005, p. 69).

In 1994, NIFL mailed an open letter to adult basic education programs throughout the United States asking learners what they thought it meant to compete economically and exercise one’s rights as a citizen. This was in response to the National Educational Goals (established by then-President Bush and the nation’s governors in 1989). Goal 6, the only one pertaining to adults, read, “By the year 2000, every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and

responsibilities of citizenship” (Stein, 1995, p. 8). One learner’s comment sums up this sea-change well: “I was really surprised back at the beginning of EFF, when our class was asked what *we* thought about Educational Goal 6. It was so great that people were asking *our* opinion and wanting us to get involved” (NIFL News, 1997, p. 5). Demetrian (2005) argues that the implicit philosophy in EFF is one that encourages citizens to collaborate with one another to strengthen local institutions. Furthermore, the politics of EFF were far more comprehensive and idealistic than the rationale that adult basic education is to train future employees for the growing service sector (p. 18).

The outcome of this solicitation to adult learners resulted in four purposes of literacy: “literacy for access and orientation, as voice, as independent action, and as a bridge to the future” (Stein, 1995, p.10). In the follow-up *Equipped for the Future Content Standards*, Stein provides an example of one program using the EFF paradigm. The Vermont Adult Learning Program worked with women either on welfare or recently removed from federal assistance. The women voiced their concerns about the extremely limited transportation and child care options that kept them from holding jobs. Eventually several of the women spoke before a legislative committee who voted to appropriate money to an organization that repairs and resells cars cheaply (Stein, 1997, pp. 68-70). These women identified a common issue and worked collectively to address it. In 1995, NIFL invited 20 learners to meet with its staff to learn how NIFL could help enhance program quality at all levels (*NIFL News*, p. 6). Furthermore, in 1995-1996 NIFL granted fellowships to two adult learners, Archie Willard and Sentilla McKinley, who conducted a national survey of best practices in adult learner advocacy. Willard explained to me that he was always “very vocal” and political (e.g., representative of his meat packing union, campaigner for favorite political candidates, city council representative). In 1989, he was on his literacy

council's board and then nominated to attend the 1993 National Congress. From the connections he made while at this congress, then as a NIFL fellow, networking at different conferences and meeting adult learners from across the country, he came to collaborate with McKinley and four other adult learners to plan "The Leadership Workshop" in conjunction with the 1997 New Readers for New Life of Illinois State Conference.

Willard posted a lengthy email to the NIFL-National Literacy Advocacy (NLA) listserv alerting the field of their intentions. Willard went on to explain that in order for learners to be accepted to this conference, they must submit an application describing how they have taken on leadership roles and what direction they would like to take next as leaders. Moreover, in order to receive a certificate of completion, participants must attend a city council meeting or a school board meeting; give a public speech to a club, church or other kind of meeting; write a letter to the editor of a newspaper; and send an e-mail message to one of the members of the academy board. Following the conference, he sent another post to the listserv thanking NIFL for their "financial support...and for NIFL's stepping back and letting us as student leaders develop our own workshop" (Willard, 1997, p. 1). The momentum did not cease there.

Highlander

Building on the success of this conference, Willard and his cohorts planned "The Meeting at Highlander" with the expressed mission of creating a national student organization. Willard described Highlander as a "place where a lot of people with good causes have gone to get started, but what they left with was a spirit" (Willard, 1997, p. 1)

Myles Horton, who founded the Highlander Folk School in 1932, worked with unions, cooperatives, and community organizations—any kind of cohesive group that had a particular aim compatible with the philosophy of creating some form of democratic society. He wrote in his autobiography, *The Long Haul*, “The educational programs at Highlander have been called experiential-based education. The experience was that of the people we were working with. What people need are experiences in democracy, in making democratic decisions that affect their lives and communities” (1990, p. 133).

In the 1950s and 1960s, Highlander held civil right movement leadership training and created the Citizenship School Program. The first citizenship school was established in South Carolina where there was a literacy poll test in place. “We weren’t thinking of it primarily as a literacy program, because teaching people to read and write was only one step towards toward becoming citizens and social activists. The immediate goal was getting the right to vote. Becoming literate was only one part of a larger process” (Horton, 1990, p. 100).

Horton hired a local African-American beautician to teach the first classes, which were held in an old building with a pot belly stove, tables, and some chairs. The teacher used no text books, only the UN Declaration of Human Rights and the state constitution. She told the students they were going to learn together and the class developed the curriculum for every day. The teacher used a technique that is commonly referred to as a “learning experience approach,” in which the learner tells her story as the teacher writes it down. The majority of the students finished the three-month class and registered to vote. Other classes followed, and along with becoming literate, students learned to organize, they learned to protest, demand their rights because they learned that you “couldn’t just write and read your way to freedom” (Horton, 1990, p. 104). The teachers stressed that voting was only the very first step, urging learners to go out

and demonstrate. Within two years, hundreds of citizenship schools could be found throughout the South, and eventually the Southern Christian Leadership Conference took the program over. Horton believed that if people could come together to discuss concerns and share their experiences, they could solve their problems. He strongly believed in peer education, in people becoming their own experts, in doing their own research, in analyzing their actions, and learning from their experiences. This approach to education is exemplified in VALUE, the organization founded at Highlander in 1998.

“VALUE Added” to Student Involvement

About forty adult learners nation-wide as well as practitioners and NIFL representatives participated in this Highlander meeting and from it the student-led organization, Voice for Adult Learners United for Education (VALUE) was formed. Finsterbusch explained to me the significance of the name chosen by the students: “Our name is a voice, not voices. We are speaking as one voice, the adult learner, and we are united when it comes to education....We’ve never spoken as a group. This is the first time in the history of the United States that you actually have a group that is totally run by the students.”

VALUE’s mission is to “strengthen adult literacy efforts in the United States through learner involvement and leadership” (www.valueusa.org). Learner leaders get actively involved in a variety of leadership roles. Examples include serving on boards and advisory groups, where they make decisions about program goals and needed improvements; recruiting new learners and tutors; providing moral support and guidance to other learners, to help them persist and succeed; communicating with the general public, policy makers, and funders to generate support for adult

learners and for adult education; and researching practices and reforming curriculum (www.valueusa.org).

Towards realizing its vision (i.e., adult learners will be primary stake holders and full partners in every aspect of literacy program operations), VALUE has developed a “Core Leadership Training,” a 13-hour workshop for teams of one staff member and two adult learners from local literacy programs on how to engage and support adult learner involvement in program improvement efforts. There were a total of seven state-wide trainings in 2004 given in Delaware, Pennsylvania, Oklahoma, Massachusetts, Florida, Texas, and Vermont. I participated in or co-facilitated five of those trainings in order to become a certified core leadership VALUE trainer. The first day focused on defining student involvement, discussing the assets and resources students offer literacy programs, and providing an overview of the national, state, and local adult literacy system. During the second day, students and practitioners worked together to design a project and to devise a workable timeline. Possible projects include designing a student newsletter, developing a student-led class, organizing alumni meetings, or hiring students to fill paid staff positions. VALUE also sponsors a Leadership Institute every two years. The most recent one was in Washington DC in March of 2005. Like so many grassroots organizations, VALUE’s budget is small but its passion is great as it continues to strive in its mission of developing learner leaders.

Summary

Over the past 45-years, the federal government has shown varying levels of commitment to adult literacy efforts. “Literacy, as a governmental program, has frequently been a euphemism for homogenization and social control” (Heaney, 1990, p. 6). In 1983, President Reagan announced the Adult Literacy Initiative in stimulating a number of new initiatives in adult literacy education, many of which focused on strengthening literacy education programs through the recruitment of volunteers. Although financially inadequate and theoretically misguided, it was during the height of the adult literacy campaign in the late 1980s and early 1990s, along with the concomitant rise in the influence of volunteer-based programs, the passage of the 1991 National Literacy Act, and the establishment of the National Institute for Literacy, when learners were provided opportunities and created and found spaces to organize and move towards collective action. Learners in these programs began attending national literacy conferences, addressing the media, taking roles of leadership on local, state, and national levels. By 1998 adult learners were organized well enough to found the first and only national adult learner organization, VALUE.

Central to this project of forming a national student organization was learners gathering together sharing their stories, thus presenting an alternative to the metanarrative of illiteracy that was presented in political rhetoric and media images. Pat Blackwell indicates this. She identified listening to other stories and telling her own as the “turning point” in attending the National Literacy Congress. I discuss the centrality of narrative inquiry in the following chapter, as I explain why I chose narrative ethnography to research Sunnydale’s student involvement group.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODS

To know the phenomenon about which [researchers] write and to be fully honest about how they came to their interpretations, one can argue that it is dishonest not to draw on their own emotional experience and incorporate these emotions into the final telling of their “research tale.” (Gilbert, 2001, p. 11)

I conducted a nine-month ethnography of an adult learner involvement group at a ProLiteracy-accredited literacy program in Central Pennsylvania from May 2004 to January 2005. I was guided by the following questions:

- How does the student involvement group enable learners to exercise power within the organization?
- How does the student group foster critical participatory practices?
- How do individual group members benefit by taking part in the group?
- How do the individual members and the group itself benefit Sunnydale Literacy Partnership?
- What are the challenges of sustaining an adult student involvement group in an adult literacy program?

In this chapter, I first describe the methodology and critical framework and then proceed with a narrative of how I came to this particular research area, gained access to this research site, the fieldwork I undertook, my encounters of the field, and the steps and missteps I took to arrive at the interpretations I did.

Narrative Ethnography

“Narrative inquiry can be characterized as an amalgam of interdisciplinary analytic lenses, diverse disciplinary approaches, and both traditional and innovative methods—all revolving around an interest in biographical particulars as narrated by the ones who live them” (Chase, 2005, p. 651). A narrative can be oral or written, elicited or overheard during fieldwork, an interview or a naturally occurring conversation. Narratives may be a short topical story about a particular event, an extended story about a significant aspect of one’s life such as schooling or a narrative about one’s entire life (Chase, 2005). I agree with Denzin and Lincoln (2005) that the project of listening to the voices of outsiders and examining deviance from dominant norms from their standpoint is one of the most important tasks of critical scholars. Participants are seldom able to give full explanations of their actions, or intentions; all they can offer are accounts, or stories, about what they have done and why (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

As is the case with any type of ethnography, narrative ethnography involves long-term involvement in a culture or community, and as is the case with life history, the narrative researcher focuses heavily on an individual or a small number of individuals. In narrative ethnography, however, both the researcher and participants are presented together in a single multi-vocal text centered on the process of encountering others (Chase, 2005). I situate my personal narrative and ongoing reflections throughout the text with the intent of connecting my struggles and uncertainties with those of the participants. I do not desire to be the omniscient, omnipotent voice from above, commenting and critiquing upon the actors below. I am right in the middle of the action as I learn, listen, identify, connect, make mistakes, and draw inspiration while interacting with and engaging the members of the group. I aim to be as transparent as possible in explaining how my questions, interactions, and interruptions shape the participants’

narratives (Chase, 2005). I identify myself as a gendered, embodied, sexualized being; hence, I discount the myth that social research can ever be neutral. Narrative ethnography is concerned with “demystifying the researcher and researched as unattached and objective instruments, arguing that research is personal, emotional, and sensitive” (Coffey, 1999, p. 12).

As a critical theorist, I examine social conditions in order to uncover the hidden structures that oppress certain groups and favor others. I believe that facts can never be isolated from the domains of values or removed from an ideological inscription (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005) and am keenly interested in exposing social structures, discourses, ideologies, and epistemologies that “prop up both the status quo and variety of forms of privilege” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005, p. 306).

One begins this project of emancipation with self-reflection. This involves examining how one's history and biography have expressed themselves in the way one sees oneself, one's roles, and one's social expectations (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005). The ultimate goal of critical theory is to change society, but such change cannot occur until criticism progresses from the individual level through social groups to society as a whole:

Identity is always personal and social and that while we cannot predict the path of historical action or name human agency in advance, we can never give up the struggle for self-formation and self-definition such that domination and suffering in this society are always minimized. To invent new identities as active, cultural agents for social change means to refuse to allow our personal and collective narratives of identity to be depoliticized at the level of everyday life. (Freire cited in Heaney, 1996, p. 12)

Self-reflection results in power –power over oneself and the lessening of the power of external forces. By obtaining more control over oneself, a person is able to become more emancipated, more self-determined, and less outwardly controlled; they no longer accept their subordination as natural, necessary, or inevitable (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005).

I began my dissertation with a personal narrative acknowledging all of the privileges I have enjoyed as a white, middle class, English-speaking, well educated citizen of the United States. Yet I have also come to understand the oppression I have endured as a woman with mild cerebral palsy as I reflect upon my past struggles to fit within the socially constructed confines of normalcy by attempting to “pass” as a non-disabled body. A critical theorist understands that “the definitions of reality, normalcy, rationality, and so on serve as paradigms that in some sense govern the conduct permissible within them” (Brown as cited in Peca, 2000, p. 7).

Critical theory privileges a materialist-realist ontology, meaning the real world makes a material difference in terms of race, class, gender, or physical ability (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). It is a material condition that I favor my left leg when I walk. The associations attached to that difference that permit a fellow graduate student to jokingly ask if I had beat myself up in the womb or to state that I seemed “pretty smart for someone with cerebral palsy” are socially constructed and contestable.

Critical participatory education has the potential to change negative stereotypes of learners among practitioners and the general public (Campbell, 1994). “All the actors in participatory education bring to the encounter the characteristics and identities they have in their lives...the main point of participatory education is to alter some of the socially taken-for granted ways learners and practitioners interact with each other” (Burnaby, 2001, p. 312). Everyone involved in a participatory project must be willing to take on new social roles and entertain the possibility at least that they can enter into relationships and possess characteristics that they did not express or have before (Burnaby, 2001).

Thus it is important to understand how the participants individually and collectively present their personal and group experiences in relation to the discourse of (il)literacy (Chase,

2005). “Critical researchers have come to understand that language is not a mirror of society. It is an unstable social practice whose meaning shifts, depending upon the context in which it is used” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005, p. 310). In this instance, the dominant discourse presents the literacy learner as dysfunctional, passive, and helpless (Quigley, 1997; St. Clair & Sandlin, 2004). Thus I am curious to learn how the group members accept, reject, or transform this “official narrative” in their stories and actions.

The project does not end there. Critical theory is not matter of “people...talking about themselves to themselves,” (Dill, 1997) or simply reciting a litany of complaints ad nauseam (Auchenbach, 2001). The point of problematizing the status quo is to change it. Freire (1970) states problem posing is only the “point of departure...only by starting from the situation in which they are submerged” can people begin to “move...In order to do this authentically, they must perceive their state not as fated and unalterable, but merely as limiting--and therefore challenging” (p. 73).

Exploring Adult Learner Involvement

I begin this narrative by relating how I came upon this particular area of research and how I gained access to the site of research. In the spring of 2000, I began working at adult literacy program as a tutor/student coordinator. At that time, I knew nothing about VALUE, or the field’s expressed interest in promoting student involvement. I did become quickly familiar with the stringent standards and vocational outcomes mandated by WIA. Lindeman’s warning that “We may so far exaggerate the incentives and motives which are derived from capitalism as to cause the entire educational system to become a direct response to this system and to lead to

its further emphasis” (1961, p. 49) struck me as remarkably prescient. I felt so far removed from the kind of programs I wanted to be involved in.

How exciting it was then to learn about Pennsylvania’s annual student conferences! I first attended one in March 2002 in Harrisburg. Adult literacy learners gathered together, talked with each other, openly discussed their “reading problem” with each other and practitioners, and advocated for more funding from legislative aides in attendance. Furthermore, it was there I met Martin “Marty” Finsterbusch, former literacy learner and current Executive Director of VALUE. I was intrigued by Finsterbusch’s passion for adult learner involvement. He spoke simply and strongly, telling the approximately 40 learners in attendance that “we are all in the same boat” and that “we can work together to ensure that adult learners’ concerns and needs are addressed.”

I was drawn to the idea of literacy learners becoming leaders, defying the low expectations implied within the dominant discourse, achieving what others thought they could not, and coming to a point at which they no longer feel it necessary to hide their “disability.” These ideas resonated with me strongly because I was reminded of my own struggles and how many times I was told explicitly or implicitly that I should not or could not participate. I decided to get involved with the organization and learn more.

Working with VALUE and TLC

From that point on, I became a participant/observer of activities, meetings, programs, conferences, and workshops that actively involved adult learners. I was able to take part in several VALUE-sponsored events: I interviewed several of the founding members about their involvement and perspectives and was allowed to take part in two VALUE teleconference executive board meetings. Furthermore I co-presented a workshop on student retention with two board members at VALUE’s Third Annual Leadership Institute in Florida in the summer of

2003, participated in one of the pilot core leadership trainings in December 2003, and co-facilitated several state-wide VALUE leadership trainings in the fall of 2004. I also attended the ProLiteracy Conference in Washington DC, which 75 learners attended. I accompanied a former adult learner who is now a VALUE member and board member of ProLiteracy, as he visited several federal representatives' offices during ProLiteracy's "Capitol Hill Day" to discuss the importance of funding literacy.

In the summer of 2002, I began working at Tutors of Literacy in the Commonwealth (TLC), a statewide organization of adult literacy providers in Pennsylvania established in 1981. In 2001-2002 fiscal year, TLC received a small grant from the state Department of Education to help develop and organize a state-wide adult learner group. The approximate 40 learners in attendance at the Fifth Annual Adult Learner Conference decided to hold a meeting in the fall of 2002 on the topic of public school reform. TLC purchased National Issues Forum (NIF) materials to guide the meetings. NIF is "is a network of civic and educational organizations that recognizes the need for citizens to deliberate together about issues they care about before they make decisions" (National Issues Forum, "About NIF Forums").

TLC then contacted six ABE programs from across the state asking a practitioner and adult learner from each program to co-facilitate one of the six regional meetings. I participated in the initial four-hour facilitator training as well as three of these regional meetings.

I believe the time I spent working with VALUE and becoming acquainted with the national adult learner leaders were instrumental in understanding the history of the national student movement and some of the student involvement issues that helped inform this study. Working at TLC enabled me to learn what literacy programs supported student involvement throughout the state. I was also able to gain access and establish rapport, trust, and credibility,

which are all vital in conducting qualitative research. First, I was “Juliet,” a fellow-worker in the field who could empathize with practitioners’ worries about funding cuts and concerns about meeting program numbers. I could also “talk shop” at the annual Pennsylvania Association of Adult and Continuing Education (PAACE) conferences and at TLC quarterly meetings.

It is through all this work and interaction with VALUE and TLC that I learned about Sunnydale Literacy Partnership, the site where I conducted this study. TLC’s fall newsletter contained an article about Sunnydale’s “student involvement group.” According to the newsletter article, Linda, Sunnydale’s literacy coordinator, sent out student surveys in the fall of 2001 to find out if learners would be interested in establishing or attending a student group. Annie and John, two learners from the program, met with Linda to discuss who would attend, how often the meetings would be held, and what the group would do. At the first meeting in February 2002, John and Annie were appointed president and vice president, respectively. The group held a potluck supper and John presented a workshop on how to use a day planner. Based on the description in the TLC newsletter, it seemed like students were in decision-making roles. I wondered how this group came to be and how it functioned.

Becoming Acquainted with Annie

I first met Annie at the Fifth Annual Adult Learner Conference. I remember talking to this vivacious, articulate woman in her early 50s, seeking her advice about how to encourage a literacy student I was tutoring at the time to get involved with PAVE. Annie told me I needed to be patient because it is a “scary step” for learners.

I saw Annie again and met Linda for the first time in the fall of 2002 when they came to the TLC office for a “train-the-trainer” workshop; they had agreed to be co-facilitators for the Fall workshop on public school reform in their region. Due to a family emergency, Linda was

unable to co-facilitate her regional workshop, and I took her place and conducted the workshop with Annie. Thereafter, my boss at TLC asked me to present a workshop about PAVE at the 2003 PAACE conference. I asked if Annie could co-facilitate with me again. I felt it was very important for a learner to represent the student group. Annie agreed to take part, and Linda emailed me to tell me she was “pleased [I] wanted to work with Annie again.”

I seized this opportunity to “slip my foot in the door” (Fetterman, 1998, p. 33) by asking Linda if I could attend Sunnydale’s student group Christmas cookie exchange in December of 2002. She allowed me to do this. I wrote some brief reflections about the meeting when I arrived home:

Before others arrived, a staff member told me that everyone who works for Sunnydale is highly encouraged to tutor learners on a volunteer basis. I showed some surprise at this, telling her I never heard that kind of thing from other programs. She replied, ‘well, I think it would be elitist not to [tutor students].’ I am struck by the choice of that word. Is this organization truly egalitarian? Linda made a point of ensuring that everyone said something in the meeting, even if it was just to say what he or she was doing for Christmas. There was a couple from Colombia and she asked what Christmas traditions they had in their native country. She also shared with the group that she was scheduled to have minor surgery. Annie jokingly asked if “she was goin’ in for botox injections.” Wow! I’m floored by what she said that. Is she insulting Linda? I can’t tell how Linda feels about this comment. I left that evening with sacks of cookies and a CD consisting of Christmas tunes done in a new agey style. It was one of many wrapped gifts that Linda and Annie had purchased at the Dollar Store.

Fetterman (1998) writes that it is crucial to maintain a “nonjudgmental orientation, which prevents ethnographers from making inappropriate and unnecessary value judgments about what they observe” (p. 22). This is difficult, allows Fetterman, given that “socialization runs deep” (p. 23). Indeed. Raised as a “good little Catholic girl” I was always taught to be respectful of—even deferential towards—my teachers and elders and to be nice to everyone else. The notion of saying something so seemingly impudent to Linda floored me. It was only much

later that I realized that this type of joking among students and Linda was commonplace and meant to be supportive, as I discuss in chapter six.

Annie and I began sharing stories in January 2003 when we got together to prepare for our PAACE presentation. We talked for over an hour and a half. During the course of this discussion, she asked me why I was so interested in her group. By this time, I was working on my research for the class I had to complete and had come across the book, *Participatory Practices in Adult Education* (2001), a compendium of stories written by practitioners working in Canada and the United States about their triumphs and struggles in working *with* adult learners. I had emphatically underlined, highlighted, and circled this sentence written, “I have put myself in the naming process so that I too must reveal stories...it takes a lot of courage to break away from the ethos of professionalism that stops us from sharing our personal experiences” (Campbell, 2001, p. 10). Similarly, I was thrilled to read Suave’s (2001) comment, “If we are to locate ourselves on common ground with the learner, which I believe we must do in this work, we must be willing to seek out and the break the bonds that have caused us all too easily to judge others and assume we know what is best for them” (p. 18). I wrote in my journal the following:

“YES!!!! I think as much as we would like to say that we [practitioners] don't prescribe to the deficit model of learners, that we really believe that adult literacy learners have many abilities and different ways of knowing, but that affirmation rings hollow if we are unwilling to admit that we as literate educated folks do not always know better or are fully self-affirmed. That we don't struggle with problems too.

I had been thinking about these passages a lot during this time and reflecting on why I was so drawn to student involvement, and by that time I finally realized that it had much to do with my childhood and even some adulthood experiences as a mildly physically disabled woman. Thus I shared with Annie some things about my childhood struggles. Annie listened intently, saying

little. During a phone conversation in January 2005, when I asked Annie about her reflections on participating in this study and why she was so open with me, she responded, “Well, you trusted me first. I remember way back when you told me about how you were picked on as a kid. Always picked last for teams and stuff, so I figured you could understand a little of what it’s like.”

Gaining Access

Throughout 2003, I kept in contact with Linda. We began a sporadic correspondence via email, and these exchanges have proved to be an invaluable data source. Additionally, we saw each other at TLC quarterly meetings, PAVE meetings, 2003 PAACE conference, and student conference. Annie too started coming to TLC quarterly meetings. I met Liz, Sheila, and Carmen (other students in the group) for the first time at the 2003 student conference in March of that year. I also attended an occasional student meeting. For instance I went to the July 2003 meeting when the Democratic nominee for county commissioner came to speak to the group about voting, and I also attended the potluck supper in November where I first met Bill.

By the end of 2003, I had finally finished my coursework and decided I needed to leave my job at TLC so I could focus full time on my proposal. I also told Annie and Linda about my interests in studying the student group for my doctoral study. Annie was thrilled, immediately telling me she had shared her past (“Annie’s story,” as she called it; she asked me to use the same pseudonym for this study) as part of her friend’s Master’s thesis. “A doctorate degree is higher than a Masters, right? Oh this is so important,” she declared. “What an honor that you picked our group! You’re gonna let people know about how important these programs are. You will help so many people. Our children and grandchildren” Although I was pleased that she was so positive and flattered that she ascribed such an altruistic and far-reaching effect to my

research, thinking that my dissertation would “get the word out” about literacy programs and the work her student group does, I knew that undertaking this research was going to benefit me and my professional development far more than it would ever benefit this particular literacy group or literacy programs in general (Wolcott, 2005, provides a very damning overview of the self-serving nature of qualitative research). While I hoped researchers and practitioners would find my research useful, I was more concerned that I would not “commodify people’s pain to further [my] own career” (McCorkel and Myers, 2003, p. 203).

Linda, the ultimate gatekeeper, expressed concerns about my research; she told me, “This is OK with me providing you also sign a confidentiality statement and submit a statement as to how you will use the information you gather, and the group agrees. I am not against the idea. I just need to protect my students. I know you realize this” (personal communication, December 4, 2003).

Linda allowed me to attend the 2004 February meeting to propose the idea to the whole group. Liz, Sheila, Bill, Annie, and Gary were there as were two other students; Carmen was not present. This was the first meeting Gary attended. I told them I was interested in student involvement and their group and wanted to learn from them. Most of the people present knew that I had worked with TLC and helped with the state-wide student group regional meetings, as well as attended and/or presented at the 2003 Pennsylvania state-wide adult learner conference. I hoped this known identity as a supporter of student involvement coupled with the trust and approval I had already gained from Annie, “an integral and powerful member of the community,” would help provide entree for me (Fetterman, 1998, p. 34). I was very informal in appearance (wearing jeans and a sweatshirt) and in speech. I told them I would be coming to meetings and writing about what happens at these meetings. I would ask a lot questions about

their involvement in the group, but they would not have to answer any of them, and I would not use their real names. I added that they could call me if they wanted to discuss privately any of their concerns. Linda quickly pointed out the call would be long-distance, and I should not expect them to pay that expense. I agreed with her. “Well, you can call me collect....” I faltered. Linda shook her head, and I stopped. I realized in that brief exchange the differences in class between me and the group members and how presumptuous I was in thinking I had already developed enough rapport with the members that they would feel comfortable calling me.

I left the room and nervously paced the hallway while the group conferred among themselves. In a matter of minutes, Linda beckoned me back into the room and said everyone agreed. Annie later relayed to me that she “did have to convince some of ‘em. They weren’t all sure they wanted you there.” I was disappointed that the group—or at least certain members—were uncomfortable. I thought by “logging time” at the meetings and conferences and talking informally with people, giving them time to get used to me, but I was naïve to think that it could be so easy. Issues of comfort and discomfort, acceptance and distance continually arose throughout this study.

At the beginning of May 2004, I once again found myself walking in corridors hoping fervently that all the members of my dissertation committee too would agree to allow me to begin. They did. I procured the appropriate approval from Penn State’s Office of Research protections and proceeded with my study.

Fieldwork overview

From May 2004 through January 2005, I acted as participant-observer at nine monthly group meetings, a tutor training, and a Sunnydale advisory board meeting. I participated in two fundraisers (a bake sale at the mall and a car wash), attended a potluck supper, and traveled with the group to Harrisburg for a field trip. I also presented one workshop to the group in July and then another in October. Moreover in 2004 Linda, Annie, and Carmen took part in the state-wide VALUE Core Leadership training (described in chapter 2). Coincidentally, I first learned about the VALUE trainings from Linda in June of 2004. She reported that she had received an email about the VALUE training from her Professional Development Center, which was co-sponsoring the Pennsylvania VALUE training. She told me that she “immediately wrote back saying [they] wanted to participate” because she “didn’t want to miss the boat on that one.” When I later called Finsterbusch to see if I could attend the Pennsylvania training as part of my study, he invited me to serve as a trainer-in-training. I told Linda that I had agreed to do this. I also returned to the field in June 2006 for follow up interviews.

Interviews

Spradley (1979) distinguishes between informal and formal ethnographic interviews. The latter usually occurs at “an appointed time and results from a specific request to hold the interview” (p. 124). He urges the interviewer to tape record these interview and take “copious notes” (p. 234). The informal interview, on the other hand, occurs whenever the ethnographer asks a question during the course of participant observation (p. 123). Although I employed both types of interview throughout the course of the study, I relied far more heavily on the informal type. Not all the participants were willing to be recorded or even formally interviewed., as I

describe in the following section. Thus by necessity I had to rely on field notes and at times just my memory until I was able to leave the field and return to my notes or tape recorder. This is why I tend to be parsimonious in my use of quotes; I understand that I cannot reproduce all the exchanges and interactions I had over the many months verbatim. Yet, I did spend many months in the field and maintained communication with the participants thereafter. Thus I had ample opportunity to conduct follow up discussions and to ask for clarification regarding earlier comments.

Specifically, I conducted hour to hour and half formal tape recorded interviews with Annie, the president of the student involvement group; Sheila, one of the co-vice presidents; Bill, the historian; Gary, the secretary; Carmen, a very active ESL learner from Peru; and Ellen, the founder of Sunnydale. I transcribed all of these taped interviews (See the appendix for an excerpt of a transcription of the formal interview I had with Annie). I also conducted informal interviews with Linda, the coordinator of the program, who also acted as treasurer of the student group in 2004, and Donna, the assistant coordinator.

Table of Study Participants

Participant Name	Role at Sunnydale Literacy Partnership
Annie	Adult literacy learner. Co-founder of the student group. Served as president of the student group in 2004
Linda	Tutor coordinator of Sunnydale Co-founder of student group. Served as leader and treasurer of student group.
Gary	Adult literacy learner. Served as secretary of student group in 2004
Liz	Adult Literacy Learner. Served as co-vice president of student group in 2004
Sheila	Adult Literacy Learner. Served as co-vice president of student group in 2004
Bill	Adult Literacy Learner. Served as historian of student group in 2004
Carmen	Adult ESL Learner. Active member within student group in 2004
Ellen	Founder of Sunnydale Literacy Partnership
Donna	Assistant Coordinator of Sunnydale Literacy Partnership

Surveying the Landscape: Identifying Themes and Filling in Gaps

During the first few monthly meetings (each lasted about two hours), I sat off to the side, diligently taking field notes, trying to attend to the social milieu, the setting, conversations, and interactions. Fetterman (1998) writes, “Fieldwork is exploratory in nature. The ethnographer begins with a survey period to learn the basics: the native language, the kinship ties, census information, historical data, and the basic structure and function of the culture” (p. 8). Fetterman (1998) also notes that the survey period is “somewhat uncontrolled and haphazard” (p. 8). I found this to be very true. I felt overwhelmed and scattered; I did, however, begin to identify themes, gaps, and problems in my approach.

One of the first themes I considered was “civic engagement.” I had attended Sunnydale’s July 2003 meeting when the Democratic nominee for county commissioner had come to speak about how to vote, and then the very first meeting I attended as part of my study (May 2004) was again on the topic of voting practices. Linda suggested to the group that they pay attention to the news and watch the presidential debates to prepare to vote for the upcoming 2004 Presidential election. Linda’s presentation and recommendation provided a logical entry point for me to ask the group members in follow-up informal interviews and discussions if they were in fact paying attention to the campaign and/or intended to vote. I also noted how the evening was structured; the first hour of the gathering was the “business meeting,” (e.g., Gary read the minutes, Linda distributed the treasurer’s report and asked that it be approved, old business and new business were discussed, motions were made and seconded). I jotted in my field notes, “How do the group members feel about this? Does it make sense to them? I need to ask group members about this.”

Finally, at the May meeting there were far more attendees than I had anticipated, and 12 of the people present were Spanish-speaking students. I noted during the meeting that some of the ESL learners were murmuring among themselves during the meeting. Afterwards, Linda told me that she had encouraged the students in her ESL class to attend. “I told [the class] that I would not be teaching the class the night of the monthly student meeting, but I would count the hours if they showed up. It’s a good way for them to practice English.” Based upon the literature I had read, I was aware that divisions often arise within any heterogeneous community of students who differ in class, ability, education, culture, and language (Campbell, 2001; Horsman, 2001). I wrote down in my notes, “How will the ESL and literacy students interact? Or will they?”

During the second month of my study, I traveled with the student group to Harrisburg. Annie suggested that the group visit the state museum and capitol building. I had the good fortune of sharing a ride from the IU to Harrisburg with Donna, the assistant coordinator. Although she does not typically come to the monthly meetings, Donna came with us on the field trip thinking there would be a need for an extra vehicle. As it turned out, not as many students came as anticipated, so I was the only one who rode with her. During the hour and half drive, Donna chatted with me, telling me about the beginnings and history of Sunnydale. Donna started as a tutor in 1985 and provided a wealth of information. As she drove, I sat in the passenger seat jotting notes as she talked. The narrative ethnographer treats participants as narrators, inviting them to tell stories that are meaningful to the participants themselves (Chase, 2005, p. 661). For example, Donna told me a story about the beginning of Sunnydale. She told me about the “guy from Laubach” who stayed at Ellen’s house and did not charge for materials and trained the first group of volunteer tutors for free. I learned from her that Ellen, the founder

of Sunnydale, was still active in the program as a tutor. I quickly realized that Ellen would further fill in the gap about the history of the program, and I wrote in my field notes that I needed to interview her. Subsequently, when I spoke with Ellen, as well as with Linda, I again heard the story about the “guy from Laubach.” Hearing this story repeatedly helped me understand how central volunteerism and the humanistic ideology are to the organization as a whole.

Annie as Primary Narrator

Annie was the one I listened to the most in this study. She is the most influential member of the group. At the time of my study, she tutored Sheila two times a week at Bill’s house, and talked with Liz—whom she had tutored in the past—as well as Gary—regularly on the phone. Gary called Annie his “honey bunny,” Bill attributed his joining the group to Annie, and Liz wrote in an essay published in the Sunnydale newsletter, “if it was not four [sic] [Annie] I would not be her [sic] today.” Linda referred to Annie as the “hub of the group” and remarked once that she could convince someone that even “hell is a fun place to be.”

The day before the car wash, which was held in Annie’s home town, I arrived at her apartment the day before to spend the day with her. I conducted a semi-structured, recorded interview with her at her apartment in the morning, and then in the afternoon she acted as tour guide driving me through her town where Carmen, Sheila, and Bill also lived. She pointed out the factory where she used to work, the places where she used to live, and Sheila’s, Bill’s, and Carmen’s houses. We stopped by the cemetery where her parents were buried and walked around the grounds of the “beautiful” Catholic Church that Carmen attends. We went by the power plant where Sheila’s son works. She talked about the history of the area and explained the economic differences between the west and east parts of town. I listened to her intently while

taking notes. Like many interviewees, she expressed gratitude for being able to express her views at length to an attentive listener (Wolcott, 2005). She remarked,

Who wants to hear about me? I'm like the grim reaper. Most of my stories are sad or about people dyin'. In most conversations, 99 percent of the time I'm the listener. Who wants to hear about my sad life? But what about me? Nobody listens to me. I've told you things I've never told anyone else 'cause you listen and care. You always got that pad of paper and you write it all down.

I greatly appreciated the care she showed me. Annie was so positive towards, helpful with, and interested in my research. She always seemed happy to see me and talk with me, and I came to rely on her for encouragement and emotional support. Much later over the course of the study, I began to perceive this dependency upon her as problematic, an issue I discuss in chapter six.

Gaining the Gatekeeper's Trust

Linda, on the other hand, struck me as guarded and unemotional. Wilkins (1993) writes that during her research "stoical and reticent people unsettled [her] because she feared that they did not have the emotional warmth and responsiveness which [she] craved" (p. 96). I wrote in my journal after the June 2004 meeting, "I pulled into the Church parking lot about 15 minutes to 7:00. Linda pulled in soon after me. I was hesitant to approach her. Why? Because she looked so serious, thin-lipped, unsmiling." But I forged ahead. I walked towards her and said hello with a bright smile. Was I being artificially cheerful? Does she find me meddlesome? But then again, I was distant and reticent too. What did she know about me? I disclosed very little to her; rather, I tended to be bland and sweet (mousy?) around her, never bothering to correct her when she called me "Julie."

Moreover, I came into the field with a strong assumption based upon literature I had read, conversations I had with Finsterbusch, Blackwell, and Miles, and my own observations that most practitioners do not really support student involvement, that far too often practitioners do not

believe students are capable (Fingeret, 1989; Campbell, 2001). Or as Finsterbusch indicated at the 2004 Pennsylvania State student conference, “[Practitioners] are not open to change, they feel threatened because they have been doing the same thing for 20 years” and may fear losing their status, sense of importance, or their job altogether. Thus from the beginning I was skeptical of Linda and her true intentions in starting a student group.

When I emailed her to ask if I could schedule a time to interview her, she replied, “I am sorry I am not available to meet on Friday afternoon. I am also not in favor of a recorded interview although I am glad to answer any of your questions regarding the student group” (personal communication, June, 15, 2004). Wilkins (1993) recalls how “anxious” she was during her fieldwork; she “became obsessive about consent, all too ready to believe [herself] intrusive and unwelcome” (p. 95). Although Linda was not wholly rejecting the notion of talking with me, I felt that she was wary of my intentions. I approached Linda again three weeks later using a different tactic:

I'm wondering if I may come into the IU next Thursday July 8, to look over old newsletters. When I visited Ellen, I only got a chance to briefly review a couple, but I think it would be worth it to review them more carefully. Thursday would be ideal for me since I need to come anyway for the monthly meeting that evening. Have a wonderful holiday weekend! (e-mail sent July 2, 2004).

She responded, “This is OK. With my assistant coordinator on vacation it may be busy for me, but you won't need me to look over the newsletters. Will you be here to go out for lunch? Nothing fancy...just 1/2 hr” (personal communication, July 6, 2004). I was thrilled that she wanted to have lunch with me, and our lunch—however brief—provided my first opportunity to sit with her and talk face to face, to conduct an informal interview.

Linda drove me to a little diner near a lake, telling me that she likes to come out there and “relax, enjoy nature, and to get away from it all. I need quiet time to think things over.”

During lunch, she showed me the latest newsletter she was working on. She told me she had created a new design for the newsletter and pointed out particular articles she had written. I complimented her on how nice I thought it was as I gave it a cursory glance before launching into my questions and addressing my agenda: Is Sunnydale a member of VALUE? Does she remember taking part in Ellen's student/tutor group since she was a tutor at the time? When did she start attending conferences? I just wanted to collect efficient answers to fill in my interview schedule, instead of allowing her to guide the discussion and discuss what particular story is important to her. Unsurprisingly, as a result, Linda gave curt responses and a look of irritation. She impatiently tapped her finger on the newsletter pages. I then realized my mistake. She wanted to tell me about the newsletter, how much time she put into it, what the articles were about, the new format. That was what was important to her at that moment. Furthermore, when I really reviewed the copy, I realized how much of it was devoted to the student group. I might have never realized how important the newsletter was to my data collection if I had refused to attend to her story. Chase (2005) notes that narrative ethnographers frequently explain how they initially ignored, grew impatient with, or got thrown off track by interviewees stories. Later they realized their mistake (Chase, 2005, p. 660).

After the work day, I rode over with Linda to her house so she could gather some items for that evening's meeting. As we drove along, I took this inopportune moment to ask her about the earlier comment she had made about contacting legislators. She responded in a somewhat defensive tone,

I just don't have time for that right now. I'm just trying to keep the group together. I do want them to vote, but I'm more interested in getting them to read for pleasure right now. That's what I want to do. So they can read what they want, not just stuff out of workbooks where they then have to answer a lot of questions.

When I finally returned home, wrote field notes, and reflected on the day, I knew I had been overly eager; I had thrown questions at her, wanting to cram it all in, nervous I would not get it all down. I was insensitive to the importance of timing and failed to demonstrate patience (Fetterman, 1998, p. 39). I also recognized how consumed I was with the macro-level of politics (e.g., national elections, federal legislation, VALUE), stridently pushing the agenda that students must get involved in activism order to effect social change. Yet as Auerbach points out, “social action is nonlinear, nonsequential process that develops unevenly over time. It can occur at the personal, classroom, or community level” (Auerbach, 2001, p. 269). Even Linda’s passing comment about wanting to give students more control over the curriculum is a form of social action, a subtle shift in power relations (Auerbach, 2001). I concluded that I need to pay more attention to the micro-level of politics within the group. The next day, I sent the following email:

Hi Linda,

Thanks so much for letting come yesterday and learn more about the literacy program and your work. It was very helpful. I feel I bombarded you with too many questions and didn't give you enough time to reflect and answer as thoroughly as you might have. You told me you like to think about things more, mull them over and then come back with a response. So I hope you won't mind if I return to some of those points later to make sure I understand your perspective. My goal is to understand your view of things because you are mentoring this group and guiding it.

You had a lot going on yesterday and a very long day! As I was driving back, I thought to myself "Wow. Her day is not even over because she is going to give Annie a call when she gets home."

I will pass along your suggestion about the VALUE training (i.e., it should be offered on weekends so people who work during the week can go too).

Thanks again!

Juliet

Linda’s response was simply, “E-mail questions you may have and I will be glad to reply.”

From that point on through the duration of the study, we exchanged many emails (I received 51

emails from her over the course of this study). I interacted with Linda at the meetings and at events too, so I certainly was not completely reliant on e-mails, but I think corresponding via email gave her some space and sense of control so that she could answer questions how she wanted to in her own sense of time. She was reflective, posing good questions and making observations. I have quoted liberally from her emails throughout this ethnography.

I was also pleased to see that Linda did continue to promote macro-political awareness. Annie told me Linda called her, Sheila, Liz, Bill and Gary at home to encourage them to watch the presidential debates, and at the January 2005 meeting Linda reported that she had asked for donations from tutors to help finance the trip to the VALUE Leadership Institute in Washington DC. Moreover, Linda raised monies and personally drove group members to DC. I became more relaxed around Linda and more attentive to timing and shifts in her tone (Fetterman, 1998). I believe the time invested, and the respect and admiration I ultimately showed her helped me gain some trust. I remain uncertain, however, about how much rapport I developed with other members of the group.

Answerin' Some Lady's Questions:

When I spent the day with Bill and Sheila at the mall helping them with the fundraiser, I had several hours to engage in informal interviews and ask open-ended questions that could evoke stories (Fetterman, 1998, pp. 40-41). For example, I asked "Where did you grow up? What was school like? How did you find out about Sunnydale? How did you find out about the group?" I tried to elicit narratives about their past and stories about their current involvement in the group (Chase, 2005). But again, as with Linda, I felt many times that I was just the researcher collecting data. For instance, on one occasion in July 2004, I went over to Bill's

house and interviewed him and Sheila more formally. When someone phoned while I was there, I overheard Bill say, “Oh we’re just over here answerin’ some lady’s questions.” This nonchalant response reminded me again of the distance between me and Sheila and Bill. Did they place me in the same category with the social workers and school administrators that come traipsing through their homes to administer questionnaires, test, and assess them? Again, as with Linda, I told them virtually nothing about myself; our relationships were very asymmetrical. I was just “some lady” asking questions. Yes, they knew I was interested in the group, but did they even really understand why? To them, I was just someone Annie knew, liked, and trusted. They only had that to go on. I never bothered to tell them anything else; I certainly never told them “my story,” but I was determined to get theirs!

Gary thought it was “nice” I wanted to get his opinions and that “it might be of interest to others in some ways, half and half.” But he iterated that I should not use anyone’s real name, “Otherwise when people are readin’ along, they’ll halt and try to figure out who it is.” Gary did ask for a copy of the final ethnography. “Whenever you’re done with gettin’ your whatever you call it, can I get a copy? I’d like my mom to read it since it’s about me and the whole group.”

As mentioned previously, I also interviewed Carmen. Although she was not an officer in the group, Carmen attended a handful of student involvement meetings throughout 2002 and 2003. She also attended the state-wide student conference in 2003 and 2004. Furthermore, in 2004, she recruited a number of fellow ESL employees at her workplace, secured classroom space, and then approached Linda about teaching the learners. She spoke at a tutor training and expressed great interest in doing public speaking as a means to recruit more ESL learners and tutors. She also presented at the monthly student meeting about her experiences as an immigrant and learning English. Moreover, she participated in the state-wide VALUE core leadership

training in August with Annie and Linda. Linda and Annie hoped she would agree to be president of the student group in 2005. Carmen was initially a little nervous. She stared at the tape recorder for the first couple minutes and leaned towards it speaking loudly and slowly. Eventually, however, she settled back and relaxed on her couch as she told me about her “wonderful tutors”—she had pictures of each to show me. She also asked with keen interest about my experiences in higher education since it was her dream to attend college.

Ellen was “delighted to talk with anyone interested in Sunnysdale” and consented to being recorded as well. “Oh, I have this terrible accent. Do you really want to listen to it on the tape? But sure that’s fine. I can be very honest because I’m retired. It’s not like anybody can fire me,” Ellen chortled. She also told me her granddaughter was working on her dissertation and she knew “how much work it was.” She had asked Linda to bring over binders filled with old Sunnysdale newsletters. “I know you’re going to want to look at these. My granddaughter is always looking at historical documents.” Having access to these documents was extremely helpful. As we sat in her large country-style kitchen house, she served me lox, bagels, cream cheese and tea, and we chatted for about two hours. This was the easiest, most comfortable interview experience for me. But then again, Ellen had nothing to risk. I was giving her the opportunity to reminisce about her life’s work, of which she was very proud. Furthermore, her similar educational background and understanding of the doctoral process helped create a connection between us

I felt most disconnected from Liz, another member of the student group. Although she agreed to be interviewed, she was not home when I went for our scheduled time to meet, and I never did get a chance to interview her in a formal way. I was, however, able to chat with her before and after meetings. In fact, she shared some very personal information about her daughter

with me one evening as we were standing in the church parking lot. As Campbell (1994) found with some of the participants in her study, Liz was willing to talk with me as long as I was not recording her words, but simply just listening to her and expressing concern. She came late in the afternoon to the mall to help with the bake sale, after spending many hours in the emergency room with her sister. I tried to engage in conversation with her then, but I was too tired by that point to summon energy to have much of a meaningful discussion.

Annie asked Liz if I could drive her to the December 2004 meeting, and she agreed. Although she hurried out of the house as soon I came to the door, I did get a chance to glance into the open room and saw her children sitting on the floor doing activities with what I assumed to be a social worker; or as Bill put it, “some lady askin’ questions.” During the 25-minute drive to the meeting, Liz talked about her impressions of the group. I was driving so I could not take notes and had to rely on my memory. When I got to the church, I sat for a few minutes and jotted down what she had said.

When we met in January 2005, Liz smiled and laughed a lot. She expressed excitement about going to the VALUE Leadership Institute in Washington DC. In part she may have been more forthcoming because she saw me enough to be convinced that I was genuinely interested in the group, but several things in her personal life had changed as well: She had decided to move to a nicer place away from the neighbors who constantly threatened to call the police; her boyfriend was out of jail; she had finally had gotten a new tutor; and her son was doing better in school.

Identity management

“Some researchers believe that they cannot get close to participants unless they are viewed as equals or even subordinates....[They] do not want participants to see them as smarter, more competent, or wealthier” (Kleinman & Copp, 1993, p. 29). Taking the advice of the standard research text, I tried to minimize differences and simply blend in (Kleinman & Copp, 1993). I was anxious to establish rapport, to be accepted, and be well liked. My educational level, class, and knowledge of adult education theory were greater than all the participants, and I never wanted any of the participants to think I considered myself superior because of these differences. Furthermore, I believe these efforts were successful. Annie appreciated that I “did not use big, fancy words, and never wore fancy expensive clothes or make up.” I was “never tryin’ to impress everybody like some professionals do.” I responded breezily, “Oh fine” when Linda asked me how my Masters paper was coming along. I never reminded her that I was working on a doctoral dissertation; that would have only indicated the even greater educational difference between us. Linda told me at one point that she does not have a degree in adult education and sometimes worried whether she was using the “proper terms or knew all the theories.” These comments left me to doubt if she was truly “eager” or just anxious “to see how someone else sees us” (personal communication, June, 3, 2004). I played up my identity as a part-time employee and student with minimum income. I joined in the complaints about rising gas prices and how hard “it was to get by,” knowing full well that the economic toll upon them was far greater than on me.

I also felt self-conscious for being of average weight; all the participants in this study were significantly overweight and discussions around diet and exercise were common. I always dressed in baggy jeans and oversized shirts, to de-emphasize my smaller frame. When Annie

guided me around her town, we first swung through the Burger King drive-thru. I did not want to eat fast food, but I did not want her to think I was “snotty,” particularly when she insisted on buying my lunch, telling me that I can buy some “big fancy meal” for her someday when I’m “rich and famous.” On another occasion, I stopped at a convenience store with Linda so she could get a sandwich and coffee for dinner before the group’s meeting that night. She told me that she can never lose weight because she is always eating “on the run.” I got a sandwich too, even though I was not hungry. I gained a number of pounds over the course of my fieldwork.

Commitment Acts

Performing “commitment acts” (Feldman & Berger, 2003) was also extremely helpful in gaining rapport and learning about the group too. These activities “involve a particularized investment of time or energy with an unpredictable payoff to the research...in the end doing them demonstrates the researcher’s commitment to learning the culture” (Feldman & Berger, 2003 p. 36). I felt this was especially crucial for me to do in this context. Everyone in the student group provided service and volunteered their time and money. Linda tutored Liz and then later taught the ESL class on her own time. Annie habitually purchased gifts—“door prizes,” she called them—to give at the meetings to any newcomer. She also drove anyone who needed a ride to the meetings. At the April 2004 meeting, Linda reported that “each [student] signed up for a month to bring snacks rather than have someone always shouldering the expense” (personal communication, April, 16, 2004).

Moreover, when I visited Linda at her office in July, she showed me scrap books filled with pictures and news clippings, noting that the staff member who was working on them did not complete the project. “It would have been nice if Jane had volunteered her time to finish it up,” Linda stressed, “But she chose not to do that; and I ran out of money.” Linda also criticized

another staff member who seemed reluctant to tutor a student. “Oh she says there is no student available in her area that fits her time schedule. But I think that is an easy excuse. She doesn’t want to be bothered.” Thus when Linda later asked that me to drive Sheila and Bill to the meeting that evening, since Annie had so many others to transport, and Linda had to pick up two students from her area, I immediately, emphatically said, “Oh, of course!”

At the tutor training in June 2004 I observed, Linda asked me to run out to her car in the pouring rain to fetch her eyeglasses. I spent the entire day (from 9:30 am to 7 pm) at the mall taking shifts at the table helping Sheila and Bill with selling the baked goods, thus allowing Linda to take breaks and have dinner with her friend. Annie was impressed that I drove three hours to help the group with its car wash. “I mean how many people would do that? Drive all that way just to wash cars? That just really shows how much you care.” Sheila acknowledged my efforts at the car wash too when she said to me at one point, “Come on, Juliet. You and me been workin’ hard, let’s take a break.” Additionally, in July, a student from another program and I co-presented a workshop on goal setting that we had done in the spring 2004; Annie asked if I would.

Finally, I approached Linda after the September meeting and volunteered to provide a condensed, abbreviated version of the VALUE leadership training to the group at the October meeting after Carman attempted to summarize the training at the September meeting. I later emailed Linda asking her if she I thought I was being “too pushy” in offering this. She responded, “No I did not think you were too pushy suggesting a training I think that is just what we need and I was not prepared to do that. I am looking forward to it (personal communication, September 17, 2004). At the potluck supper in November 2004, Sheila asked if I would announce the names drawn for the raffle they held.

Although I knew these acts of commitment were helpful in gaining trust and helped me glean information, I was not able to be as an acute observer during these times. For example, when Annie and Linda expressed difference of opinion about Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 911*, I was standing up at the front of room presenting. I had to remember the exchange as best as I could until I could get to my pad of paper and pen. Nor could I make many observations during the October meeting; all my attention and concentration was entirely focused on remembering and presenting the VALUE leadership workshop material. Also, I could not take notes while participating at the car wash. Again, I had to rely on my memory until I got a chance to write things down in my notebook or record them on tape during my two-hour drive back to State College. Using the tape recorder in this way was immensely useful in capturing my fleeting thoughts and reflections.

Getting Online

Fetterman (1998) writes that "the internet is one of the most powerful resources available to ethnographers" (p. 77). The internet proved vital in my research. For example, I was able to access the website of the mail distribution plant where Carmen worked. The website included a description of the company including the number of employees and candid job descriptions. I also came upon archived company newsletters on the website that I could download. One article was about Carmen. This document provided confirmation for me of her job title and responsibilities and the date when she passed her citizenship test. As Fetterman (1998) indicates the internet also is also useful in analyzing census data (p. 72-73). I was able to research income, education, employment rates, and types of industry represented among the various towns and counties where my participants lived. I also researched information to help me understand the difference between supplemental security income (SSI) and social security disability (SSD) as

well as the history of Intermediate Units (IUs). Finally, I also turned to the internet to glean some historical background on Carmen's native country, Peru.

Musings on "being under the microscope"

I wondered about how much I pried and poked into the lives of my participants. At times I found they were flattered that I took such acute interest in their lives, and pleased that I thought them and their group "worthy of being part of my study," as Linda put it. They would share openly, voluminously, so much information that I could not process it all. Sometimes they would appreciate being able to talk to me about things they could not share with others, seeing it as therapeutic. Thrusting pages at me filled with their histories, giving me copies of documents from meetings, questioning why at times I did *not* have my pad of paper with me, they seemed intent on getting their story told.

Other times, however, the participants would blurt something out and then immediately wish they could take it back, telling me, "Oh don't write that down! That's just between me and you," as Annie said on more than one occasion. They stared at the tape recorder—if they permitted me to use it—or eyed my tablet, wondering what I was jotting down exactly. "*Ella escribe mucho!*" (I heard one ESL learner whisper to another during one of the monthly meetings). Bill commented to me "You write good. You've gotten it all written down." Of course, I could freely write whatever I wanted right in front of the students assured that they would not know what I was scribbling. It dawned on me late into my study that I always refrained from openly taking notes when I was near Linda, nervous that she would lean over and read what I wrote.

Annie told me bluntly, "It's not always fun to be watched and written up about. It makes people nervous." She went on to tell me that Liz worried that I might report her to Children

Youth and Family and take her kids away. Linda shared that some participants were concerned about “how personal [I] may make this.” I assured everyone that I would maintain confidentiality, and that I would not put anything in the “paper” they did not want. They certainly knew, however, that I have final authority and they would have to trust that I would maintain my promises. When arguing against the veracity of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Annie noted that it is easy to take anything “out of context and make it look bad...a church, a school, even a literacy program.” I immediately thought that the comment seemed directed towards me. Yes, inevitably, “It is the researcher who will be the one to judge...how the context will be related to a respondent's remarks. The amount of context presented in relation to specific respondents or situations will also be the researcher's choice” (Wolcott, 2005, p. 35).

Moreover, questions posed to me at times were unnerving. In July 2005, when Linda asked about my plans after I finished, I had no ready answer; did she think I was directionless? Annie told me once that perhaps people would be shocked if they knew *my* family history. As we stood by her parents' gravesites, her comment called to mind the history of alcoholism, manic depression, and suicide in my family. But I did not divulge any of these stories to Annie or any member of the group; I could easily “duck” this off-handed comment all the while probing her and the others for greater and more graphic details about their families. When I asked Gary about a particular argument he had with Linda, he replied a little defensively “Well, it was just one of those days. Don't *you* have days like that?”

On three occasions, I was asked why I was limping—I had only shared my story with Annie--I simply replied that “I always limp.” Bill seemed a bit embarrassed assuring me that he never noticed before “I just thought you broke your leg or somethin.” Linda said, “That's a shame,” with a look of pity, and Gary just shrugged. All of these exchanges, interactions and

comments made me realize how difficult and uncomfortable it can be “to be under the microscope.”

Brookfield (2000) problematizes the narrative of linear progress that presents an individual who used to live her life according to other’s expectations, but after undergoing a “disorientating dilemma,” now lives a fully integrated true life. Brookfield (2000) asserts that “who we are is socially negotiable” (p. 46). I was confident, strong and forthcoming in sharing my story with Annie, yet reluctant and uncomfortable when others drew attention to how I walked. How I presented and what I told my story and re-presented myself changed in different situations. I reminded myself frequently that the participants in the study did likewise.

Exiting, reentering, and exiting the field again and again

I know you have hung out with us longer than you intended. We will surely miss you, but life moves on. You know how to find us if you ever want to drop back..
(personal communication from Linda December 30, 2004)

I had originally intended to complete my field work in a mere six months, thinking I could gain a thorough understanding of the dynamics, relationships, and people within that admittedly brief amount of time (Fetterman 1998, notes that classic ethnography involves a *minimum* of six months). Six months became nine. I came to appreciate the formal format of the meetings, realizing that the members appreciated the structure; I got to observe the positive changes in Liz’s life and know that the group traveled to the VALUE Leadership Institute in Washington DC. For even in October Linda felt certain that funds would *not* be available to send any students (personal communication, October 22, 2004). I had a difficult time leaving; I genuinely enjoyed being part of the group. I felt a sense of acceptance, belonging and connection. Linda complimented me on the VALUE mini-workshop I presented and Annie said it was an “epiphany” for her when I asked everyone to list something that she or he is good at

doing. “No one asked me that before. Asked me what I *can* do.” I was pleased to be included in the September birthday celebrations; my name was included on the birthday cake along with Linda’s and Annie’s. Gary gave me a note pad for a gift since I “was always writin’ in ‘em.” Linda sent me a Christmas card thanking me for “supporting the students and for my friendship.” In January 2005, she told me I “had a heart for literacy like [she] does.”

I kept returning to the field (I attended the May 2005 monthly meeting and went to the July advisory board meeting) thinking if I could just collect more data, perform some more “commitment acts” (Feldman, Bell, & Berger, 2003). I would feel better about the process because it would give yet another opportunity to ask questions and clarify meanings. I became a compulsive data collector (Kleinmann & Copp, 1993). Typing up field notes became ritual; I felt like I was accomplishing something and was a “real researcher” (Kleinmann & Copp, 1993).

Coffey (1999) also insightfully suggests that fieldwork offers emotional commitment. It provides place, purpose, a social life, and a structure. It provides rituals and routines. I had the 160-mile round trip up and down the highway, the scratching out field notes hastily in my field book before or after the meeting, the partaking of food and sharing of laughter. What I would do? What will my life be after this is all over?

Although Linda appreciated my return visits and said that I was “always welcome,” she realized “gas is expensive,” especially since I was “not working.” So she didn’t want me to “feel [that I have] have to do this traveling if it isn’t convenient (personal communication, May 12, 2005). I left the field when I took a job outside the state. I now had another emotional commitment, new identity, new place, and new rituals. I did return yet one more time to the field in January of 2006 since I learned at that time that the group had temporarily disbanded. I discuss this in chapter 6.

Data Quality

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), one indication of data quality is that the text should display honesty or authenticity about its own stance and position of the author.

Furthermore, the text should show evidence of critical subjectivity; the researcher needs to have heightened self-awareness in the research process and discuss her psychological and emotional states before, during, and after the research experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). From the preface onward, I situate myself within the research, explaining how I arrived at this general subject matter, the approach I took to the study, and my findings.

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) also maintain, “The combination of multiple methodological practices, empirical materials, perspectives, and observers in a single study is best understood as a strategy that adds rigor, breadth, complexity, richness, and depth to any inquiry (pp. 5-6). For example, I learned about the history of Sunnydale from Ellen, Linda, Donna (the assistant coordinator) and Annie. I additionally had access to Sunnydale’s historical documents as well as state reports. All of these sources helped me tell a story of the founding of Sunnydale. On another occasion, I overheard Gary mention that he would see Linda at Burger King on Sunday. I then took the opportunity to ask each of them separately about this get together, thus gaining two accounts. The current newsletters and the group’s scrap book kept by the group’s historian provided useful information. For instance, I was able to verify Carmen’s attendance at the first meeting in February 2002—she could not recall the exact date—because I saw her pictured among the attendees.

Ultimately my goal is to create a highly readable narrative filled with thick descriptions. I like Merriam and Simpson’s (1995) notion of “user generalizability,” meaning that the reader of my work ought to be able to glean a good understanding of the context, issues, and multiple

realities as presented by me in close collaboration with my participants and thus be able to determine whether the described situation applies to her own (p. 103).

Data Analysis

As mentioned previously, I began to identify themes as I started to collect data, informed by literature on participatory education, my previous experience of working with PAVE and VALUE, and my personal interest in stigma and stereotypes stemming from my childhood experiences. I categorized my field notes, interview transcripts, emails, tape recorded reflections, as well as germane literature and created Microsoft word files for each of the categories with labels such as, “Linda’s role,” “Communication,” “Stigma,” “Sunnydale,” “ Literacy Practices,” “Food,” “Us and Them,” “Politics,” “VALUE” “Reciprocity,” “Social Capital,” and “Giving Back.” Over the course of the study, I added more notes and reflections to these documents as well as created new ones and collapsed others, depending upon how much data I had gathered for each given theme and the connections I made. For example I subsumed “Linda’s Role” into “Literacy Practices” as I observed that she was very intent on helping the members of the group learn how to conduct business meetings. The text *Participatory Practices in Adult Education* was very influential in my decision to frame my findings in terms of benefits and challenges of participatory practice. In the introduction, co-editor Campbell wrote that that “[Benefits and challenges] are seldom juxtaposed, thus leaving the question, ‘Do limitations equal or outweigh the benefits?’” (p. 6).

I spent innumerable hours writing, cutting, pasting, and adding ideas as I wrote. Richardson (2000) avers that “writing is also a way of knowing—a method of discovery and analysis. By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship

to it” (p. 923). Similarly Spradley (1979) encourages the novice ethnographer to begin writing sooner rather than later, recognizing that while every ethnography description is “partial, incomplete, and will always stand in need of revision,” writing allows the researcher a “hidden store of knowledge gained during the research process” (p. 160). For example, by writing a biographical account of my early school days, I came to appreciate why I became so interested in notions of stigma and why the episode at the mall with Sheila (as described in chapter 6) resonated with me so powerfully. (See Appendix B for a longer mediation on my day at the mall). I fully appreciate Tedlock’s (2000) comment that “women ethnographers provide personal rather than professional reasons for undertaking field research” (p. 469).

The ethnomethodological approach, Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA), was also helpful in my analysis. Sociologist Harvey Sacks is credited with developing MCA (Perakyla, 2005), which has become a “thorough machinery for explicating the way people do descriptions, make claims and organize social relations” (Perakyla, 2005, p.). Categories are connected to activities or characteristics such that there are conventional expectations about what constitutes being a member of a particular group (Perakyla, 2005). The discourse of the literacy community, for instance, is based on the moral norm that every adult within the United States should be able to produce and consume written language. The relationship which this community shares functions to construct the categories of literate and illiterate (St. Clair, 1998, p. 9). In chapter 6, I analyze the categorization of “illiterate” and the associations made about members in that category and how members either accept or reject the characterizations. People are usually referred to by using categories, and any one person can be referred to in any number of ways. Perakyla notes that he could be called a “man,” “father,” “researcher,” By keeping in mind that there is always more than one category available for the description of a given person, the

analyst always asks, ‘Why this categorization now?’” (Perakyla, 2005, p.). For example, I analyze why the literacy students and Linda refer to Carmen and the other Latino/Latina students exclusively as “the Spanish.”

I also analyze the discord that arises when members fail to comply with the conventional expectations of being in the student involvement group. The ESL learners, for example, are criticized by the literacy students and Linda for not fulfilling the obligations that come with group membership yet benefiting from the rewards of being part of the student involvement group. I include large blocks of narrative as relayed to me by Annie, Linda, Gary, and Sheila. In their respective stories they construct and shape their experiences within the group to complain about others’ actions and defend their own. I emphasize each one’s voice relating what he or she says and how he or she conveys it given her subjective positions, social locations, interpretations, and personal experiences (Chase, 2005). For instance, I take issue with how Linda’s categorizes the literacy students as childish and needy by pointing out the vast discrepancy between her social status, actions, and professional role and theirs.

Summary

In this chapter I describe my approach to studying Sunnydale’s student involvement group. Through the use of narrative ethnography, I place emphasis on the relational aspect between me and the participants (or narrators) and I listen to their stories and interact with them in their daily lives. Chase (2005) writes that narrative is a way of understanding one’s own and others’ actions, of organizing events, and seeing the consequences of actions and events over time. “The narrative communicates the narrator’s point of view, including why the narrative is worth telling in the first place....narratives express emotions, thoughts, and

interpretations” (p. 656). As a critical theorist, I am keenly interested in learning how their stories replicate or reject. In the next chapter, I discuss the research site through the use of the narrative of Ellen, the founder of Sunnydale.

CHAPTER 4: SUNNYDALE

This chapter provides a history of Sunnydale Literacy Partnership (the literacy program at which I conducted my study) beginning with its inception in 1982. Ellen, the founder of Sunnydale, was the primary narrator of this story, but I also relied on Linda's account, Annie's comments, Sunnydale's historical documents, published literature, and what I gleaned from informal discussions with others in the ABE field in Pennsylvania. In her story, Ellen emphasized a tight allegiance to the principles of Laubach Literacy and volunteerism—a loyalty Linda (the current coordinator and leader of the student involvement group) shares. These ideals are reflected in how Ellen managed the program. Jurmo (1989) maintains that 1983 and 1984 marked the beginning of Laubach Literacy Action's interest in promoting student involvement on the national level, encouraging local affiliates to do so as well. These national initiatives, in addition to the close connection Sunnydale had with TLC and regional and state student conferences, led to the establishment of the current student involvement group.

The Rise of Sunnydale

Sunnydale Literacy Partnership was founded as a Laubach Literacy Action-affiliated program in 1982, a time when adult literacy had once again gained attention at the national level and subsequently at the state level. Armed with the startling statistic that 20 percent of Americans are “functionally illiterate,” according to the Adult Performance Study, Congress mandated in its 1978 emendations of the Adult Education Act in “unusually explicit language” (NACAE, 1979, p. 4) that the adult education delivery system expand to serve the “hard-to-reach,” “the hard to motivate,” and “the hard to teach” population (NACAE, 1979, p. 6). To that end, the 1978 Adult Education Act directed each state to create a plan in consultation with a

diverse group of stake holders including unions, libraries, businesses, mental health groups, and volunteer-based organizations such as Laubach Literacy Action and Literacy Volunteers of America (NACAE, 1979, p. 6). During this time, these two national organizations were rapidly expanding their respective roles in the literacy field. For instance, in 1983, LLA set the ambitious goal of doubling the number of its students and tutors by 1988 (Kanger, 1985). The 25 staff members of the Laubach national staff traveled across the country attending conferences, providing technical assistance, and giving moral support to new programs (Kangisser, 1985).

Pennsylvania was one of the first states that heavily supported volunteer-based literacy councils as a means of expanding the system (Ilsley, 1985). For instance, in 1981 the state provided special project funds to the Pittsburgh Regional Library Center to develop and implement a model for connecting literacy and ABE programs to “address the needs of illiterate Pennsylvania adults.” This network was named Tutors of Literacy in the Commonwealth (TLC) (Cica and Belew, 1981, p. 81). In the 1982 edition of the *Pennsylvania Handbook of Adult Basic Education*, Alfred Bennett, Chairperson of the Northeast Region for Laubach Literacy Action, Literacy Services Manager for the Pittsburgh Regional Library Center, and Project Director of TLC argued that the “best way to teach” the “least educated” is on a one-on-one basis with the use of volunteers. He urged educational agencies to contact him for assistance in developing such programs (p. VIII-4).

Bennett attended the 1982 PAACE Mid-Winter Conference where he met Ellen, future founder of Sunnysdale Literacy Partnership. Ellen was in attendance because she wanted to find out more about establishing a volunteer-based literacy program at the Intermediate Unit (IU) where she worked. Created by the state legislator in 1970, the 29 IUs throughout Pennsylvania serve as regional consortiums to collaborate with school districts to provide specialized support

in the areas of adult education, curriculum services, educational technology, preschool education, school-age programs, and statewide programs. Each IU is governed by an executive director and a board of directors composed of school board members from member school districts (<http://www.paiu.org/>).

With a Masters in Communication Disorders, Ellen had been hired in the mid-1970s to work with mental health patients and stroke victims at the state hospital, with which her IU had a contract at the time. Ellen found, however, that several of her students were beginning readers and although the IU had a GED program, there was no suitable program for literacy students. She approached the IU Executive Director who agreed to house a literacy program and asked that she attend the 1982 PAACE annual conference to find out more about how to establish one.

Ellen met Bennett at a PAACE conference session for volunteer-based programs sponsored by the recently-formed TLC. Bennett immediately offered to assist her in establishing a new program. But Ellen was also aware of Literacy Volunteers of America (LVA) and wanted to find out how LVA operated, so she returned home and contacted both organizations. Ellen relayed the following:

It was a big deal to get a hold of these groups. You couldn't just send off an email like you can nowadays. I had to get out the typewriter and mail off a written request. I heard back from Laubach right away, but the other, LVA, I never heard back from them! Can you imagine? So I finally called, and they said that they required a 300 dollar retainer, a night's stay at a hotel for the trainer, and they charged for the materials. I thought, 'I don't have that kind of money. Forget that.'

Bennett, on the other hand, offered to stay at Ellen's house, to provide free materials and to conduct the first tutor training. For fiscal year 1982-1983, Ellen's boss applied for 310 grant money—funding specifically for “special research and demonstration projects” that will help expand the system—to establish Sunnydale over the five-county area the IU serves. Over a

nine-month period, the program set out to recruit 20 tutors and train them using the Laubach Reading Method. The IU received \$4,940 to realize this “cost-effective” program (*Catalog of Adult Education Projects*, 1983).

When Bennett was unavailable to conduct her second tutor training, he referred her to the then-president of TLC who was a certified Laubach trainer. Ellen cites this informality, volunteerism, and networking as the heart of Laubach Literacy. “You know the approach to telling people about these literacy programs should be ‘if you want to read better and faster, there is someone right in the neighborhood that can help you. It’s *free* help.’”

During her 19-year tenure as coordinator of the program, Ellen embraced the ideals and philosophy of Laubach, calling the “each one teach one,” slogan “beautiful.” Ellen asked more advanced learners to teach beginning readers and encouraged family members of learners to volunteer as well, as was encouraged by Laubach. “We always tried to have student speakers at tutor trainings too. We have an old saying, “If you want to know how the patient is, you ask the patient, not the doctor. If you want to know how the student is doing, *don’t* ask the tutor or teacher. You ask the student. That was always my guideline.”

This unfortunate medical analogy common in the 1980s which “presents illiterates as suffering a disease that can be only cured by a caring education system” (Quigley, 1997, p. 37), has been roundly critiqued by many (see Fingeret, 1989; Ilsley, 1985; Quigley, 1997). But what is important to note here is that Ellen rejects the notion that the student is wholly reliant on some outside expert.

Furthermore, she bluntly informed me that she did not like the current direction of the field, with its increasing emphasis on professionalism. “It’s like there is no room for volunteers anymore. We used to money to send volunteers and students to workshops, but not anymore.”

Finally, Ellen is keenly aware of the constraints of the system, “In an ideal situation we could allow all the students to decide when and where and how to pursue an education,” she remarks. “However, we’re mandated to provide assessment for each student and to follow an [Individualized Educational Plan], which dictates the level and materials to be used.”

As Ellen’s comment highlights, learners are constrained by the all-knowing professional who dictates what the learners are required to achieve (Heaney, 1996; McKnight, 1995). For example, the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) mandated that an accountability system be developed; the National Reporting Standards (NRS) was thus designed. NRS has five core outcome measures, which every state must track for each learner: increased educational gains as determined by a standardized assessment procedure, entry into the workforce, retention of employment, entrance into postsecondary education or training, and receipt of secondary school diploma or GED (Condelli et al, 1999). The NRS was developed in consultation with state directors, representatives from voluntary provider agencies, directors of local adult education programs, and experts on accountability systems (Condelli, 1999). Noticeably absent from this list of those consulted are adult learners.

Humanistic Ethos

Virtually every Sunnydale historical document presented the efforts of the literacy staff (all female, mostly part-time) and volunteers in terms of helping, showing compassion, and encouraging learners. For example, Ellen invited tutors and students to a gathering in 1988 in order to “bring students and tutors together in a warm, social atmosphere.” In an essay written by a tutor about the 1990 Christmas party, the event is described as follows:

Tutors and students mingle together like the one big happy family. We are all on one team—to erase literacy. Once or twice each week tutors meet with students...for their

lessons based on the Laubach theme of 'Each One Teach One.' The one-to-one brings a relationship of caring and sharing.

Three years later, Ellen established a student/tutor support group that met periodically throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s. According to a letter sent to tutors,

The purpose of this group [was] to bring students and tutors together in a warm, social atmosphere. Not only will this provide an opportunity for everyone to get to know each other, but this will also give students and tutors a chance to help each other, whether it be reading, exchanging ideas, or sharing whatever problem you may have.

Furthermore, a tutor headed up a theatre enterprise in which learners performed scenarios depicting the everyday struggles of adult literacy learners. This group conducted an interview with a local radio station in 1987. Finally, one student spear-headed a group exclusively for other students. A letter dated September 23, 1985, written, by a former Sunnydale learner, invited current learners and any of their friends "who have trouble reading" to a "Readers Anonymous" meeting. The learner wrote, "I would like to help you better your self [sic]; to make you understand you are not in this alone. I know myself what you are going through, because I have been there."

On the one hand, Luttrell (1996) and Quigley (1997) note that it is demeaning to categorize all literacy learners as helpless, dependent, and ashamed and assert that they will come to feel better about themselves if only a (female) volunteer with a "degree of caring" will tend to their wounded psyche.. Yet, Luttrell (1996) also argues that women's work of caring should not be "devalued" (p.388). "The ability to facilitate self-development and positive self-esteem that are essential to literacy education should not be viewed as an automatic outcome but rather as an achievement" (p. 348). I hasten to add, however, this is a starting point. As described in chapter 2, when learners gathered at the literacy congresses and told their stories,

they began to recognize the systematic economic, political, and ideological roots to their common problem. They told and listened to each other's stories as a foundation for action resulting in the formation of VALUE. In the section below I outline how the students at Sunnydale were able to connect with students outside of their program and take on more active roles by learning from each other.

Connecting TLC, Sunnydale, and VALUE

Tutors of Literacy in the Commonwealth (TLC) began as a program division of the Pennsylvania Association for Adult and Continuing Education (PAACE) in 1981. Securing non-profit status in 1996, TLC's mission is to provide training and support to adult literacy and family literacy programs throughout Pennsylvania. TLC also has a long history of promoting adult learner involvement and leadership (Wilson, 2001).

Beginning in 1992, TLC invited five learners to serve as "New Reader Regional Representatives"; these representatives were all adult literacy learners from Pennsylvania programs who were asked to assess needs and help develop local student leadership (Wilson, 2001). Among Sunnydale's documents, I found a 1993 letter written by the representative from Sunnydale's region introducing himself and asking to meet with students from the program. The South Central representative was Marty Finsterbusch who later became the Executive Director of VALUE, another was Walter Long, who later served on ProLiteracy's Board of Trustees (personal communication, Finsterbusch, June 12, 2004) These student leaders also helped plan and coordinate state-wide student conferences held in Harrisburg and Northeast Regional Adult Literacy conferences (Wilson, 2001).

The first Northeast conference was held in 1987. All of these conferences were sponsored by TLC and were held in the off-years of the Laubach Biennial Conferences at different college campuses across the state. For instance, the 1995 Northeast conference was held at Pennsylvania State University's main campus. This conference had the theme of *New Readers Sponsorship* and included workshops on lobbying, networking, and the impact of new reader involvement (Herr, Gourley, & Masek, 1995).

The 2001 Northeast Adult Literacy Regional Conference was held at York College. VALUE had been in existence for three years by that time, and Finsterbush had recently taken on the position of Executive Director. He presented as did Nancy Shields, former learner and founding member of the Delaware state-wide student group, Organization of Adult Alumni and Students in Service (OAASIS). Finally, LLA held a pre-conference on adult learner leadership as well. Annie, Linda, and two other Sunnydale students attended this conference.

That fall, TLC began laying the groundwork to create a state-wide student organization. TLC organized six regional meetings around the state to identify student leaders and assess the interest in a state-wide student group. Two meeting facilitators were selected from each region and participated in a training held in State College, where they learned how to effectively conduct a group meeting. Linda and Annie made up one of these teams. Marty Finsterbush was on another.

There were a total of 125 students and student supporters who participated in the six regional meetings. The content of the meeting included discussing positive aspects of literacy programs and suggestions for improvement. Participants also discussed how they could give back to their local programs and become more involved. The meeting also included a segment

on leadership development with participants defining leadership qualities and participating in an activity based on good decision making skills (<http://users.penn.com/~literacy/pave.html>).

At the Fifth Annual Adult Learner state conference, the statewide student organization, Pennsylvania Adult Voice in Education (PAVE), was formally established. In the 2002 Sunnydale Spring newsletter, Annie wrote about attending the Fifth Annual Student Conference: “I went to a valuable workshop on student involvement led by Marty Finsterbusch of VALUE.” She then referred—mistakenly—to her local student group as part of PAVE, and PAVE as “a spin-off of VALUE.”

Annie later told me,

Yeah, the whole reason I wanted to start this local group was because I thought [VALUE, PAVE, and Sunnydale’s student involvement group] were all connected—all part of the same thing. I’ve been going to these conferences for almost ten years now and hearing about all of this stuff. I’ve been hearing about student involvement from Marty and Walter for years. Down in Harrisburg [at the state student conferences] they would talk about electing officers, having a scrap book, helping out at the program’s office. They’re my heroes. I’m totally behind VALUE. VALUE has kept me in the program. They deserve a lot of credit. They’re the backbone. They give students a voice.

Annie echoes the words of Pat Blackwell, the Vice President of VALUE who described her experience of gathering together with other literacy learners at a National Literacy Congress. Annie was inspired to start a group just as Blackwell was.

Sunnydale Literacy Partnership Today

In 2000, Ellen selected her successor, Linda, the current program coordinator, who had been a tutor and then staff person with the program for the previous 11 years; “I chose her because I knew she had a lot of commitment to the program and is very sensitive to the students,” Ellen commented. Ellen spent the year 2000 training Linda for the position while also

ensuring that Sunnydale became one of the first programs in the country to earn Laubach accreditation after a three-month internal review during which the literacy council self-evaluated such things as its program management, operations and recruitment strategies, and opportunities for students to become involved in their organizations beyond instruction. Ellen continues to serve as a tutor, tutor trainer, and member of program's advisory board.

The mission statement of Sunnydale is “to meet the educational, life skills, and English as a Second Language needs of a diverse adult learner population” and the vision statement is “to meet the educational life skills, community, and workplace needs of adult students in the five counties the program serves who read below the eighth grade level. The program also works to improve the lives of immigrant population who desire to learn English as a Second Language.” During the time of this study, there were 68 active tutors and 128 learners; 26 of those learners (all ESL learners) met in classroom settings. In addition to Linda, who works full-time, and her assistant who works four days a week, five Alternative Leadership People (ALPs) are paid *per diem* for conducting intakes of the students and assisting with tutor trainings. All of these people were initially volunteer tutors before being asked to become paid staff. Moreover, most of them still tutor or teach a small ESL class. All of them either are certified or are working towards tutor certification.

Not Like It Used To Be

Although Laubach Literacy merged with Literacy Volunteers of America (LVA) in October of 2002 to form ProLiteracy Worldwide, Sunnydale still refers to itself as an “Each one Teach One” program and distributes brochures about Laubach's founder, Dr. Frank C. Laubach. Furthermore, the program uses the graduated phonics-based *Laubach Way to Reading* series as its core training material because—as one tutor trainer stated during a training I attended— “[the

series] is for everyday people who have never taught before.” Furthermore, at that same training, Annie’s tutor, Annie (who also serves as a tutor), and Annie’s student at the time, Sheila, were all present. “See, here’s three generations of teachers; we’re a perfect example of the each one teach one concept,” Annie remarked to the participants.

Sunnydale hosted “Dr. Bob” (the avuncular son of founder Robert Laubach) to speak to the students and tutors in the fall of 2002. “Linda took John [the other cofounder] and me to have dinner with ‘Dr. Bob’ at the Cracker Barrel when he came to visit. Oh that was fun,” related Annie. Sunnydale’s brochures describe tutoring as “helping one’s neighbor” who was “not fortunate to have a successful learning experience in school.” The requirements for tutoring at Sunnydale are “high school diploma, good reading skills, and a degree of caring” (a slogan borrowed from the 1980s literacy campaign). Finally, Linda told me she dislikes the direction ProLiteracy has taken:

It’s not like it was when it was Laubach when it was more about caring and helping people. ProLiteracy is more money-grabbing. They charge so much to get certified. They don’t give anything for free like Laubach did. But that’s the way the whole field is I guess with all the regulations and standards there are.

Sunnydale’s Umbrella Organization

Sunnydale is a very small part of the IU itself, which employs 625 full-time and 400 part-employees and serves 17 participating school districts, nonpublic schools, and institutions in five counties.

Linda’s immediate boss is the director of the adult education programs (this includes family literacy and the General Education Development tests preparation) who in turn reports to the head of the Education Initiatives division. Linda cited many advantages to being under the IU umbrella: “there is a person on staff who writes all the grants, someone who prepares the

newsletter material for printing. The literacy program does not have to raise money for office equipment or to pay the staff and I do not have to pay rent.” One disadvantage, however, is that Sunnydale does not have 501(c)(3) status; therefore, potential donors are often dissuaded upon learning that they cannot use their contribution as a tax write off. “I’ve lost donations from Wal-Mart because I didn’t have a tax exempt number. So I must operate within a budget since donations are not likely,” Linda told me.

Federal funding for the literacy program flows from Title II of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) and Pennsylvania’s Act 143 which is earmarked for adult literacy programs that will “enable out-of-school youth and adults 17 years of age and older who are nonreaders or who read below the 5th grade level or who lack basic English language proficiency to improve their basic skills in order to increase their prospects for a more productive life” (Pennsylvania Department of Education, Grants and Funding Information).

The IU is located atop a gentle incline. The building is a large brick building with three floors and several satellite dishes set around it. Sliding double doors lead into a spacious reception area. At the receptionist desk an older, cheerily-smiling lady greets visitors, asking them to sign in and take a “visitor’s badge.” The day I visited I felt a little out of place in my jeans, short sleeve shirt, and tennis shoes. I surveyed my surroundings as I waited for Linda to come fetch me from her third-floor cubicle. Down the corridor are a series of various sized conference rooms, with long rectangular tables and swivel rolling chairs. Many of these are equipped with a television and VCR. Teachers and administrators come for professional development and credit courses such as “functional behavior assessment overview,” and a “phonemic awareness prevention and early intervention program to help reduce reading and spelling failure.” These professional trainings emphasize the mechanical, instrumental

components of educational practice to the exclusion of content and social vision. “Our literacy programs have been adapted to an American technology in which malfunctions are remedied by the administration of professional care” (Heaney, 1990, p. 8). Upon the beige-colored, stucco walls are pictures of the board of directors comprising 17 members, one from each of the constituent school district board. They appeared to be mostly serious-looking white men and a few white women dressed in casual business attire. Below these pictures in black lettering upon a gray board is a quote from Christian literary figure, G.K Chesterton, “Education is simply the soul of a society as it passes from one generation to another.”

In striking contrast to the notion of education implied in Chesterton’s quote, Dewey (1938) argues that there is no such thing as educational value in the abstract. Rather knowledge is co-constructed within a particular social context. The student involvement group engages in socially constructed experiential-based learning in which every member’s participation matters in a community of practice. I analyze this community of practice in chapter 6.

Summary

In this chapter I place the beginnings of Sunnydale Literacy Partnership within the historical context of the adult literacy campaign of the 1980s and early 1990s. The one-on-one tutoring method, principles, and philosophy of Sunnydale were very much in keeping with the popular and political rhetoric of this time period. McKnight (1995) explains that many well meaning individuals assist the social service professionals in taking care of “the needy,” “[i]nstead of recognizing the crucial need most labeled people have for the empowerment of joining community life as a citizen, expressing capacities, and making choices” (pp. 106-107). Yet, paralleling the national activities, opportunities were afforded to Sunnydale learners to meet

with each other and with adult learner leaders of the burgeoning adult learner movement.

Ultimately, these activities led to the creation of the current student involvement group. In the following chapter, I provide biographical sketches of the participants in this group.

CHAPTER 5: BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES

In this chapter I provide biographical sketches of the participants based upon their narratives, comments, and my observations. As a critical theorist, I am concerned with social injustice and human suffering. I study how economic factors help shape everyday life and how major institutions—educational, business, and government—promote ideologies that allow certain people to prosper and others to live in poverty (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005). Given this theoretical position, I do emphasize the fact that, as is the case with the majority of literacy learners (D’Amico, 2004), the participants in this study are among the working poor and public assistant recipients living in substandard housing, suffering from physical health problems, and facing very low-wage job opportunities. The participants do not endure these hardships because they are skill deficient. Rather literacy learners “cannot read and write because they have been politically and economically excluded from those institutions of power within which the art of reading and writing is a valued and essential tool” (Heaney, 1990, p. 2).

Annie

Annie is the president, co-founder and according to Linda “the eyes, ears of the student involvement group.” Annie is a stout woman with blondish gray hair and bright blue eyes. She was born in 1950 to a father who is of Ukrainian descent and mother who is Dutch. She was an only child. She says her mother was distracted and angry, her father loving and hard-working who made money by grinding castings at the large local foundry, constructing houses, and selling discarded clothing to the rag man who would come around to their black tar paper house. Annie is uncertain whether either of her parents graduated from high school. Annie did not. She always struggled in school, was ashamed and humiliated to the point of peeing in her pants

whenever she was called on to read aloud; she was constantly teased by her classmates and labeled “stupid” by teachers. Unsurprisingly then, she was most anxious to drop out. Convinced by the school that their daughter would never learn, her parents allowed her to marry a man seven years her senior when Annie was just 14 years old. Annie was pregnant nine times during the eleven years she was married to her husband; she wryly joked that during those other two years when she was not pregnant, her husband was in jail. The family drifted from one town and state to the next so as to evade law enforcement. Her husband stole “hog wire and horse saddles” and had crossed state lines when he was on probation. Annie worked on a cattle ranch in Montana and a Ford factory in Indiana. At times, Annie, her husband, and their four children slept in graveyards or abandoned cars. In 1976 at the age of 25, when they returned to their hometown, Annie left her husband when he was sent to jail once again. Thereafter, she worked a series of menial jobs in factories and on farms to ensure that her children had some semblance of stability. She is proud that all her children graduated from high school and are gainfully employed. Annie suffered tremendous guilt, shame, and self-loathing, however, never telling anyone about her inability to read. In 1992, she planned to commit suicide. “I got so tired of living, tired of running, tired of lying.” She put her matters in order and had a will drawn up. But she believes God intervened one day by bringing two married Mormon missionaries to her door asking if she would be willing to hear about the Bible and asked her to read a scripture verse. She started to give one of her typical well-rehearsed excuses that she relied on for so many years (e.g., I don’t have my reading glasses, my eyes hurt) but instead she simply told them she could not read. They led her to the literacy council. Over the ensuing eleven years, she has worked with three different tutors. Currently she meets with a 78-year old woman in her town at the tutor’s home and now works as a home nurse companion. She works long shifts

bathing brittle-boned elderly women and contending with Alzheimer's patients.

Moreover, Annie is in poor health herself. She has high blood pressure, pained joints, ruptured discs, and a strangulated hernia. "None of this is fatal. Just extremely annoying," Annie joked. Yet, Annie maintains that she has reached a peace and acceptance about her struggles, disabilities, and hardships. "I used to be so angry at God. Why me? But now I turn it around and say, 'Why not me?' God has put me in this particular place and circumstance for a reason."

Linda

Linda is the coordinator of the tutoring program; she also served as the treasurer of the student involvement group during the course of this study. Linda is a plain-speaking pragmatic woman who dresses in knit tops and stretch pants. She shares a house with her long-time friend, Sally. They have five dogs, three birds, and two cats. Her reading interests tend towards spiritual self-help books by Deepak Chopra and Wayne Dyer, as well as Christian books like the very popular *The Purpose-Driven Life* by Gary Warren. She never wears make up and greatly admires the Amish: "I think they've got a good thing here. I don't want that life for myself, but I would like to slow down and make my life less complicated."

Linda was born in 1942 and raised outside of Philadelphia in a family with one older sister and her parents; her father was a salesman. She married right after high school to a man in the military with whom she had two sons. She divorced at the age of 25, raising her two sons with the help of her parents. Over a 20-year period she pursued and earned a bachelors degree in Health Management through classes at her local college and correspondence classes from another university. She started tutoring at Sunnydale in 1989. Linda was inspired to volunteer as a tutor when she met a young woman in the hospital cafeteria reading the Bible. The young woman told her she was learning to read through the local literacy program.

In 2000, Linda left her job at the hospital to become the assistant coordinator of the Sunnydale. Ellen was planning to retire the following year and wanted to train her successor thoroughly. In March of 2001, Linda officially took over. At the time of the study, in addition to her 40-hour a week job, Linda taught ESL classes two nights a week. She estimated that she spends about 15 hours a week devoted to student group activities.

Gary

Gary is the secretary of the student group. He has been a student in the literacy program since Winter of 2003 and agreed to be the secretary at the first meeting he attended last February. When I first met Gary, I was a little intimidated. Gary is a very large, 47-year old white man with a shaved head and grizzly reddish beard. He volunteered that he had spent some time in jail, and when I asked him once what he likes to do for fun, he chuckled mischievously and said, “Oh you don’t want to know.” He is quick to express anger and is blunt in his opinion. He told a taxi driver to “shove it up her ass” when she informed him that the cab rate had gone up, and informed Linda that “sometimes [she] can be a very cranky old lady.” But upon spending more time with him and learning his story, I came to appreciate his anger as well as candor, humor, and contributions to the group.

Gary was born in 1958. His father was a truck driver and his mother a homemaker. Gary said he dreamed of being a teacher when he was a youngster and worked hard in school. Like many children raised in rural Pennsylvania, Gary often rode his bike in the local parades. One particular summer (Gary cannot recall what year exactly) he was riding his bike home from such a parade when he was struck by a drunk driver: “I got hit in the head. My head was opened like a letter V,” he wrote in an essay. After spending two months in the hospital, he spent several

years at home rehabilitating. First he was in a hospital bed that his father had gotten from the local veterans association; thereafter, he was confined to a wheelchair as his mother fed and bathed him. In 1972, he returned to school and had to “start all over.” He left school in 1975 after completing the ninth grade and started working at a sheltered workshop (long-term employment provider operated by a not-for-profit corporation whose primary purpose is to provide employment for persons with disabilities) doing piece work.

After five years of this kind of work, Gary bought a trailer and lived on his grandmother’s farm helping her with chores. At some point, however—again the date is unclear—Gary suffered extreme emotional distress and spent time in a mental hospital. At the recommendation of his caseworker, Gary sold his trailer and moved to a small town where he still resides.

Currently, he receives Security Supplemental Income (SSI). Additionally, Gary also hires himself out as a handy man and works as a dishwasher at a restaurant receiving \$5.00 an hour; he is paid in cash after each shift. He had always wanted to earn his GED and said one of his employers referred him to Sunnydale.

Sheila

Sheila is co-vice president. She is a 49-year old white woman who refers to herself as “slow.” Given her widely splayed front teeth, wandering eye, and slight speech impediment, it is not difficult to imagine that Sheila has heard this word and many other derogatory labels far too often throughout her life. She was passed along from one special education class to the next because “teachers just wanted to get rid of me. They didn’t care if I learned nothin’” At age 16 when she was in the ninth grade, she dropped out of school to stay home to take care of her

younger brothers and sisters (she is the oldest of nine children) when her mother went to work full-time as a certified nursing aide. She did not want to talk about her father, other than to say he was a “bum.”

Sheila has worked for school cafeterias and, like Gary, in sheltered workshops. She also collects SSI. “My uncle worked at the county assistance office and he was able to get me on it “‘cause I can’t read or write; I’m slow.” Also like Gary, Sheila spent some time at a mental health facility. Her boyfriend, Bill worries about her stress level afraid that she “may end up back at the loony bin.” She sees her case worker weekly. Sheila has three children of whom she is very proud. Her oldest, a son, graduated with Associates degree and now works at the local power plant. Her older daughter was a special education student and also receives SSI. At the time I was conducting fieldwork, she had just graduated from high school and had enrolled in the literacy program working with a tutor with the intent of enrolling in a certified nursing aide program. Sheila’s youngest child, a daughter, was entering into the eleventh grade and had a “Big Sister” who took her on weekend trips such as the beach in Delaware.

One of Sheila’s sisters contacted the literacy program on Sheila’s behalf sometime in the mid 1980s; Sheila has since worked with a number of tutors, but she said they “often walked out on her.” She started coming to the student involvement group in November 2002 for the Thanksgiving meal with her tutor. Annie is her current tutor. They have been working together since summer of 2003.

Bill

Curly hair, gray eyes, quick smile and easy laugh, Bill brings enthusiasm to the group. Bill found out about the literacy program when he started dating Sheila. She invited him to the annual potluck in November 2003 and thereafter he started attending the monthly meetings with Sheila while waiting for a tutor, which he eventually got in May 2004. During 2004, Bill served as the “historian.” The historian is responsible for taking care of the photo album, taking pictures of activities, and bringing the album to meetings as needed. He or she should also label pictures to put in the album.

Born in 1954, Bill was the youngest of four sons. “I was born wrong. My head kept hitting my mom’s thigh bone,” he explained to me as he rammed his fist into his opposing palm as a means to demonstrate. “I had a huge lump on my head. And it never totally healed.” He grew up in a single bungalow on a tiny lot; his father worked at the foundry. Bill graduated from high school in 1974 but like so many others in literacy programs, he knows he was simply socially promoted. One of his senior class teachers stayed after class to help him “‘cause she could tell I really wanted to learn. But there just wasn’t much she could do at that point,” he contends. Too many others were like his sixth grade English instructor who whacked him on the neck with a ruler when he had fallen asleep in class. Consequently, he jumped up from his seat, turned around, and punched her. “She didn’t have to do that,” he told me. “She couldda just woken me up and ask me why I was sleepin’. It’s ‘cause I stayed up really late the night before studyin’. I was tryin’ so hard to understand it.” He said his father would often use a switch on him and his brothers but was incensed that Bill’s teacher struck him.

After graduating from high school, Bill worked a series of manual labor jobs and ended up at a textile mill until 1998 when he suffered a series of seizures. He attributes these seizures

resulted from the depression he endured over his brother's and then mother's death within the previous year. His brother was found dead in a snow bank wearing a thin layer of clothing; he had sustained a severe blow to the head to the head and his wallet was gone. Bill believes he knows who killed his brother, but the case was never solved. His mother died soon after his brother's murder. Another one of his brothers is in the military and lives in Nebraska; the other lives locally. Bill has never been married and has no children. He now collects Social Security and disability and lives in his parents' house. Bill is border-line diabetic and develops kidney stones and ulcers on occasion.

Liz

Liz is a 35-year-old white woman. At the age three, she and her brother were taken in by a family at her church that already had 12 children. Her adoptive mother works as a waitress and home care aid "like Annie," and her adoptive father is a maintenance man. Liz finished high school and then entered a vocational technical program for horticulture. "It was OK for awhile, but I want to be a CNA (Certified Nursing Assistant) now." She also longs to attain her driver's license.

She said she feels stuck with her "shitty-ass boyfriend" who spends all their money on "liquor and smokes," can't be bothered to drive their kids to the bus stop when it is pouring rain, and who can't be troubled to take her to a 9:30 am tutoring session because he is sleeping off the the late night round of gin. He has been known to get in fights, call 911 threatening to commit suicide, and as Annie put it, "screw around with other women." Linda characterizes her home life as "volatile."

Liz lives in a double house with her boyfriend and their two children, a six-year-old girl, and five-year-old boy. The other part is inhabited by a family with eight kids who “make a big racket and run all over the place.” Liz told me she has complained to the landlord “but he don’t want to get involved.” I arrived at Liz’s place for our appointed interview with a bit of trepidation. Broken toys and cigarette butts littered the yard, the front porch sagged, and a black trash bag covered a shattered side window. A straw hat with dry flowers and faded pink ribbon hung on a nail upon Liz’s door front. I knocked and rang the doorbell, but there was no answer.

When I talked to her later, she said she and her boyfriend had to take her son for an evaluation; “he has ADD/HD. He needs to get the right medicine. If it’s not one thing it’s another with him,” she smiled sadly. “But my daughter is doin’ better, since we were finally able to get eyeglasses for her, once the monthly check came in,” she added. Liz collects SSI, food stamps, and was eligible for the federal-nutrition program, Women Children and Infants (WIC). She has not worked since 2000 when she fell and “busted [her] tailbone. I still go to physical therapy for that,” she stated.

Liz has been with the literacy program since the late 1990s; Annie was her first tutor. She has been in the student involvement group since 2002. She was selected to be the historian at the second meeting. In 2004 she was voted co-vice president along with Sheila. “Yeah, me, Linda, Annie and John [the student who subsequently left the program] started the group. I’ve been there ever since the very beginning,” she told me proudly.

Carmen

With her husband and two children, 45-year old Carmen lives in a sub-division consisting of split level homes with one-car garages on quarter-acre lots. A Ford Explorer sits in Carmen’s

driveway with a “Support Our Troops” magnetic yellow bow on the back; her nephew is serving in the army.

One striking difference between her house and the others in the neighborhood, however, is the Virgin Mary statue that sits right beside her front porch. Carmen kisses her hand and then places it on top of the statue daily asking for blessings for her family. Carmen does feel very blessed since emigrating from Peru to the United States in 1997. Carmen grew up outside of Lima with her brother and parents; her father was a public bus driver and her mother, a homemaker. After graduating from high school in 1979, Carmen married a man with “some college” who worked as a grocery store manager. In addition to raising her two children, Carmen was heavily involved in her community. “I worked for the mayor in my district. I worked in the community with people. The city hall helped the poor people, especially the children.” Fellow community members approached Carmen with a problem or a complaint about the rise in taxes or the unavailability medical care. She spearheaded many local fundraisers and advocated on the behalf of her community. The financial situation in Peru during the 1980s was so dire that the minister of finance proclaimed that Peru was suffering “the worst economic crisis of the century” (<http://countrystudies.us/peru/22.htm>) with a decline in its gross national product of about 40 percent and an inflation rate that increased to between 1,600 percent and 7,600 percent per year from 1988 through 1990, Peru’s taxation capacity declined by over 75 percent thus sharply reducing its delivery of basic services (<http://reference.allrefer.com/country-guide-study/peru/peru141.html>).

As Carmen put it, “I came here looking for a better life; most of the companies in my country closed.” In 1985, her brother-in-law who had immigrated to Central Pennsylvania in 1981 and married an American citizen, returned to Peru to visit. “He tell us how wonderful life is

in America and talked about a VISA. He put in application for us to come. We wait *12 years* for permission. I think they lost our paperwork,” Carmen tells me. “In 1996, I wrote the US consulate in Peru and asked if they could please find it. I gave them my number.” Finally, in the Spring of 1997, her family was granted a visa. She proudly reports that within three months of arriving in Pennsylvania, with the help of her brother-in-law and his wife, both she and her husband secured jobs as machine operators at a large mail distribution plant and signed up with the literacy council to have an ESL tutor. “I knew no English at all. But I knew I needed to learn to get ahead, to make a better life.” In 2000, her family moved from a trailer to their current home.

Summary

In this chapter I provided biographical sketches of the participants in this study. As I consider these stories from the participants, I think back to Neil Bush’s insistence that reading difficulties are not a “race or class thing,” but a random occurrences that can happen to anyone. Granted, anyone can get hit by a drunk driver as Gary did or sustain brain trauma at birth like Bill (I too was “born wrong”); however, it was not because of bad luck that Gary wound up working in a sheltered workshop earning sub-minimal wages or random misfortune that Sheila had to quit school to tend to her younger siblings while her mother worked in a low-wage job as a certified nursing assistant. “Poverty and class are consequences of economic and political arrangements over which the poor themselves hold little control, arrangements which can only begin to change when the poor achieve a collective literacy—that is, when the poor begin to speak with one voice” (Heaney, 1990, p. 7). As I discuss in the next chapter, these individuals begin to work together, helping one another and Sunnydale through their collective efforts.

CHAPTER 6: RESEARCH FINDINGS

Participatory education takes on multiple meanings in a variety of contexts. Fingeret (1989) calls it a “philosophy as well as a set of practices. It is based on the belief that learners—their characteristics, backgrounds, and needs—should be at the center of literacy instruction” (p. 5). Hayes and Walter (1995) assert that participatory literacy education encompasses group activities beyond those primarily directed towards instruction. Learners may be involved in peer tutoring, student support networks, committees, advisory boards, or staff training.

Researchers have cited many benefits of participatory education. Learners enhance their personal development, increase their confidence level and renew feelings of self-esteem. Being part of a community, developing personal relationships, sharing knowledge and helping others are also identified as benefits. Participatory education also supports a rich array of learning goals by making learning authentic for adult learners at the personal and social level. Finally, the themes of having a voice and sharing power also recur in the research about learner participation (Auerbach, 1993; Burnaby, 2001; Campbell, 2001; Cunningham, 1993; Fingeret, 1989; Heaney, 1993; Horton, 1991; Jurmo, 1989).

I learned about Sunnydale Literacy Partnership through my work with the national adult learner organization, Voice for Adult Literacy United for Education (VALUE) and the state-wide student group, Pennsylvania Adult Voice for Education (PAVE). I was intrigued by Sunnydale because it had formed a student involvement group that met monthly. Sunnydale, like many adult literacy programs, traditionally pair adult learners with volunteer tutors. It is argued that students find this “level of anonymity” comforting and appreciate the attentive care that comes from the kind-hearted tutor (Luttrell, 1996). Yet this model tends to marginalize and stigmatize the literacy learner, perpetuating the notion that the adult learner should be ashamed; the one-one

relationship can also foster unequal relationships between tutor and student (Luttrell, 1996; Quigley, 1997). I was also impressed by the range of activities and organizational structure of Sunnydale's student involvement group. Members conduct fundraisers for themselves and other organizations, take field trips, hold annual elections to choose officers, engage in literacy practices, and discuss political issues. I wondered how this group came to be and how it functioned. I was curious to study how Linda, the coordinator of the program, and the student members interacted with one another. How did they negotiate roles and create more egalitarian relations within the context of a federally-funded literacy program.

In telling the story of Sunnydale's student involvement group from a critical perspective, I feel it is vitally important that participants tell their own stories. I am interested in the sociological aspect of narrative, desiring to understand how the participants individually and collectively present their personal and group experiences in relation to the discourse of (il)literacy (Chase, 2005). "Critical researchers have come to understand that language is not a mirror of society. It is an unstable social practice whose meaning shifts, depending upon the context in which it is used" (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005, p. 310). In this instance, the dominant discourse presents the illiterate as dysfunctional, passive, and helpless (Quigley, 1997; St. Clair & Sandlin, 2004). Thus, I am curious to learn how the group members accept, reject, or transform this discourse as they tell the stories about themselves and the group. Furthermore, guided by a critical sociological perspective, I was interested in how the student involvement group enabled the individual learners to exercise control within the program.

My research questions are as follows:

- How does the student involvement group enable learners to exercise power within the organization thereby shifting the typical student practitioner relationship?

- How does the student group foster critical participatory practices among its members?
- How do individual group members benefit by taking part in the group?
- How do the individual members and the group itself benefit Sunnydale Literacy Partnership?
- What are the challenges of sustaining an adult student involvement group in an adult literacy program?

I found that the group offers support and encouragement, allow learners to take on active roles within the organization thereby challenging the role of the learner from client to partner, provides opportunities to engage in and develop literacy practices, and encourages greater political involvement through group discussions of the 2005 I then juxtapose these beneficial qualities with the complications and challenges of forming a group of adult literacy learners. It is a facile presumption to believe that all learners always present a united front and are of one mind. More recent literature concerning participatory practices have presented multiple, conflicting, socially mediated notions of identity among students. Campbell (2001) underscores this point by noting, “In participatory educational practices, the social identity of the participants based on gender, class, intellectual and physical ability, location, and language influence their social relations” (p. 8). In the final few sections of this chapter, I explore these conflicts that arose among the members.

Supports Members:*Stigmatization*

Many adult literacy learners endured marginalization and oppression throughout their school years (Horsman, 2001; Quigley, 1997; Shelton, 2001; Suave, 2001). In the popular media, adult literacy learners are depicted as stupid, lazy, immoral, unproductive, and even sub-human (Fingeret, 1990; Quigley, 1997; St. Clair and Sandlin, 2004). St. Clair and Sandlin (2004) argue that the commonly accepted notion of “functional literacy” implies that “to be illiterate is to be incompetent” (p. 46). Thus there is little doubt that “illiteracy...carries a stigma” (Beder, 1991, p. 67). According to Link and Phelan (2001), “Stigma exists when elements of labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination occur together in a power situation that allows them” (p. 14). Several times during my study, I observed or heard stories about members enduring stigmatization.

One instance occurred when I took part in the book and cookie sale fundraiser event at the mall. Sheila and I took our turn to “man” the table; we sat and chatted as the long continuous loop of fifties and sixties music droned in the background and shoppers—mostly white, middle-aged, middle-class—milled about. Soon, one such shopper stopped by to rummage through the books and peer at the cookies. I explained to her that we represented a literacy program while she examined our wares. “Oh yeah? Well, my ex-husband is an illiterate!” she retorted sarcastically. Taking her comment at face value, Sheila spoke up, “Well, I can’t read either, and we do need tutors real bad.” Sheila handed literacy program literature to the woman. The woman was taken aback; she looked at me directly and said falteringly, “Oh yes it is a serious problem! And there are so many people who need help, and everyone is just too busy to volunteer, but I’ll try to find some time.” She hurried away.

Lofland (1998) contends that public space is invaluable because it is where “many unknown or only categorically known others (biographical strangers), many of whom may not share one’s values, history or perspective (cultural strangers)” can interact (p. 13). The shopping center is recognized as “America’s most distinctive contemporary public space” (Putnam, 2000, p. 211), and malls across the United States capitalize on their role as suburban’s town square by hosting “community-minded” activities such as blood drives, Halloween parades, walking clubs, cutest baby contests, and craft shows.

On that Saturday morning the Sunnydale’s student group came to the mall for its bake sale, the sign at the entrance of the mall advertised that it was a “community weekend,” (i.e., local non-profit organizations are permitted to set up tables and hand out flyers outside the JC Penney’s). Just below this notice was a sign advertising, “Everything 30% off at Bath and Beauty.” The juxtaposition of these two advertisements illustrates Putnam’s (2000) point that “mall culture is not about overcoming isolation and connecting with others, but about privately surfing from store to store” (p. 211). When the woman approached Sheila and me, her focus was entirely on our goods to be sold, not us as an organization or even us as fellow human beings. I doubt she even saw us as she began sorting through our wares.

Goffman (1963) writes, “We use specific stigma terms such as bastard, cripple, and moron in our daily discourse as a source of imagery and metaphor typically without giving thought to the original meaning” (pp.73-74). This is precisely what this woman did in calling her ex-husband an “illiterate,” only considering the connotations of the term “illiterate”: stupidity, incompetence, and dysfunction (St. Clair & Sandlin, 2004). Her quick, sarcastic, thoughtless (literally, lacking due thought or care) rejoinder indicated to me that I had caught her off guard, jarred her from her private pursuit of finding a good bargain. Her subsequent embarrassment and

discomfort upon hearing Sheila's response was palpable. She never acknowledged Sheila. Her eyes remained on mine as she proceeded to give me lip service with an acknowledgement of the seriousness of the literacy problem and her ostensible desire to help before rushing off. This exchange reminded me of Quigley's (1997) description of how his conversations regarding adult literacy end; the other person typically says "something along the lines of 'well it's awful. I must go. But I wish you luck'" (p. 6). He refers to these abrupt closures of the conversation as "the disassociation stage"—disassociation from the subject and from him.

On other occasions, people are more than willing to associate with literacy learners, but on their own terms with their own misconceptions intact. Annie relayed the following:

Sometimes it comes across that they think they are better than you. They don't have to say it, it just comes across. You can see it in their attitude. The expression in their face. They act like you're something from the SPCA and they have saved your life. But you're not their pet project. A charity case. They think they are helping society by taking care of these morons. Well, that's the way one tutor made me feel.

This tutor's perspective taps into the popular and political discourse around literacy. Graff (1979) refers to the "literacy myth," which holds that "illiterates" are "maladjusted and irrational...their condition—and their lack of requisite abilities and attributes—severely restrict their own progress, as it hinders the larger social unit in which they reside" (p. 53). This deficit perspective persists into the 21st century. For example, in Payne's book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (2001), who claims that people are impoverished because they lack cognitive abilities, emotional control, motivation, and self-discipline.

Because of all these strong negative connotations associated with literacy learners, some adults pretend to read in social situations or mask the fact that they cannot while others "cover" by revealing their limited literacy skills only to a small circle of intimates who provide support (Beder, 1991; Ozanne, Adkins, & Sandlin, 2005). As mentioned above, this an argument for

individualized instruction. In a 1997 survey that Laubach Literacy Action (LLA) conducted among its affiliates, LLA found that some programs' confidentiality policies have caused them to limit or completely avoid student involvement.

Nonetheless, LLA avers that "growing number of students no longer need or want their participation in adult literacy to be kept secret" (p. 11-12). In the early 1990s, LVA developed and piloted a small group/collaborative tutor training model to "encourage a whole language, learner-centered approach to literacy instruction" (Freer & Enoch, 1994, p. 130). The participants in this study were open and willing to identify themselves as literacy students. Sheila readily identifies herself as "illiterate" and "slow," not showing any embarrassment in the least by these labels. She also approached her minister, asking him to place a notice in the Sunday bulletin about the literacy program.

Annie called attention to her status as a literacy learner in the following conversation:

I was talking to the *Autozone* guy [about the carwash]. He asked me what the money was for, and I told him it was for an adult literacy program. He just looks at me with that attitude and says, 'Oh yeah, I know about all that. My daughter is a teacher.' I just stared right back at him and said, 'Yeah? Well, I live it everyday!' That guy has empathy but no clue.

Gary defended himself in his dealings with caseworkers and employers. "I didn't get along with [case managers] 'cause they're mean and rude," he told me. "I've quit a lot of jobs too. I don't like bein' treated bad. Sometimes they don't pay after the shift. They think I won't remember!"

Furthermore, Gary is very forthcoming when discussing his enrollment in a literacy program:

I go up to people I see around town and see if they need help with their reading. I hand out the phone number and brochure. Sometimes they say 'yes' and sometimes they say 'no.' I just think it's good to ask because everybody should get the help they need.

Thus at times there seemed to be a strong resilient sense of self-esteem among the students in the involvement group regarding their status as literacy learners and ability to learn. Other times, however, like the participants in Malicky, Katz, Norton and Norman's study (1997), learners manifested ambivalence about their ability to learn, at times faulting themselves and other times criticizing the school system or family members. Sheila became passionate when talking about her mother's criticism:

My mom even told me I couldn't learn to read and that I was stupid. My own mom! It made me feel this big [Sheila puts her thumb and forefinger a centimeter apart]. But my brother was there and he said, 'mom, don't you put her down! I don't ever wanna hear that. It's your fault she didn't learn to read since you made her drop out of school to take care of us. That's why she can't read.' I was glad that he was there to stand up for me.

Liz did not want her daughter to be stigmatized. "I'm trying really hard to keep my daughter out of special ed. They wanna put her in there, but I don't want her to go in there, and get labeled like that, like I was." Annie validated Liz's concerns:

[Literacy students] have been walking around their whole life feeling stupid from kindergarten up. It's been instilled in them. Before kindergarten everyone was normal. Playing on the playground, no one questioned their intelligence until they went to school. And then there was this disability with reading. And from that time on, we were labeled. And that is something you have to live with for the rest of your life

Annie's notion of normalcy arose during the June 2004 meeting. Annie read the following from an essay she had written about why she was in the student group: "It's important that we give back and try to demonstrate that we can be normal people who can stand tall."

Linda was struck by her choice of words.

"What is this about being 'normal people'? I don't like that at all. I'm not hanging out with a bunch of freaks here!"

"But we were labeled when we were in school and told we're stupid and made fun of,"
Annie responded.

‘Well that was just a bunch mean kids who didn’t know better,’ Linda replied.

‘No, it’s not Linda I got teased down at the mill when I worked there. I was called dumb and stupid ‘cause everyone knew I couldn’t read!’ interjected Bill.

Linda does not deny that learners endure prejudice. ‘Sensitivity is one of the biggest things I look for in tutors. Tutors have to understand that these students are not stupid. They just got skipped over in the system. Everyone can improve their literacy skills.’ While I greatly appreciated that Linda placed blame for adults’ struggles with literacy on the ‘‘system,’’ she still seemed to insist that a kind-hearted, sensitive tutor would remedy the learner’s problems. Yet in addition to low literacy skills, many learners in literacy programs suffer other adversities: poverty, poor health, physical disabilities, and mental health issues (D’Amico, 2004; Horsman, 2001). Thus even if one improves her literacy skills through tutoring, the social conditions that allow adults to have limited literacy proficiency or suffer other concomitant adversities remain unchanged, and stigmatization remains unabated.

For example, Gary felt no hesitation in sharing that he was a literacy student, yet did feel inhibited telling others he belonged to a mental health group. He told me he participated in a walk-a-thon for this group. ‘I raised 400 dollars, but I told people the money was to build a new wing on a children’s hospital ‘cause I figured they’d be more likely to give to sick kids than for adults with mental problems.’ He also did not want to discuss the reasons for his imprisonment. Sheila also spent time in a mental hospital. She never disclosed this to me, but Bill remarked that he hoped she ‘‘wouldn’t wind backup in the loony bin,’’ casually using an offensive, stigmatizing term. Liz was very reluctant to let me visit her home and see her children, fearful I would report her to child protective services.

Given all the hardships, abuse, and loneliness learners endure daily, it is unsurprising that studies indicate that adult learners look to programs for social support, safe spaces, and conviviality (Campbell, 2001; Stromquist, 1997; Suave, 2001). Campbell (2001) found in her research of student groups that “being together,” was equally important to “doing things.” The participants in her study emphasized how they gained support, made friends, and became a part of the community so they did not feel alone. Stromquist (1997) found the literacy classes she studied in Brazil served as a site for social distraction, a self-help group, and a social club. Sunnydale’s student involvement group provided all these things. I found this aspect of the group to be especially important for Gary and Liz, who seemed to have the most isolated lives of all the members. Both of them have limited mobility since neither can drive. Gary has to rely on caseworkers or ever more expensive public transportation. Otherwise he is stuck at home alone in a drab broken-down house that has been converted into tiny one-bedroom apartments with outdated unsafe appliances and stained walls. Liz has to rely on her boyfriend for transportation or one of her sisters who will occasionally take her and the children to Walmart when Liz’s boyfriend starts “going off.”

A Welcoming Place to Be

The members meet at a United Church of Christ located in one of the many small towns lined across the five counties. The church is homey, well worn, and welcoming. Covering the walls are red and black posters proclaiming, “We care more about rights than rites.” Bright colored flyers advertising playgroups for preschoolers, and sign up sheets for “Yoga for Christians” are tacked to the bulletin board in the foyer. The building is used seven days a week by groups ranging from Alcoholics Anonymous to Girl Scouts to La Leche League. The student involvement group has met there since its first meeting in February of 2002 because one of the

co-founders was a member. Initially, the group had considered changing locations from month to month as a means of making it equally convenient for the students scattered across the five rural counties; however, it ultimately decided to always meet in the same place and same time to give the group stability and consistency. The group generally meets downstairs in the “fellowship hall,” such an apropos name for a place where one hears lots of laughter, cheering, joking, and singing. At the top of the stairwell is a sign directing members to the location of the meetings. Gary and Annie made this sign. It read, “Student Involvement Group: Where everyone can be a star.” In the fellowship hall, a series of round and rectangular tables surrounded by folding chairs are set upon the well-polished wooden floor. The group gathers here the second Thursday of every month.

Being There for Somebody

The 2004 Student Involvement Group mission statement was to “support and encourage the students of [Sunnydale].” Annie frequently called it a “support group.” One of her favorite expressions was “We’re like a combustion engine: when one is down, the others push that one up.” When I asked Liz how she would describe the group, she immediately responded, “We’re like a family. We support each other and help each other.” Sheila declared that the group is important to her because she “got to meet new friends...and it gave [her] self-confidence.” Linda frequently shared sayings at the meetings such as, “Friendship is born the moment someone says, ‘What you too?’” and “A bundle of sticks is stronger than a single twig.” She also recited poems expressing sentiments of overcoming hardships and trusting one’s own abilities.

I observed group members supporting each other by making each one feel included. For example, everyone’s birthday was celebrated with a card, gift, cake, and song. Gary initiated this practice by finding out and recording everyone’s birth date. All new members receive gifts.

Annie relayed that the group also went bowling and miniature golfing, and the ones with the highest scores received prizes. The students took turns bringing food to share. On two occasions, the members applauded after Gary finished reading the notes. In addition, the students celebrate Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, St. Patrick's Day, and Fourth of July with food, decorations, and prizes. Linda noted, "We are never wanting for food and it gives us a good friendly atmosphere for fun and conversation plus welcoming students who are attending for the first time."

The students also easily joke with one another, demonstrating a strong level of familiarity and friendship. As mentioned in chapter one, Annie teased Linda about getting "botox injections" when Linda mentioned she had to go in for minor surgery. I reminded Annie of this instance when we talked on the phone in March 2005. She remembered the episode well and laughed when I told her about my initial reaction of shock. "Ya know, kiddo, maybe you need to laugh more and be less serious," she gently chided me,

Hey, I didn't know what she was goin' in for. She didn't say it was for appendicitis or anything else, so I didn't really know how serious it was. I just wanted to lighten the mood, make her smile. I think you should try to make people smile. It's a way to be there for somebody.

At the June 2004 meeting, Annie commented that she had "nuts at home" for the ice cream social that the group was planning for next month. Linda responded dryly, "I could say something about that. But I won't." Everyone chuckled. Gary reported that the treasury had \$2,079 instead of the actual figure of \$279. "I just wanna make sure everybody's payin' attention," Gary jokingly responded when the others noted the discrepancy. On another occasion, Gary reported that he didn't have his glasses so he snatched Annie's and put them on

for comic effect. Annie explained that it is necessary to “blow off steam and be silly once in awhile. This is one place we can do that. We can be ourselves.”

Moreover, the members encouraged each other to stay in the program. For instance, Liz had been on the verge of dropping out of the literacy program because she did not have a tutor. Annie intervened on Liz’s behalf:

I told Linda that we’re losing Liz. That’s she gonna drop out ‘cause she thinks Linda gave up on her when Linda went to teach the ESL class [Linda had been tutoring Liz up until the time Liz’s boyfriend went to jail and thus could no longer drive Liz to tutoring sessions]. And even though Linda said that that’s not true, I told Linda, ‘But that’s what Liz *thinks*. So that’s how she sees it.

After that conversation, Linda found another tutor for Liz within the week. Liz remarked at the 2004 Thanksgiving dinner that the support of the group is what “kept [her] in the program.”

Stromquist (1997) maintains that “low income people who interact more gain important social skills in the process that help them gradually to move out from their marginal existence” (p. 97). Self-actualization does not come from individual skill acquisition acquired under the tutelage of a caring volunteer—as the Laubach “Each One Teach One” slogan suggests—rather it is connected to affective involvement in acting together with others (Jansen and Wildemeersch, 1998, p. 224).

Furthermore, all of these above examples challenge the perception that adult learners are helpless, passive, and deficient; these cited instances indicate that adult learners have much to offer each other. They encouraged one another and provided each other the support and good will that an individual tutor or professional cannot. In the following section I discuss how the group members use their problem-solving knowledge and assets to benefit Sunnydale Literacy Partnership as well as other organizations.

Helps the Literacy Program and Other Organizations

In this study, I repeatedly noted examples of ways the group members helped the program and other organizations by sharing access to their personal networks , providing ideas, and giving time as well as labor. In an email sent to me, Linda captured how she tapped into the rich social networks of the students and how consequently the program benefited immensely:

I told [the group] I desperately need tutors. Sheila talked with her minister about placing a notice in the church bulletin. Liz talked to someone in Headstart who said they would put it in their newsletter next week. Gary reconnected me with a student I had lost track of. Annie has referred a number of tutors. These are all people with sensitivity and a heart the size of a barn. (personal communication, September 15, 2004)

Moreover, Annie furnished pumpkins for a Halloween party for Linda's ESL class because she had a friend who is a farmer. Annie and Sheila came into Linda's office and contacted students who had not been coming to tutoring sessions. All of the group members presented at tutor training sessions. Gary supplied the program with numerous calendars. "I saw that Linda was always giving out calendars to new students," Gary told me. "So I thought 'why should she always have to do that?' Now whenever I go over to the Representative's office, I pick up a bunch of free ones for her to give to students." With monies from fundraisers, the group purchased a case of razors for the Veteran's hospital. "They fought for us; they kept us free. It's the least we can do," Annie reasoned. The group has also discussed holding a blood drive and assisting with building a house for Habitat for Humanity. Donna, the assistant coordinator asked if the group would collect soda can tabs for Ronald McDonald House; at the very next meeting, Liz brought in a plastic bag full of them. Gary also recommended holding a walk-a-thon for literacy like the one he participated in for his local mental health association. Sheila, Bill, Liz, and Annie all contributed items for the mall bake sale and took turns selling the baked goods throughout the weekend.

It was at Sheila's suggestion that the group held a car wash fundraiser when she learned from her daughters that *AutoZone* car shop provides soap, water hoses, and buckets, allowing nonprofit groups to hold car washes in the store's parking lot. Linda asked Sheila to take charge of the event. Sheila, Bill, and their daughters made signs advertising the event and made sandwiches and iced tea for everyone who came to help. When various people came over to Linda to ask what they should do, she always referred them to Sheila. "Ask her. She's the one in charge." Sheila directed Bill and her daughter to purchase a thank you card for the manager of *AutoZone* and asked them to get the hose re-attached when it came loose. During the entire five-hour event, Sheila rarely took a break; she soaped and scrubbed cars as the sun beat upon her shoulders throughout the morning and into the afternoon. The other members became concerned because of her high blood pressure and kept trying to coax her to sit in the shade. Sheila, Sheila's daughter, Bill, Gary, Annie, as well as Annie's friends and family were there to assist; Linda and I worked along side them. At one point, Sheila became annoyed with Gary because she believed he was not contributing and complained to me. "He's just standing there, not helping. I'm sorry, that's just not fair. I'm gonna say somethin' to Linda. I'm sorry; I just don't think that's right!" Sheila angrily whispered to me.

I have to admit that I was annoyed too as I washed cars along with Sheila. It did not seem that Gary was demonstrating the appropriate level of commitment to the group's efforts. I later asked Gary why he did not want to wash the cars. He related that he had to wash his father's trucks all the time when he was a child, and he just did not want to do it that day. I had to check my own presumptions and misconceptions. Once I spoke with him, I came to realize he had a reasonable explanation. It was not that he was lazy or trying to shirk his responsibilities as Sheila and I initially assumed. If that were case, why would he even bother to come at all and endure

the heat of the July day? Moreover, his physical condition prevented him from engaging more actively. He frequently had to go the bathroom because of the diuretics he took to help his kidneys function. Linda later defended Gary: “He told me on the way over that he wasn’t going to wash cars. But he brought donuts, collected and kept track of the total amount of money, and handed out brochures about the program to the customers. He contributed.” Linda focused on what he did instead of what he did not do. Even though Gary did not participate in a way Sheila and I recognized as legitimate, Linda did. She rightly viewed his participation as meaningful. In fact, Linda decided to end the event at 3:00 because she was worried about the physical drain on both Sheila and Gary.

The group also considered holding a spaghetti dinner fundraiser to secure monies for the VALUE Leadership Institute in March 2005. At the January 2005 meeting, Linda guided the discussion about the spaghetti dinner by asking specific questions: “How much are you going to charge per ticket ? “Where is the money going to come from to purchase supplies?” “Where will you hold it?” “When will you hold it?” Linda let the group decide how it wanted to plan the details instead of imposing her perspective. Sheila suggested purchasing napkins, plates, and cutlery at the discount store, Save-A-Lot to buy napkins and cups. “I can bring a punch bowl,” Liz volunteered. “I can make center pieces,” added Annie. Sheila reported to the group that she had asked the local Salvation Army center, where her mother goes to church services, about holding the spaghetti dinner. “But the lady said they wanted 75 bucks,” Sheila relayed to the group. Liz then offered to talk with her pastor about using that church’s space, “What’s the point of having a fundraiser when you have to pay to use the place?” Liz replied rhetorically. Ultimately the group decided that the cost of organizing the spaghetti dinner was prohibitive. The import of this example is that the students took control and made the decision.

All of these instances of the learners' participation and contributions defy the "strong belief on both the right and left is that illiteracy leads to social exclusion" (Sandlin & St. Clair, 2004, p. 51). Brandt (2001) reports that when she asks colleagues to imagine what their life would be like if they could read and write, their responses are, "It would be like living in the dark" or "not having shoes" (p. 1). Finsterbusch is all too familiar with this perspective:

In our society there is discrimination against adult learners. . . . Just because you can't read and write well, you are seen as "less than." Our reading and writing skills may be less than [that of others], but as a human being we are not less than anyone else. Even in our field a lot of people see their students as less than themselves. They don't see what students could do for them because they believe they are less than (personal communication, March 13, 2003).

As expressed above, the common discourse describes the literacy student as lacking, helpless, always dependent, and passive. The benevolent (often female) volunteer must take care of the child-like illiterate for the good of himself and society (Luttrell, 1996; Quigley, 1997). Participatory education programs, on the other hand, focus upon what the learners bring to the learning context individually and in community with one another.

Calvin Miles, President of VALUE told me, "If student involvement was the ideal, then the minute students walked in the door [of a literacy program] it would be laid out: this is what we can do for you, and this is what you can do for us" (personal communication June 22, 2003). Indeed. Research conducted over the past 20 years documents the rich social spheres and interdependence among adults who historically would be considered "illiterate" (Bingham and Ebert, 2000; deAvila, 1983; Fingeret 1982, 1983; Fingeret and Drennon, 1997; Merrifield, Bingham, Hemphill, Bennett-de Marrais, 1997; Ozanne, Adkins, Sandlin, 2005; and Zieghan, 1991). The participants in Fingeret's (1983) study describe how they reciprocate the help friends and family provide with reading tasks by offering such things as firewood, food, or free

haircuts. Similarly, in their study of consumer habits among people with low literacy, Ozanne, Adkins, Sandlin (2005) write about the “savvy consumer” who has families and friends depending on her (p. 264). De Avila (1983) found that “[participants] insist on a service exchange system with their readers in order that they can maintain their personal dignity” (p. 122).

In addition to maintaining self-respect, students gain skills and experience when planning and executing fundraisers, public speaking, and interacting with different groups within the community is valuable. Learners are doing things for themselves instead of having things done on their behalf. These endeavors provide new learning opportunities and a sense of satisfaction from achieving self-defined goals. Learners also gain a sense of ownership as they exercise greater power within the organization.

Provides Opportunities to Engage in and Develop Literacy Practices

Literacy activities become meaningful to the extent that they are needed in interaction with others and with the content to be learned... Literacy is defined as practice...the practice that people engage in within routines of daily life. Literacy is those skills, knowledge, and practices that are needed to function successfully in the society or culture he or she is situated or desires to be situated. (Askov, 2000, p. 256)

In this study, I observed group members engaged in many literacy practices prompted by the social situation in which they found themselves. Liz looked a calendar to see what day of the week a particular date fell when the group was deciding to take a field trip to Harrisburg. Liz also brought in a Girl Scout cookie form on behalf of her daughter and others filled it out to order cookies. Annie, Sheila, and Gary all brought in birthday cards, thank you cards, and sympathy cards for everyone to sign on various occasions for group members and guest presenters. Annie drew a floor plan to figure out how to configure the tables and chairs for the

covered dish event. In all these above-cited instances, group members negotiated signs and symbols in order to achieve self-determined desired aims. They were not filling out exercises from work books or repeating letter-sound associations because they had to comply with some external authority. They were striving to achieve goals that had direct consequences for their particular social situations. Pratt and Nesbitt (2000) cite research that suggests learning begins at an unconscious level as people engage in social relations within communities of practice. Coined by Lave and Wenger (1991), the term “communities of practice” refers to “groups of people who share insights and ideas and who help one another solve problems and develop a common practice” (Merriam, 2004, p. 210).

Linda Leading

When I analyzed the data pertaining to Linda, I overwhelmingly found that she acted as facilitator in helping learners become more comfortable with a wider range of literacy practices through the functioning of the group. Dewey (1938) writes, “Education is essentially a social process. This quality is realized in the degree in which individuals form a community group. It is absurd to exclude the teacher from membership in the group...[she] is the leader of the group activities” (p. 58). Linda drew a clear distinction between her group and the kinds of gatherings Ellen held in the late 1980s and early 1990s:

Ellen’s were socials for tutors and students. The students didn’t take charge of anything. There was no emphasis on leadership development. I want them to get beyond just being a social group. I want the group members eventually to get involved in other groups in the community and be able to follow what’s going on during those meetings.

Linda has expertise, skills, and abilities that the students do not. She has served on the local Habitat for Humanity board and acted as Vice Chair on the Tutors of Literacy Board. The learners have valuable experience, abilities, and assets, but they have never had opportunities to

take on these kinds of positions. Linda recognized that as the adult educator, she serves as the facilitator for entry into other communities and the practices and the values of that community must be open to them from the first stages of their learning (Burnaby, 2001; St. Clair, 1998). Linda desired that her students “make deep and pervasive changes in their literacy practices, ultimately leading to interacting increasingly with other literate persons in diverse social and cultural settings” (Fingeret and Drennon, 1997, p. 96).

A year later in February 2003, Linda was feeling stymied in her efforts. She was unable to attend the February meeting and had asked a staff member to lead it and help the learners elect officers for that year. Linda sent me an email recounting the disappointing results:

The last meeting was not the success with office elections and planning that I hoped it would be. I had two concerns about the last meeting that I will try to correct next time we meet. It is understandable that no one wants to be secretary. I will offer to work very closely with the person who will agree to accept that position. I am not concerned about spelling, sentence structure or long paragraphs. I only need a subject and outline from them. As for the elections I want to explain that you need to nominate people who have time to come to all meetings and who truly have an interest in the organization. [The student who was elected and turned it down had only been to that one meeting]. I want to work with the president to teach them the outline for a meeting agenda and planning the program. I must say I did not approve of everyone being asked to take notes at the last meeting. The intention was very good. However, we are not there to hold a class. We are there to support each other and the literacy program. This is one way to discourage a lot of students from attending the meetings (personal communication, March 8, 2003).

Linda had a strong vision about how she wants these meetings to be conducted and what kind of learning experience she wants the members to engage in. As a literacy coordinator with twenty years of experience of working with literacy students, she had a realistic understanding of the students' comfort level and current ability, knowing that they would not all feel comfortable taking notes and that the newly-elected officers must be willing to take on the position and obviously would need her help in carrying out their responsibilities.

Linda became more directive in 2004 when she met the newly-elected officers over the course of three sessions to establish mission and vision statements as well as descriptions for each office. Officer duties are as follows:

President: It is the responsibility of the president to lead meetings and keep them orderly. The president encourages leadership and keeps the group moving forward. The president helps the group set goals and involves students in training sessions. He/She leads the group in projects, fundraisers, and services that give to the community.

Vice President: The first duty of the Vice President is to help the President and fill him or her. The second duty is to help others with their needs. The third duty is help come up with new ideas to make the program run smoother. He or she will also help recruit new students.

Secretary: The secretary must arrive before the meeting starts and is responsible for taking notes and listening to what is said. The secretary will keep the attendance sheet and have everyone sign it when they arrive at the meeting. The secretary will read the minutes from the previous meeting

Historian: The historian is responsible for taking care of the photo album, taking pictures of activities and bringing the album to meetings as needed. He or she should also label pictures to put in the album.

Creating well-defined, clearly-stated roles for each office helps learners understand what is expected of them. Campbell (2001) found that even when members had titles, such as president, if there was not a set list of duties, they remained uncertain why they should even attend meetings and what they were suppose to do at those meetings. But in this instance, officers have specific tasks to carry out at the meeting. Their participation matters; other members are counting on them to fulfill these duties for the good of the entire group, and as detailed below, the members took their roles and that of the others seriously.

When I started regularly attending meetings in May 2004, I noted that the business meetings were more formalized than I had recalled from the occasional meeting I attended in 2003. They were loosely based on a simplified version of “Roberts Rules.” The president called

the meeting to order using a “gavel” (i.e., a wooden hammer), the minutes from the last meeting were read aloud (as a means to address differing levels of literacy proficiency), copies of the treasurer’s report were distributed. Old business and new business concluded the agenda.

I wondered initially if this imposed structure was too forced, too different from the typical literacy practices of the students, perhaps causing embarrassment and discomfort. Gary haltingly, slowly read the minutes at the June 2004 meeting, snapping at Linda when she corrected his pronunciation when he uttered that the bake sale was “whooping success” instead of “whopping success.” “Here you wanna read it?!” he retorted as he thrust the paper in her direction. Gary then stumbled over the word “brochures.” Linda corrected him again. “Oh hush up!” he responded. Linda later told me she gave him the wrong paper in the car on the way down [she drives him to the meetings] and “then gave him one he had never had a chance to read before he had to read it before the group.” But still, this explanation did not allay my worries that there was not enough collaboration among the entire group. Did the learners understand why they were following “Robert’s Rules”?

At the May meeting, Annie asked Sheila and Liz if their arms had fallen off when neither raised their hands to second a motion, and she jokingly tapped her gavel on Bill’s head. Linda complained to me that the students neither seemed focused nor took the meetings seriously enough and shared that a tutor who had attended an occasional meeting told Linda thought the format was “over the students’ heads.” I wondered the same thing, as we waded through pages of text on voting rights while Linda read to us.

Engaging in Literacy Practices

Over the nine months that I observed, however, my initial apprehensions were relieved. I observed students becoming more comfortable with the format and appreciating the learning

experience. For example, students asked Linda as well as each other about words they did not recognize:

“What does N/A mean?” Gary asked Linda.

“Annie, what is this word?” Gary asked, pointing to “recruitment.”

“How do you spell library?” Sheila generally inquired to the group

“Oh, I know. I looked it up in the dictionary,” Gary replied.

Liz told me she likes having agendas and secretary minutes understanding precisely the importance of these record keeping devices: “It’s good so people who weren’t there last time know what they missed and know what’s going on.” Annie thanked Linda for letting the students get together to talk *and* write about their vision for the group. Gary said that he enjoyed being secretary, since he “had done that kind of thing before.” He took his duties seriously as evidenced by the neatly organized black binder he brought to every meeting. In it, he kept copies of the mailed post cards advertising each monthly meeting, attendance sheets, copies of the minutes, treasurer reports, and other documentation from various meetings that he properly dated.

He also told me he had his “own method” for taking notes. “I know what my abbreviations mean.” He and Linda met once a month at the Burger King to go “over the words.” Linda added to this account: “I have been getting together with Gary to help him with the minutes. He misses some of the names and other details. We blend our notes together then he types them up and presents them at the meeting.” Linda is practicing Vygotsky’s (1978) scaffolding approach, which requires the teacher to provide students the opportunity to extend their current skills and knowledge by engaging students' interest, simplifying tasks so they are

manageable, and helping the learner achieve a greater level of mastery over a particular literacy event (Bonk and Kim, 1998; Demetrian, 1999).

Linda planned to take a similar approach when a student took over the position of treasurer in 2005. Linda had served in this position during 2004; she kept track of the money earned from the fundraisers and provided copies of the monthly treasurer reports to the group. Over the summer of 2004, she set up a savings account in the group's name. She stated, "I will teach that person how to keep simple records and give the report." Russell, a learner who attended several meetings during 2004, took that office in January 2005. His name was added to the student's bank account.

Dewey (1938) suggests that education should be a social enterprise in which all individuals have an opportunity to contribute and to which all feel a responsibility. Jansen and Wildemeersch (1998) similarly surmise that when individuals are actively and affectively involved, they will develop feelings of responsibility and togetherness within the community; they are seen as competent actors whose participation matters. At the September 2004 meeting, for example, I noted three instances demonstrating how attentive the members were to proceedings of the meeting. First, Liz called out, "You skipped over the update on the student conference item, Linda."

Oh, did I? Thanks," Linda replied.

Annie then corrected the treasurer's report, noting the monies raised from the last bake sale had not been added to the balance.

Finally, Linda brought in flyers for the Spanish-speaking ESL learners to post at their work place, advertising the program. The learners asked Linda why there was no contact name

listed, only a phone number. Linda said they could write in hers. They then wondered what would happen if the person calling only spoke Spanish.

“They say you need to learn a little Spanish, *maestra*,” Carmen said, acting as translator for the group.

“Well, Elana, our data base manager speaks Spanish. I can say ‘*un momento por favor*,’ and get Elana,” Linda replied.

This brief exchange with the Spanish-speaking students solidified for Linda the need to have a Spanish speaker on staff; she knew Elana planned to retire soon. Linda had already been mulling over the idea of asking for funds to pay for a Spanish-speaking ESL learner as well as literacy student to work in the office in the 2005-2006 fiscal year. When Linda attended the VALUE leadership training in August 2004 with Annie and Carmen, the facilitators suggested hiring students to serve on staff.

Linda’s ultimate goal was to have the learners run a meeting without her there. Although that never happened during the course of this study, I observed students taking on greater levels of responsibility for various events, such as the 2004 November potluck event. Students planned the menu, made the food, and decorated the fellowship hall. In total, about 50 people were in attendance. Sheila and Bill brought friends they had met through a cooking class they took at the Salvation Army. Linda brought a friend, her son, and grandson. Annie asked her one of her daughters and several grandchildren. Carmen and Raoul performed two Peruvian folk songs. Sheila and Annie brought numerous prizes to raffle off; they collected money and distributed tickets and asked me to announce the winners’ names after Liz’s children picked out the slips of paper. Liz volunteered to read an essay on why the group was important to her and introduce the guest presenter, a civil war actor who recounted the battle at Gettysburg. “I’ll have

to wear something nice,” Liz remarked, smiling shyly. Liz came that Sunday evening to the church fellowship hall dressed in a floral print dress and wearing make up and earrings, in marked contrast to the oversize t-shirts and stretch pants she typically wore. Voice quivering, hands shaking, Liz stood at the podium and read her essay. But no one could hear her; Sheila and Annie came over and helped her by turning on and adjusting the microphone. Everyone cheered loudly after Liz finished reading and Linda published the essay in the subsequent Sunnydale newsletter. “I thought she did well,” Linda later remarked to me. “Especially with the microphone ordeal. I don't think we were supposed to be touching that equipment, but I didn't want to make a big deal about it.” Linda was willing to give up control, just as she did at the car wash allowing the learners to take on greater responsibility.

In short, Linda asserts that she has “no problem brainstorming with [learners] or listening to their ideas. I know I cannot think of it all.” More than any other member, Annie made the most suggestions. In a community of practice, learners have different levels of mastery. Some have more experience and have been more proficient at adopting the behaviors and norms of the group. Annie has gained that mastery.

Annie as Mentor

Some literacy learners do have very limited associations and experiences, interacting only with a tight circle of friends and family members, traveling in a limited geographical space (Stromquist, 1997). Liz, for example, exemplifies what Fingeret (1983) terms a “local,” an individual whose social network is very limited, often consisting of no more than a spouse, siblings, perhaps a co-worker and a few friends (p. 138-139). Liz had not worked since 2000, does not know how to drive a car, and has never traveled outside of central Pennsylvania. Annie, one the other hand, “function[s] within a heterogeneous extended network provid[ing]

opportunities to continuously learn and grow” (Fingeret, 1983, pp. 137-138). “I have learned and seen so much,” she told me. “People have shared so many things with me. I’m like a sponge. I just take it all in.” For instance, Annie has lived in a number of states, working a variety of jobs since age 14. She cared for a daughter-in-law of President Coolidge from whom she enjoyed hearing interesting stories. Annie has had the opportunity to interact with people of different cultures and faiths. For instance, her ex-husband was of the Seneca-Iroquois tribe. She told me she wanted her children to know something about their heritage, so she took them to pow wows. “You know we all worship God in a different way. Christian, Hindu. Mother earth, father moon. My daughter-in-law [who is Japanese] is not a practicing Buddhist but if she was that’d be OK. We all worship God in our own way.”

Like Linda, Annie shares her greater experience and connections to introduce others to new learning activities. It was at her suggestion that the group travel to Harrisburg to visit the state museum and capitol building. She took Sheila to a 19th century mining town after they finished reading *Coal Miner’s Daughter*. Annie also took Bill and Sheila to the county courthouse to get their voter registration cards:

My tutor and Linda both said I could just call the courthouse and ask them to send the voter registration cards, but I wanted to take them there to pick up the cards because I knew it would be far more worthwhile for them. They would get that experience of seeing the courthouse and what goes on there. Bill loved going through the metal detector, and they started talking about getting to watch a trial. I’m more worldly than they are; I can show them these things. But once they see it, they get an idea and they’ll run with it.

When I asked Bill about this episode, Bill did indeed speak about it enthusiastically:

I’ve only seen the court room on *Perry Mason* and *Murder She Wrote*. But I’d like to learn about law. I’d like to take a field trip. Annie said she’d look into I don’t know if I’d wanna be on the jury. I mean how do ya figure out who’s guilty or not? How can you tell?

Dewey (1938) asserts that all genuine education comes about through the kind of experience that prepares a person for later experiences of deeper and more expansive quality. He recognized that no one person can directly experience everything; one must rely on signs and symbols to enlarge one's direct experiences, linking those experiences to things that can only be signified. "It is doubtless this fact which is the cause of the disposition to identify an uncultured person with an illiterate person—so dependent are we on letters for effective representative or indirect experience" (Dewey, 1938, p. 272). In our current digital era, we can certainly add the media of television, radio, and computers in addition to books, and Dewey's concern that the "symbols will not be truly representative" (p. 272) remain valid. Bill, for example, relied on two TV dramas for any understanding of the judicial system, but by visiting the courthouse—a more immediate representation—his experience and understanding is enlarged and enriched. He begins to consider how effectively to negotiate a more active and social role, that of a juror.

All of these instances I have cited challenge the deficit perspective that prevails among most literacy programs and general public: adults with limited literacy lack knowledge and are unmotivated to learn (Tett, 2005). My research further supports studies (Beder, 2001 Bingham, 2000, Quigley, 1997; Zieghan, 1991) that suggest that while literacy learners often resist the formal structure of literacy programs, they resist neither learning nor gaining new skills. Socio-cultural studies have found that all adults learn as they interact with others in their daily lives (Merrifield, 2004; Zieghan, 1991). "New Literacy Studies" (NLS) (Merrifield, 1998) are ethnographies representing a new tradition in considering the nature of literacy, focusing not so much on acquisition of skills, as in dominant approaches, but rather on what it means to think of literacy as a social practice (Street, 1984). Scholars such as Fingeret (1983) Heath (1983), Purcell-Gates (1996) and Street (1984) have documented how various communities have

different literacy practices, thus presenting literacy not as a set of decontextualized skills but rather recurrent practices embedded within a particular social, emotional, and linguistic milieu that give those practices meaning (Tett, 2005, p. 28). The group's monthly meetings provided that milieu thus enabling learners to expand their literacy practices and assume new roles (Tett, 2005).

One of these new roles that some of the participants took on was that of voter. The group discussed how to vote and political issues in the months leading up to the November 2004 election. In March of 2005, the group also traveled to Washington DC to participate in VALUE's Leadership Institute. In the next section, I discuss how the group encouraged greater political involvement.

Encourages Greater Political Involvement

A few quantitative studies have pointed to some correlation between participation in a literacy program and civic goals. Bingham (2000) found that one year after learners had entered programs, voter registration increased 13 percent, involvement in social/sports activities rose from 7 to 17 percent, and involvement in the PTA activities rose from 16 to 23 percent. (p. 23). But the question remains, how did programs help learners achieve these goals and can programs do more to bring about these vitally important outcomes? Improving one's reading and writing proficiency may help one decode a ballot or petition, but does it is dubious to conclude that decontextualized reading drills or even a "crash course" in U.S. history would help a reader grasp the larger political issues. Bingham (2000) pointedly notes that other types of community involvement among her study participants, such as attending community meetings or talking about politics with friends and family, did not change nor did participants' community

awareness. The researcher asserts that this is because the traditional curriculum used in many literacy programs has little to do with local communities.

Getting the Vote Out

For me, one of the most intriguing aspects of Sunnydale's student group was its stated intention to encourage political involvement. Part of the group's vision statement read was to "register and vote in state and national elections." In my years of involvement with various literacy programs, I have never worked with or knew of any agency that encouraged civic engagement. The student group has "encouraging learners to register and vote in state and national elections" as one of its goals. Towards achieving this end, the May 2004 meeting was devoted to discussed voting procedures; the intended speaker was a representative from the League of Woman Voters. Unfortunately, she cancelled the day before without giving a clear reason but promised Linda to leave information about voting at a designated spot for her to pick up. She did not even do that. "I spent the whole day rushing around trying to get something together for tonight so I could come up with something." Linda told me in an exasperated tone before the meeting began. I was annoyed too and wondered if this woman felt that literacy students were not worth her time, since statistically they are the least likely to vote (Comings, Reder, and Sum, 2001, p. 18).

Nonetheless, Linda prepared a presentation and 25 people (including myself and Linda) attended the meeting. In addition to all the officers, there were ESL learners from the two classes Linda was teaching at the time, as well as Annie's daughter, Sheila's daughter, Liz and her two children, and three other literacy students. Linda handed out copies of *Election Day: A Guide*, published by the League of Women Voters, that she had downloaded from the League of Women Voters website. Fact sheets about why one should vote, when and where to vote, what to bring,

and one's rights as a voter comprised the thick packet of information. Linda reviewed the information with them, reading aloud from some of the pages. She covered a wide range of issues, peppering her presentation with populist and progressive points such as, "You don't have to be beautiful and you don't have to be rich to vote," "We're all equal when it comes to voting," "Everyone counts the same," "You have to speak up for yourselves," "Lots of Americans don't vote, but government has an effect on your life." "Everyone has a right to complain," and "You guys should be part of the community." She repeatedly stressed that everyone should pay attention to the upcoming elections and should decide which issues are most important to each one. During the course of the presentation, she raised a number of issues. One was the environment. "Clinton passed a lot of conservation measures like bringing back the gray wolves out west."

"Yeah, I saw 'em on Wild Kingdom," interjected Bill.

"But Bush has discontinued a lot of those things," continued Linda.

"Or are you concerned about the economy and loss of jobs?"

"Yeah, the factory I worked for 12 years shut down," Bill rejoined.

"Or having money to send your kids to college," Linda went on. "Or are you worried about public schools? You know, Bush says *The No Child Left Behind Act* will help schools. But Democrats say Republicans haven't put enough money to really support it. Where do *you* want money to go? Is it for jobs or to fix the roads? Money gets pulled away from some things and gets put into other things."

Linda told everyone to pay attention to the news and campaign coverage: "Listen to the candidates. Find out what they stand for. You may not agree 100 percent with any of them, but

decide on the one you like most. Even if your candidate doesn't win, you're still showing support. Politicians pay attention to those who vote."

I had mixed feelings about how Linda conducted the meeting. On the one hand, I appreciated how Linda used simple direct, language in touching upon a range of political issues. She also placed the students in a position of agency, repeatedly emphasizing that they should vote and that their votes do count. Valentine, Sandlin, and Vreeland (1998) admit that "universal voting would not solve all of America's problems"; however, "it could go a long way toward giving voice to people whose needs and desires are generally ignored" (p. 3). Politicians would have to be more responsive to a new constituency—a constituency personally and deeply concerned about poverty, social welfare, and a variety of issues more important to society's "have-nots" than its "haves" (p. 3). Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) concur that citizen activists tend to be drawn disproportionately from more advantaged groups. Consequently, "the voice of the people—as expressed through participation—comes from a limited and unrepresentative set of citizens" (pp.1-2). Linda also conveyed an aspect of politics: the process of allocating scarce resources. As McKnight explains, "A realistic approach to public policy and expenditure always requires an understanding trade-offs—who or what gets less as something else gets more" (p. 104).

On the other hand, her presentation did not lead to reflective dialogue. Her comments consisted of generalities rather than springing from the learners' specific economic and social situations. Auerbach (1993) maintains that the participatory teacher ought to identify problematic aspects of learner's lives, re-present them to learners as context for discussion, and then guide discussion. Stromquist (1997), for instance, provides an illustration of an effective use of reflective dialogue around the issue of fair wages that she observed in her study.

There were opportunities for Linda to engage in critical assessment of the students' realities that evening. Bill, for instance, paid rapt attention to Linda. I watched him as he focused on Linda, barely blinking, never looking away. He responded to her presentation by connecting the current topic at hand with his own experiences, but Linda did not acknowledge his comments. She seemed more intent on getting through the huge packet of information.

Linda also asked the ESL learners what issues concerned them and what their voting rights were in their native countries. These were such broad statements/questions, however, that it was difficult for the learners to engage in a meaningful discussion. Moreover, I could hear several of the Latino/a learners murmur amongst themselves in Spanish throughout the meeting. I suspect that they could not follow all the conversation in English and thus understandably engaged in their own conversation.

Given that Linda had to prepare something at the last minute and the distractions that evening—there were several restless young children in attendance who needed constant attention were in attendance that evening—this particular evening and forum were far from ideal to engage in participatory, dialogical interactions. Furthermore, Freirian dialogues require “practice and great skill in body language, understanding of people’s experiences, and smoothing over moments of uncertainty and threat” (Stromquist, 1997. p. 105). This skill is neither one required of the typical literacy coordinator nor offered in a typical professional workshop (Burnaby, 2001).

Talking Politics

As I interacted with the members of the group over the ensuing months, however, I found that they raised several issues that could have been expanded into critically reflective discussions. For example, Bill recounted to me how much of his insurance he has to pay. “This Medicare is killing me. They should help out more,” exclaimed Bill. “I’m payin’ 200 a month. I get seizures and had a bladder infection. And I had to pay for most the medicine myself. How stupid is that!” On another occasion, Annie noted how valuable Pennsylvania’s Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) is. “Ya know when I was workin’ at the factory, back when my youngest daughter was still at home, I was only making 110 dollars a week, and I couldn’t afford health insurance. So my daughter went without. There was no program like CHIP like we have today.” Carmen has two nephews who are in the navy and are stationed in Iraq. Like many others, she initially thought the war in Iraq was an effective response to 9/11, but by the time I interviewed her in the Summer of 2004, she had changed her mind because of the mounting body count and increasing price of gas. Gary told me that he been trying to contact his local representative about the prices of public transportation. “It’s gonna go up ta three bucks a mile in September. But he’s in Harrisburg a lot. I end up talkin’ to the secretary all the time; she knows who I am. But I think she’s just givin’ me the run around.” Sheila is concerned about prices in general: “Gas goes up, food goes up, heat goes up, but what can ya do?”

Sheila expresses the frustration and lack of political efficacy that Merrifield, Bingham, Hemphill, and Bennett deMarrais, (1997) found among participants in their study. All the group members evinced cynicism at various times about having any personal agency in the realm of policy making. For instance when the group traveled to the state capital, Linda picked up the contact sheet of all the state representatives and said to me, “Well, those would be helpful if we

do any letter writing.” But then she wryly added when noticing that phone numbers were included: “Oh, yeah. I’m sure if I called they would say, ‘Oh, Linda I would be happy to have lunch with you to discuss literacy funding.’” On another occasion she maintained that often times even if one goes to a town meeting and protests, the item gets passed regardless.

Like the adult learners in Stromquist’s (1997) study, many of the Sunnydale group members believed politicians are corrupt. Gary stated, “They lie to you, cheat you.” In a similar vein, Sheila said, “My step dad always said all politicians are crooks. They’ll promise you anything. You can’t trust ‘em.” Bill wondered whom to choose when casting a vote. “The candidates say different stuff, but who’s tellin’ the truth. How do ya know who’s right?”

Annie was skeptical about how responsive representatives really were. “My local Republican rep came door to door right before Election Day asking what I wanted to see change, what my concerns were as a constituent. I told him about the literacy program and that we needed more jobs in the area. Too many factories closin’ down.”

I asked one of those obvious and seemingly stupid questions (Fetterman, 1998), “Do you think he listened to you? Did he seem to be sincere in his attention?”

“Oh, kiddo,” Annie sighed, “I think he would have acted sincere even if I told him my cat spoke seven languages. But yeah, I think he kinda listened anyway.”

Carmen said she was not sure she was going to vote because she did not know enough about the candidates. In fact, the primary reason she became citizen was so that she could sponsor other family members to come to the United States in the future, not to participate in the political process. She contrasted Peru with the United States:

Yeah, the president [of Peru] is OK, but the people under him not so good. Because each person is only interested in himself, no one see other people or other communities. Maybe they have a lot of money, but I don’t know what doing with this money. They take money for themselves. They cannot see the poor people. The poor people don’t have

a house, maybe live on the street. I want a government that sees that. I am very happy here. It's not like that.

Quigley (1997) notes that one of the popular images within the rhetoric of adult literacy is the simple immigrant who expresses gratitude for being able to come to the United States and boundless optimism about her opportunities to succeed. Although this is a gross stereotype, as Quigley (1997) realizes, there is some truth to the image. Carmen is in pursuit of the "American Dream" and is undoubtedly living at a much higher standard and in a much safer environment than she did in Peru. Yet, homelessness and extreme poverty exist in this country, even if these social blights are not visible on her tidy street in the nice part of small town Pennsylvania. Freire (1970) argues that for one who is "conditioned by a culture of achievement and personal success, to recognize his situation as objectively unfavorable seems to hinder his own possibilities of success" (p. 156). Carmen accepts the myth of American meritocracy and self-help. She waited 12 years just so she could come here and has invested too much in this dream to give it up. She may very well be one of the few who prove that the system works, but still at the expense of far too many others left behind (Heaney, 1996).

Liz, too, did not vote in the 2004 presidential election. She filled out the voter registration card because Linda directed everyone to do so, but she never expressed any interest in the discussions, She avoided the subject matter altogether. I am unsure why Liz felt this way. It may be that she found it irrelevant to her life or unpleasant, or socialized, as so many women are, to see politics as a "man's world"; whereas her duties and responsibilities remain in the private sphere (Stromquist, 1997, p. 110). At the May meeting, for instance, she was unable to pay much attention to the presentation as she had to tend two her children who accompanied her.

In a subsequent conversation with Sheila and Bill, I found that they were indeed following the presidential campaign, and what had captured their interest the most were the

debates around “culture war” issues rather than economic ones: As I sat in Bill’s dilapidated, single bungalow set on a tiny lot, staring at the cheap paneled walls and thin, gray matted carpet, Bill shared how he had been watching campaign coverage on Fox News. He did not like that Kerry was for “homos marrying” or that he was pro-choice. “But Bush doesn’t want an abortion after two months max.”

“I mean how can you kill an innocent, little baby like that?” Sheila chimed in.

Annie intended to vote for Bush. “He’s doing the right thing. He’s protecting our country. Things just aren’t the same since 9/11.” Annie rationalized that “a lot of the money is going to support the war. It’s so important that we keep our country free. So money has to go that way.” Annie accepts the “discourse of ‘protecting the homeland,’ [which has allowed] the US government to feed an ever-growing military-industrial complex and in the process starve domestic spending” (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2005, p. 309)

I was frustrated that Annie, Bill, Sheila were determined to vote against their best interest, as I saw it operating from a critical perspective. It seemed to me that they were voting for a candidate who would further widen the gap between the rich and poor and enervate social programs by promoting faith-based initiatives. During his campaign trail, Bush stated that “Problems that face our society are oftentimes problems that, you know, require something greater than just a government program...Intractable problems can be solved. There is the miracle of salvation that is real, that is tangible, that is available for all to see” (Bush, 2004, para 8). Sheila attends an Evangelical church that collected food for the starving children in Africa and Annie was “rescued” by Mormons on the eve of her intended suicide; therefore, I can believe that Bush’s language of salvation, miracles, and faith resonates with them strongly. Frank (2004) argues that while Republicans have shifted the focus of public debate from serious

economic issues to “culture wars” and “war on terror,” the “backlash leaders may talk Christ, but they walk corporate;” once the election is won, “values take a backseat to money” (p. 6). I hasten to add that one can hardly simply assume that all Christians are in lock step with the right wing agenda. For example, Linda who attends a Christian church and reads the “Left Behind” series, which deals with the Rapture and End Times as described in the *New Testament* Book of Revelation; and passed along an excerpt from *The Purpose Driven Life* to Annie, is a registered Democrat and in fact encouraged all of the office members to register as Democrats as well explaining that “Democrats are for social programs and Republicans are for rich people and big corporations.” She nodded to Liz. “Remember we talked about it at our last tutoring session?” She then said to me in aside, “I know I’m showing my bias here but oh well.” Brookfield (2002) argues that in this era of welfare reform and WIA legislation, the distinction between Democrats and Republicans is meaningless; both parties are beholden to corporate interests. I cannot dispute that point; I would love to break up the two-party monopoly.

Nonetheless, the point here is that Linda and my political views are to the left of Annie, Bill, and Sheila’s. Likewise, Demetrian (1993) found that the vast majority of adult literacy learners at his program were more conservative in their life goals and political orientation than the practitioners and wonders if it is ethical for educators to “shape the consciousness of learners towards *their* political agenda” (p. 46). Suave (1987) maintains it is not:

I do not see it as the educator’s responsibility to push this choice or that but to support the learners in asking questions, gathering information, acquiring sought-after skills, clarifying issues and seeing the implications for a variety of proposed solutions to problems, and finally, to accept the learners’ right to make the decisions most meaningful to them (p. 15).

While Kincheloe and McLaren (2005) acknowledge that some take the notion of emancipating others as arrogant, they remain steadfast in their project to effect greater social

justice and to critique those forces that prevent individuals and groups from achieving autonomy (p. 308).

Brookfield (2000) takes a more tempered approach, appreciating the “postmodern challenge to critical reflection,” which rejects the notion that one can “peel back the layers of ideological domination to arrive at a clear and accurate analysis of injustice” (p. 45). He advises fellow adult educators to “apply the same skepticism to their own positions as they do to others’ so as not to become overconfident that they have grasped the one universal truth” (p. 46). Yet, he accepts that many adult educators hold fast to the idea that change is for the better, despite the contradictory complications of the postmodern age. “We do our work as adult educators because we believe through our practice we can help ourselves and others lead more authentic and compassionate lives in a world organized according to ideals of fairness and social justice.” I could not continue to support VALUE, teach, do research, or even finish this dissertation if I did not believe that my life’s work was helping—albeit in a miniscule way—others achieve greater human agency.

Tedlock (2000) decries the paucity of research that highlights the political discussions and verbal encounters between researchers and participants who have differing interests and goals. Kleinman and Copp (1993) do not find this dearth surprising, given that most researchers believe they should either feign agreement with participants or at least refrain from voicing disagreement, assuming participants will no longer trust the ethnographer, thus leaving the researcher unable to collect “good data” (Kleinman & Copp, 1993, p. 39-40). I was so appreciative of Annie’s help and support throughout the study; I doubt I would have gained entry into the group without her. Thus I did not engage in conversation about my political views. I only nodded vaguely when Annie showed me the book her grandson was reading, Hewitt’s

Crushing the Democrats in Every Election and Why Your Life Depends on It. Perhaps I should have, since “empathetic disagreement” can bring researcher and participant closer together (Kleinman & Copp, 1993). In the end, I did not trust the strength of the bond Annie and I had or give either of us the opportunity to challenge the other, which might have led to greater mutual understanding (Kleinman & Copp, 1993).

Annie and Linda, however, disagree publicly, during a presentation that an adult learner from another program and I gave. Annie asked us to provide the PAVE workshop on goal setting we had done for in the previous spring. We presented it on Sunday afternoon in July at the regular meeting place. Although the typical neon-colored post cards were sent, only Linda, Gary, Annie, another learner, Ron, and his wife Kathy were able to come. At one point I discussed personality types, asking what kind of person likes to talk and be listened to. Linda blurted out, “the president.” The following short exchanged immediately followed:

“And hey, speaking of which I saw *Fahrenheit 9/11* [the controversial documentary filmed by Michael Moore] over the weekend. Did anyone see it? It was very interesting and gave me a lot to think about.” Linda said.

Annie and Ron both took umbrage at her suggestion. “Oh it’s not true, that’s just a bunch of propaganda,” they retorted practically in unison.

“But it presented actual footage and scenes of things. I mean, it’s right there for everyone to see,” responded Linda.

“It’s easy to take things out of context,” Annie rebutted. “You can make anything look bad. A church, a school, a literacy program. You know, you just pick and choose what you want to show and how you show it. And I saw bin Laden’s half-brother being interviewed on the

Today Show. He said his family members were not allowed to leave the United States early. So that just wasn't true."

"Well, I still thought it was good." Linda said with finality.

Linda then apologized to me and my co-presenter for interrupting our presentation. I immediately said, "Oh no, don't apologize. The election is coming up, and it's important to talk about these things."

Three weeks later, Linda and I took a lunch break during the car wash. I asked her about the exchange she had with Annie and Ron. She told me that she believes Bush invaded Iraq for no other reason than to avenge his father's defeat in the Gulf Conflict of 1991. But she also pointed out that she read in the most recent ProLiteracy e-newsletter that she is not allowed to endorse anyone for presidency since hers is a government-funded organization. "I'm really only supposed to talk about the mechanics of voting." Similarly, in 2003 Sandra Baxter, the Interim Director of the NIFL sent a missive to all of NIFL's electronic discussion lists, informing subscribers that while they can discuss critical issues, they must not send messages that are "intended to influence or cause others to influence a member of Congress to favor or oppose legislation or an appropriation by Congress" (quoted in Lopez, 2006, p. 11). Consequently, "This generated a great deal of discussion on several lists regarding censorship, freedom of speech and the importance of legislation and appropriations in any discourse over critical issues in the field" (Lopez, 2006, p. 12). Demetrian (2005) affirms that "The political culture is particularly polarized in the current period, with a neoconservative ascendancy challenging the fundamental precepts of the New Literacy Studies" (p. 268) and pushing the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) to the right (Demetrian, 2005, p. 268). Stromquist (1997) states that

“Attempts at political resocialization in literacy programs are difficult to realize when there is no concomitant political actions occurring in the rest of society” (p. 115).

Given all these obstacles, it is noteworthy that the group members engaged in political discussion, registered to vote, and that Annie, Bill, Sheila, and Gary all cast ballots for the very first time in 2004 election. Statistically literacy learners are among the least likely to cast ballots. In the year of the 2000 presidential election, for example, 52 percent of voting-age citizens who had not completed high school were registered to vote compared to 83 percent of those with a bachelor degree or higher (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). Moreover the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) found that 55 percent of those who measured at Level 1 (the lowest level) had voted in an election within the past five years compared to 88 percent of those who measured at Level 5 (the highest level) (cited in Comings, Reder, Sum, 2001, p. 18). For Annie, the act of voting is emblematic of individual and collective change: “There is power in our vote. We fought hard to get there with the Nineteenth Amendment. We don’t want go back to when we walked three steps behind the man.” Despite scandals, calls of unfair voting practices, and gerrymandering, the electoral process can still effect change. The 2006 elections, for example, resulted in a shift from a Republican to Democrat majority in the house and senate. The Democrats had not held the majority since 1994. Furthermore, for the first time in the history of the United States, a woman holds the position of Speaker of the House. As Annie alluded above, women have achieved at least some political clout since the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment.

Student Group Goes to Washington DC

Furthermore in March 2005, Linda, Annie, Liz, Gary, Carmen, Bill, Sheila, and two other adult learners traveled to Washington DC to take part in VALUE’s Leadership Institute. The

literacy program and tutors donated money and the student group raised monies as well to finance the trip. The expressed purpose of this gathering was to advocate for funding of adult literacy programs. In late January 2005, Gary called me to let me know that he had called his local representative and told him that he was going to visit Washington DC. "I told him that he should be there and give us money. I think he might donate and show up."

Although I was unable to accompany the group because I could not afford to do so, Linda wrote extensively about the group's experiences in a "bonus issue" of Sunnydale's newsletter: "The first morning, a legislative aide explained to students how laws work, how Congress works and explained how we can be most effective." According to Linda's article, the aide also explained the ramifications of Bush's proposed budget cuts. Students then attended workshops on student leadership and public speaking. In total, adult learners personally talked with five senators and six representatives. Adult learners talked with staff of an additional 15 Senators and 21 Congresspersons. In total, 100 students from 25 states attended the Institute.

When I later spoke to Annie by phone, she relayed to me that she told her story to "some representative" during the VALUE Institute in March of 2005. "I said you can't take money away from these programs. It's so important to people like me. It saved my life. And it's so important to my children and grandchildren." Linda underscored the importance of learners representing themselves in meeting with legislators by telling the group at the December 2004 meeting, "It is much stronger coming from you. You're speaking from your heart. If you tell politicians these programs are important, they'll believe you. If they hear from me they'll just think I'm protecting my job." Boyte (2004) calls "everyday politics" the process of "ordinary people "reclaiming public life" from technocrats and experts. "It has as its first premise a respect for the intelligence and talents of ordinary, uncredentialed citizens" (p. 35). As evinced in the

founding of VALUE and its ongoing activities such as this Leadership Institute, the collective efforts of adult learners has the potential to effect social change. Heaney (1996) avers, “For those without privilege or wealth, the power to influence social policy is the power of numbers” (p. 4).

However, “One cannot appeal to a single, stable, authentic notion of identity (i.e., that of the literacy student)” (p. 8). Recent studies have indicated that for all the support the learners provide each other and accomplish working together, differences in social identity, language, capability, goals, cultural backgrounds, and status all contribute to disagreements, dislikes, and discord (Campbell, 1994; Freer & Enoch, 1994; Horsman, 2001).

Conflicts Between Us and Them

One obvious difference within the group was between literacy and ESL learners. According to Linda, since February 2002, when the group had its first meeting, a few ESL learners attended on occasion, but there were always far more literacy learners in attendance and ABE students always held the officer positions. In February 2004, the student group officers created a vision statement. In part the vision statement read that the literacy students wanted to “increase attendance [and] learn more about other cultures as more ESL students join the group.”

In the 2000 census, Latinos made up 13 percent of the population and 59 percent of non-English speaking households in the United States spoke Spanish (Edmondson, 2006). Enrollment in ESL programs has risen by 42 percent in the past ten years (D’Amico, 2004, p. 17). A little more than half of Sunnydale’s learners are ESL students, and most of these learners are from Central and South America (Sunnydale newsletter, February 2003). Like Carmen, many of them came to central Pennsylvania for work. Throughout the five counties that the

literacy program serves, one can find a cabinet manufacturer, meat packing plant, grocery store warehouse, undergarment factory (Linda likened it to a “sweat shop”), yarn processor; and a ribbon maker. Linda admitted that “some of these folks are illegal immigrants and are scared of being deported. But I don’t get into it. I just don’t ask about it. I take all nines for the social security number on the in-take form.”

In interviewing immigrants while doing research on adult student groups in Canadian literacy programs, Campbell (2001) found in her study that the dominant discourse of being an immigrant is that “if you are motivated and work hard, you will succeed and within this discourse there is little space for complaining about the injustices in life” (p. 62). Working hard and accepting harsh conditions were recurring themes when I interviewed Carmen. She de-emphasized the stress and physical demands of her work as a first shift machine operator at a mail distribution center that processes over 2,000,000 pieces of mail every 24 hours. “Yeah, I like,” Carmen responds smiling brightly when I ask if she enjoys her work. “Sometimes I get paper cuts and stand on my feet long time so sometimes it hurts on my back. But it’s fine. The boss is nice. I like the money. I like overtime because I have bills to pay.” She often works six days a week. Yet, according to her company’s website, in addition to paper cuts and long periods of standing, Carmen’s job involves “being exposed to noise, dust and oil residue and lifting materials up to 50 pounds.” Obviously, by the company’s own admission, this is difficult, unpleasant work. Moreover, Annie told me that Carmen’s legs are “real bad. She has a lot of pain,” and that frequently she suffers sore shoulders from the constant repetitive motion Carmen’s job requires.

Still, according to a Sunnydale newsletter article written by her tutor, Carmen “demonstrates determination” and “works tirelessly...and persistently until she accomplishes her

goals.” Certainly, it would be easy to point to Carmen as an example of the “American Dream”; she has earned US citizenship and lives in a comfortable middle-class home. Although, as Edmondson (2006) notes, sometimes in households headed by a foreign born worker, others are working as well thus concealing the low wages each member is earning. This holds true in Carmen’s case; all four members of the household work full-time: her husband is employed at the ribbon factory, her daughter is employed by Burger King, and her son works in construction. Carmen strives to master English, aspires to go to college, and encourages her Spanish-speaking co-workers—“her people,” as she calls them—to attain the same goals she has set for herself. “When I first start [at her job in 1997], I cry because I couldn’t understand anything. I spoke no English. But Alice, she work in [Quality Control], a woman from Panama, worked there spoke English and Spanish and she help me. She was my translator. So I want to help others now.”

Among the 400 employees at the mail distribution plant are a number of workers from El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, Colombia, Mexico, Ecuador and other Latin American countries. Carmen serves as a “Spanish trainer” for the first shift. Linda told me that Carmen receives no additional pay for the added responsibilities of giving facility tours, explaining company policy, and training these new employees. Carmen also tells her Spanish-speaking co-workers about Sunnydale and in fact established two ESL classes:

I tell my people, “I have a school. Maybe you want to go to the classes two days a week. It’s not too bad. OK?” I told the father [the priest at the Catholic church she attends]. I go to church and I ask him, “Father can we borrow a classroom, meet in the basement.” He say it’s OK. Take it Carmen. I called the sister of the school, the principal and asked her to use classrooms. Then I call Linda up and tell her “Linda, I have people and classrooms. I have nine people when we started. I say why look for one tutor for one person when I have all these people?”

Carmen had met Linda in February 2002 when she attended the very first student involvement meeting, which was a potluck event. Carmen learned about the dinner from her

tutor. Before late 2003, Sunnydale's tutors were the sole conduit of program information; they received the program's quarterly newsletters and post cards announcing the monthly student meetings. Thus it was always at the tutor's discretion as to how much—if any—information she shared with her student. Carmen's tutor did tell her about the dinner, and they attended together: "I thought it was nice to have a dinner, a way to meet people. That's how I meet Linda and Annie." Thereafter she occasionally attended the monthly meetings throughout 2002 and 2003. Carmen also attended the state-wide student conferences in 2003 and 2004 along with Linda, Annie, Liz, Sheila, and two other ESL learners. "I enjoy the meetings but can't go much because of work." But Carmen does tell other ESL learners to attend, "'Go to the meetings.' I say. 'It's good because you can practice English with other people. You can see how their mouths move. You get to talk to Americans. And you get to give your opinions, suggestions.'"

Linda, who taught the two classes Carmen set up during the summer, encouraged everyone to attend the monthly meetings as well. "I want the Spanish students to have the opportunity to listen to other students speaking English and get to know and perhaps become friends—if only at meetings—with each other," Linda explained to me. "I consider this part of the class, and I give them credit for hours when they come."

At the meetings I observed, however, there was little cross-cultural learning or even talking between the ESL and literacy students. Typically, the seven to nine ESL learners clustered at one table, and the literacy students gathered at another. Difference in language was the most pressing and obvious barrier. At the July meeting, for example, there were 19 people present: seven English speakers and 12 Spanish speakers. Carmen gave a presentation about how she came to the literacy program and the tutors she had over the past years. Carmen had given this presentation at a tutor training workshop. Carmen spoke in both English and Spanish,

translating back and forth. After she was through, Linda brought up how Miguel needed to obtain picture identification so that he could cash his paychecks at the bank. A lively conversation ensued among the Spanish speakers about how Miguel best could do this. All of us “Americans” sat quietly while they talked. “So, what did you decide?” Linda said afterwards. “Did you guys figure it all out?”

On the one hand, I appreciated the problem posing technique that Linda employed. She brought up Miguel’s dilemma for the group to consider. Moreover, the Latino students were free to speak their native language to construct possible answers, instead of having to negotiate complex thinking skills in a second language (Degner, 2001, pp. 38-39). Yet, inevitably that did leave half of the participants out of the discussion entirely.

Repeatedly, the literacy students expressed frustration about not being able to comprehend. Bill said that he “tried sittin’ next to one, but then he moved away. I don’t know. Maybe he thought were talkin’ bad about them or I wonder if they talk bad about us. I just don’t know ‘cause I can’t understand ‘em.” Sheila added, “I think they should just talk in English. They should try harder!” Linda expressed frustration too when she drove several Spanish speakers to the November meeting: “They all sat in the back talking among themselves in Spanish. They didn’t talk to me at all. I thought it was pretty rude.” But even when attempts were made by the ESL learners to speak English, the results were not always successful. Liz reported that sometimes she just pretends to understand, “Like when I shared a room with Maria when we were at the conference up in State College. I just nodded my head a lot and go ‘uh huh. I didn’t really know what she was tryin’ to tell me.”

Furthermore, the literacy learners and Linda often referred to the ESL learners as “the Spanish,” thus striping the ESL learners of their individuality. I too found myself falling into the

habit of calling Carmen and the others, “The Spanish.” Yes, they all speak Spanish, but Carmen, Miguel, Raquel, Maria are obviously multi-dimensional human beings who are from different countries and of different heritages and ethnicities. They have varying opinions, ideas, goals, and beliefs. Furthermore, Spanish may not even be their first language, but because of a long bitter history of European conquest and colonization, they have had to learn it, since Spanish is the “official” language of their respective native countries. Thus because they all spoke Spanish and because none of native English speakers did, “The Spanish” was an easy way to differentiate between “them” and “us.”

Frequently, throughout this study, I wished I were proficient in Spanish so that I could have communicated with the Latino/a students more effectively. On one occasion, I had the opportunity to drive Ana to a meeting. Between my very limited knowledge of Spanish and her beginning-level English skills, we were unable to convey much more than “hello,” and “nice to meet you.” It was frustrating for both of us. Even when interviewing Carmen, who certainly has a strong working knowledge of English, I still felt I missed nuances and could not delve into questions as thoroughly and deeply as I would have liked. I would have enjoyed hearing more about the political system in Peru and more about her community activism in Lima. Annie, who has spent a fair amount of time with Carmen, says she can understand about 85 percent of what Carmen says. I agree with that assessment, and I wonder how much of what I said she comprehended. Perhaps like Liz, she nodded her head politely when I spoke to her.

The language barrier was especially evident at the September meeting when Carmen, Annie, and Linda were to review with the rest of the group the VALUE core leadership training they had attended the previous month. Linda admitted that she did not prepare for the presentation except to make copies of a hand out, because [she] thought “Annie and Carmen

would get together to talk between themselves, but that didn't happen.” Overall the meeting was very informal. “We’ll have to wing it,” Linda told the group when she realized she forgot to make copies of the agenda and handed the wrong secretary’s report to Gary. Moreover, the meeting started a half-hour late. By the time it came for Annie and Carmen’s presentation, most of the meeting time had elapsed. Annie then nodded to Carmen and said, “You go ahead and talk.”

Consequently, Carmen was left to summarize the 13-hour VALUE core leadership training in both English and Spanish, so everyone could follow along. Although she made a valiant effort, Linda told me afterwards she could not comprehend much of what Carmen was saying nor truthfully could I. Thus it was somewhat understandable but nonetheless unfortunate that midway through her presentation, Gary jumped to his feet and motioned to Liz and Sheila to come into the kitchen. Soon after they came marching in, singing happy birthday with cake and gifts in hand; Linda’s, Annie’s and my birthdays were all in September, and Gary had decided that everyone’s birthday should be celebrated during the appropriate month’s meeting. Carmen was visibly disappointed to be interrupted, but she graciously sat down. In a follow-up email, Linda wrote to me,

I think all of the commotion about our birthdays made it difficult for Carmen to get her point across. The actions of the students were rude, but then again their purpose in being there that night was a birthday party. Gary was very proud of the fact that he put the whole thing together and bought the gifts from the group. Sheila ordered the cake.

Linda remained hopeful, however, “that if the two groups could mix, a more common bond could be found. It all takes time. I don't expect it overnight. Wait until they start working on projects together” (personal communication October 27, 2004).

Language, although an obvious obstacle, seems to be just one reason why these groups have not formed a more common bond. As several researchers have found, divisions arise

within any heterogeneous community of students who differ in class, ability, and education as well as culture and language (Campbell, 2001; Horsman, 2001). Annie touched upon this very sensitive issue when she relayed the following: “When we’re driving over to the meeting [Annie is the only one with both reliable transportation and a driver’s license thus drives many students to the meetings] Sheila and Liz are up front goin’ on about the system. What are the Spanish suppose to think? Sheila and Liz don’t understand that’s there’s a stigma to not workin’ and havin’ a case worker.” As we continue to talk about this issue, I can see that this really bothered Annie: “I mean the Spanish are workin’ all these crazy hours and Gary, Sheila, and Liz don’t. They’re able to stay home and eat ‘cause the Spanish are workin’ and payin’ taxes. If more people worked and paid taxes than we could afford these literacy programs. We could afford more social programs.”

Annie accepts the stereotype of the hard working immigrant as described above. This is a pervasive image, even projected within the student involvement group. Quigley (1997) implicates the literacy field “in the myth making process” because it “needs to keep up appearances” to win the minds, hearts, and financial contributions of the both public and politicians (pp. 7-8). For instance, New Readers Press, the publishing division of ProLiteracy, produced a series of videos for tutor training sessions. One segment of this series is entitled, “Determined to Learn.” Linda showed this 10-minute video clip to the group at the July 2004 Meeting. The video depicts migrant farm workers, day laborers, and political refugees with advanced degrees all working tirelessly for minimal compensation, contributing positively to the community, and learning English so they can buy homes, earn citizenship, and attain better paying jobs. Carmen gave a presentation afterwards proclaiming that “God led [her] to the

literacy program,” where she was privileged to work with a “beautiful tutor who had sunshine in her heart.”

In contrast, the dominant discourse suggests that the literacy student is seen as lazy, unmotivated, and opportunistic who only has herself to blame for not earning a decent wage. Sacks (1979) explains that a member of any given category (Jews, women, septuagenarians) is seen as “a representative of that group...so that the fate of each is bound up in the fate of the other” (p. 24). Annie seemed anxious to put distance between herself and her fellow literacy students. “I’m not like them,” she asserted. “They have professionals who solve their problems. I always had to rely on myself.”

Unlike Gary, Liz, and Sheila, Annie has never received SSI or had a case worker. She has always eked some sort of living for herself and children through sheer tenacity and savvy. As discussed above, her circle of associates is broader. She proudly told me about her friend who earned a Masters, her cousin in Florida who pays for Annie’s airline ticket so she can visit annually, and her son who has a construction business. Annie clings to the notion that one can be successful solely through hard work and individual effort. Demetrian (1993) argues that many students place responsibility for one’s lot in life upon themselves because they can maintain a locus of control; their future lies in their own hands, spurring them on to try harder. But this also leads to blaming oneself for one’s situation.

Annie continued this line of discussion by highlighting the shame she felt because she is literacy student:

And I know how embarrassing it was for Iris [another literacy student] when she’s shown up at things and the Spanish students think she’s foreign born ‘cause she’s got a darker complexion. They tell her that her English is real good and they wonder how long she’s been studying. But then she has to explain that’s she’s learning to read English, and that’s her first language. I mean some of these Spanish have college.

On another occasion, Raquel, who is from Colombia, had this brief exchange with Liz:

“So are you teacher or tutor?”

“No I’m a student. I’m learning to read.”

“Oh,” Raquel looked puzzled, but shrugged her shoulders and turned away.

These two above-cited instances of mistaken identity came about because of the common misperceptions that the Latino/a students have about the United States. Carmen told me that she and other ESL learners were very surprised when they found that other learners in the group were literacy learners:

Yeah, Raoul come to me and he say, ‘you mean these people can’t read? In this rich country with all the education? How can that be?’ You see, we think in South America and Central America that everybody finish school. In our countries young boys have to go to work in farms. But not here.

Linda asked Annie and Gary to share their personal stories at the August 2004 meeting so the “ESL students could understand where the literacy students were coming from.” Gary read his story about being hit by a drunk driver; Annie discussed how she had a learning disability and married at 14 years old. Then Linda showed the 1994 Laubach Literacy video, “Life Without Literacy: A Daily Challenge” which depicted a woman struggling with everyday literacy tasks (e.g., reading to her child, writing a note to her daughter’s teacher, reading food labels in a cafeteria where she works). Russell, his wife, and Annie were murmuring at a table throughout the 15 minute video; Sheila got up from her seat to start cleaning up. Gary looked down. Liz watched the video closely as did two ESL students. “It takes a lot of courage to come forward to a literacy council for help. Literacy students should be admired,” Linda said afterwards. Little discussion followed. Linda wrote to me in an email the next day, “I didn’t think the students were as focused as they were the last meeting” (personal communication, August 13, 2004).

Annie told me later that she and Russell did not want to watch the movie. “It was too depressing, you know. We want to see positive stuff of people with learning disabilities achieving stuff and being successful.” Again, Annie focuses on the individual success story. Sheila said the woman in the video reminded her of herself so it was hard to watch. Moreover, the reasons for low literacy were strictly presented as individual misfortune and personal learning disabilities. The structural barriers of unequal educational opportunities and social injustice that are firmly embedded within Rauol’s question of how such “rich country” with compulsory education could still leave people with limited literacy skills, remained unaddressed at this meeting.

At one point, when talking with Annie on the phone, I asked her if she thought the group could talk about reasons people are on welfare and why people can’t read. She adamantly answered that she thought it would be far too uncomfortable for everyone:

Some people do look down on you for collecting welfare. And then are we s’pose to ask [ESL learners] about whether they have a green card, whether they’re here legal or not or living in subsidized housing? No that’d be puttin’ them on the spot too. I just think we should interact more and get along. I’m trying to keep harmony in the group and stay positive.

Like Auerbach’s (2001) teachers in training, Annie believes participatory pedagogy is “too negative...learners don’t want to think about their problems” (p. 273). Stromquist (1997) found this to be case in her study of Brazilian adult students. Brookfield (2002) writes the “majority of adults will choose not to rock the boat by challenging conventional thinking on race, class, or gender or by opting to explore political dynamics outside, but especially inside, the adult classroom (p. 106).

Getting along, keeping harmony, and staying positive, or even interacting were difficult to do, however, especially when “the Spanish” showed up late, skipped meetings altogether, or

did not help at fundraisers. Although Linda repeatedly explained to the “usual doers” that the “Spanish work a lot of hours, frequently on Saturdays.” This answer was unsatisfactory to Sheila. “It’s just not fair that they get to go to stuff like field trips or get taken to places with money *we* worked hard for. I don’t care, that’s just not right. They get credit for our ideas and hard work. The money should be used for just us.” Liz expressed slightly more tolerance, “I don’t mind the Spanish so much when they come around. They seem like they’re in their own world. They seem to pop up every so often when they’re interested in doing somethin’.” Because the ESL learners were not fulfilling the “category-tied obligations” of a being a group member (e.g., helping with fund raisers, attending meetings regularly) Liz and Sheila felt justified in complaining (Perakyla, 2003). Annie and Linda, however, argued that the expectations were not made clear to them. “I mean when they went to the Amish country with us, they just thought it was just 13 dollars for the whole day when really student funds that we made from the fundraisers was why it was so cheap. I really don’t think they knew that,” Annie stated. Linda echoed this sentiment, “They have to learn what is expected and needed, and they can only learn by being asked.”

In December 2004, the ESL learners decided they did not want to attend any more meetings. Linda concluded that “They just don’t have a tie to the group, transportation is a big problem, and I think they are most interested in learning, and their teacher makes it fun. I think our literacy students tried to a degree to be warm and friendly, but there was still that feeling of ‘us’ and ‘them.’”

When I met with the officers of the group in January 2005, Liz shared that she sees Juan working when she goes to Wal-Mart, “I can understand him better now. We say ‘hi’ to each other.” Liz also expressed an interest in learning some key phrases in Spanish, “you know like

‘hi’ and ‘how’s it goin’? I think it would be cool to learn that stuff. ” Gary sees Maria around town and says “hi” to her as well. Annie relayed that she and Carmen exchanged Christmas gifts. “She also asked if I would drive them to Harrisburg for a field trip since they didn’t get to go when we went back in June,” Annie continued. “If my van’s up to it, I’d be happy to take ‘em. Like when I took ‘em to Hershey. It was Sunday so I didn’t want to play any be-bop kind of music on the radio so I asked them to sing. They sounded like angels.” Here, Annie focused on something that she shares with the Latino/a students, a shared belief in Christianity. This reminded me of how Annie showed me Carmen’s “beautiful” church, telling me that she frequently walks around the sanctuary admiring the pretty landscape, water fountain, and the Virgin Mary statue.

Additionally, Carmen attended the VALUE Leadership Institute with the group in March of 2005; and according to Linda, she and some of her coworkers did attend meetings throughout the rest of year. But it remained unclear to me if these two groups ever forged a unity. I suspect not, given the ensuing events in 2005 which led to the temporary dissolution of the group. I take up this matter in the following section.

Power Struggles

I moved out of state to begin working full-time at a community college in August 2005, but I stayed in contact with the group through emails, phone calls, and cards. I wanted to stay in touch for professional reasons (i.e., I still had not completed my dissertation) and personal ones as well. At the end of October I sent an email to Linda asking if they were having a group meeting in December and if so that I would like to attend. I missed the group members and how I was generally welcomed and included in the group events. After living in State College for eight

years, the move to Maryland was a difficult transition; I wanted to return to something familiar. I imagined the December meeting to be a lovely reunion in the fellowship hall at the United Church of Christ, just like the cookie exchange in December meeting of 2002 when I first attended: we would eat lots of food, receive door prizes and joke with one another. I then received this email from Linda on November 29, 2005:

I am sending you this advance notice to let you know I am suspending all Student Involvement activities indefinitely. There are unresolved internal problems that defeat the purpose of the SUPPORT group and I cannot support this group's activities under these circumstances. Should they decide to solve them themselves I may once again consider activating this group, but until then there will be no meetings or activities supported by Sunnydale.

I drove up to the IU in early January 2006 to meet Linda for lunch and find out more. When I saw Linda, she was full of news and gossip about all the members, happy to talk with someone who "was really interested." As we sat across the restaurant table, she pushed a large stack of photographs taken at group events for me to review as she regaled me with updates and gossip about all the members. The litany of problems and complications were many: Sheila did not make a good president because she becomes upset and cries and becomes very childish in the way she handles things. Liz never took notes at the meetings even though she was secretary. She claimed she could remember it all but never wrote anything down. Russel never kept track of the treasurer's report; he let his wife do it. Gary was calling Linda as many as five times a day for "no good reason." Annie was always complaining to her about Sheila and Gary. "They were all being so childish," Linda remarked. "But then again, maybe my expectations were too high." I asked her what her expectations were: "I wanted them to be more community-minded. To get out and help others and stop thinking about themselves all the time. Get out of that 'gimme' mode. To get a life."

I pondered this answer for some time afterwards. It seemed so harsh. Linda views “having a life” and a purpose as consisting of volunteerism and taking care of others; this outlook defines who she is, and I understand this position very well. But I, like Linda, am a middle-class, white, educated, woman who is heavily socialized to be in a care-taking role. But why should the students feel compelled to demonstrate the same kind of volunteerism and civic engagement that we do? I think it is presumptuous to project her view onto the group without considering the differences in their interests, abilities, and life circumstance.

Moreover, I began to see how Linda’s *raison d’etre* was in fact causing her frustration and growing resentment. Quigley (1997) writes of the how maternalistic humanism can quickly turn into condescension and the deficit perspective (p. 124). For example, Linda told me she had lent forty dollars money to another student—a friend of Liz’s who started coming to the meetings and whom Linda was currently tutoring—and only received \$5 in return. She also described how in November a number of students attended a play, and afterwards many of them went with her to the coffee shop and ordered without having money. Thus she ended up paying for them. She had also taken on the task of managing Gary’s money. “He had someone else doing it, but that guy wasn’t a very good accountant.” When Linda met Gary’s caseworker at the potluck supper in November 2005, she shared her concerns: “I told [the caseworker] I was helping Gary with his money, and the caseworker said he wasn’t allowed to help Gary, because he is supposed to be able to do that himself. ‘Well he *can’t*’ I told him.”

Dirx, Fonfara, and Flaska (1993) underscore the importance of maintaining boundaries between the practitioner and student. It is all too easy for a teacher to have an unconscious need to be needed and “[i]f an ABE student acts in a way to reinforce that feeling,” practitioners may have difficulty deciding what is appropriate and inappropriate within the context of the

relationship (p. 56). Linda encouraged Gary's behavior by helping him. By continuing to do so much for Gary and the other students, Linda implicitly indicates that their expectations of her are acceptable or even desirable

When I asked Gary about his arrangement with Linda, he explained to me that he had "gotten Linda to do [his] checks because [his] hand writing was so bad. It used to be Ralph down at the tax office," he continued, "but he screwed me over too many times." Before then someone at the bank helped him and prior to that, his mother helped him. Gary may have found someone else to take on that role if Linda had refused or perhaps—as the case worker suggested—began to do it himself. As well-meaning as Linda is, her willingness to do so much for Gary can lead to a greater dependency.

Finally, Gary does reciprocate as he is able. He bought Linda a rug for Christmas and took her to dinner. When I asked him to describe his relationship with Linda, he responded, "Well, I try to help her out however I can." Nor did her statement reconcile with my early findings as described in the previous chapter in which the students were helping the program and outside organizations. In fact, Linda had said herself "that their hearts were as big as barns," and that "they never said no to anything she asked of them."

As we further talked that day, Linda evinced more ambivalence about the group. Yes, she was happy to "less demands on her time," but she did hope the group would get back together. She even placed some responsibility upon herself by wondering aloud if she hadn't mentored Sheila enough. "In the first several months, we were doing so many activities, so busy with that that we didn't have many business meetings....I didn't have time to work with her and then by the end it just seemed too late." She also recognized that Annie had a lot more experience with and exposure to leadership and business meetings, given that she had been

president for the prior two years and had “gone to the VALUE trainings and gone to all those TLC meetings.” Linda planned to have a meeting for the officers later in the month to decide what they wanted to do. “I don’t want to hash over any negatives. That will only make things worse. They have had some time to think about there being no student group.”

After meeting with Linda, I drove over to Gary’s place to pick him up for dinner. I sat in the car trying to compose myself wishing I had given myself more time in between meetings. I had gotten teary-eyed when Linda told me that Gary recently had a seizure because he ran out of his medicine and that he was experiencing macular degeneration. “He probably won’t tell you though,” Linda said. I wondered again, “How much would *I* do for Gary?” “How involved would *I* get in his life if I were in Linda’s position?” Kleinman and Copp (1993) describe the tension many qualitative researchers feel in portraying study participants on the margins of society. On the one hand, ethnographers do not want to present them as passive victims but rather as “gritty, savvy, and streetwise, responding in creative ways to bad situations” (p. 14). Yet, this kind of representation can lead to glossing over the physical, emotional, and psychological difficulty of living in such horrendous conditions (p. 14).

I walked along the sidewalk. Gary called to me and then crossed the street. His appearance was especially neat in his button-down flannel coat. His blue eyes shined brightly under his white eyebrow tufts; his cheeks were rosy. “Hi honey, how are you?” he greeted me. He presented me with a several pads of paper that he had purchased at the Dollar General Store along with pens he collected from the myriad doctors’ offices he is in and out of. He had carefully wrapped one writing tablet—a pretty Christmas themed one—in a paper towel. “You’re always writin’” he chuckled good humouredly. I smiled, and we headed back towards the car. I asked him how he was and he just said “fine.” As Linda predicted, he divulged nothing about his

recent health problems. He did report, as had Linda, that Bill was going into the hospital “for his kidneys.” He had asked Bill and Sheila to join us for dinner, but they said they could not.

Once at the restaurant, again I found myself across the table listening to a litany of complaints: “Annie said ‘I don’t want you, Sheila, and Liz in the group no more.’ That’s exactly what she said I heard her.

“Did she really say that, Gary?”

“Yes, *I* heard her. And I get so sick of Annie tellin’ the same story over and over about how she got to the program. Nobody wants to hear it no more.”

Gary went onto to complain about another new student, Dorothy, who had been recently coming to meetings. “She wants to come in and change everything. Like we had the plates set up at the covered dish and she wanted to move them to the other end of the table. I mean she can’t come in and change stuff like that. She should just keep her big mouth shut. That’s what me and Sheila think” In Gary’s mind, Dorothy has not earned the right to present her own agenda or perhaps he and Sheila felt threatened by Dorothy, thinking she wanted to take their authority and power away.

A few days later, I tried Annie again on the phone. She answered immediately and was happy to hear from me. I was relieved. She too was frustrated and tired. She squarely placed the blame on the 2005 president, Sheila, calling her an “I person.” (Marty Finsterbusch often drew the distinction between the “I” leaders and “we” leaders at his presentations and VALUE trainings.)

She can’t delegate. She wants to everything herself. Like when we had the auction. I offered to come over and help her wrap the stuff up, but then she went ahead and did everything herself. And she doesn’t like Dorothy. I think she’s threatened by her. Well that’s just my opinion. And she doesn’t like Jeannie (another new student) ‘cause she chews her fingers. But this is all so kindergardenish. It really is.

Furthermore, Annie believed Sheila had “manipulated” Gary.

Remember how much she used to pick on him because he ate so much. I always stood up for him! Even when he snapped my bra strap when we in Amish Country, I never said anything. I put up with sexual harassment. I always sat by him when no one else wanted to. Now she’s turned him against me. And I know Gary hung up on me. It wasn’t ‘cause he had to go the bathroom like Linda thinks. *Come on, Juliet!* I can see that maybe bein’ the case maybe once or twice, but he did it all the time! I’ve done so much for this group! I’ve helped everyone of them. I’ve driven them places, given them money, My daughter told me I was ‘stupid’ to be doin’ all of this work all the time, puttin’ up with so much, and lettin’ everyone else get the credit

Later I contemplated how much Annie sounded like Linda in her insistence on being the care taker and the consequent greater dependency Sheila, Gary, and Liz felt under her maternalistic humanism; Liz and Sheila even referred to Annie as “mom” on occasion. That need to be needed seemed evident in her discourse as well.

I called Sheila too. She had some *happy* news, for which I was so grateful to hear. Her 20-year old daughter had gone off to the Job Corps center, studying to become a Certified Nursing Assistant. “I found out from my neighbor. Her son’s doin’ that. I don’t have to pay for it, so I said, ‘hey go for it.’ They’ll even pay for two years of college.”

When we turned to the topic of the student group, Sheila’s tone immediately changed. She repeated the story of how Annie said that she, Gary, and Liz not to be in the group anymore:

Liz, Gary, Bill, and I all heard her say this. “Ya know when Annie was president no one told her what to do. We all just set back and let her do what she wants. We let her be the boss, but she always wants to tell me what to do. She don’t trust my decisions. But I’m just gonna keep my mouth shut. I don’t want to get myself in trouble again. We’ll just start fightin’ all over again.

Just as Gary did, Sheila focused on Annie, “the current star in power,” angry at what she saw as Annie’s self-importance (Horsman, 2001, p. 84). Annie *is* undoubtedly the star. She co-founded the group, served as president for two years, and tutored both Liz and Sheila at different times thus highlighting her greater literacy abilities. She drives, whereas Liz, Sheila, and Gary do

not, leaving them dependent on her for transportation. Annie is very articulate as she easily and appropriately incorporates words like “stigma,” “interim,” and “context” into her speech. Her voice is clear and strong. She speaks at public forums far more than the others because she is “so good at speaking from the heart,” as Linda stated. She can tell the well-rehearsed “gut-wrenching testimonial” (Quigley, 1997), about how she was on the verge of suicide before coming to Sunnydale, that is so effective in getting volunteers and policy makers to support literacy programs (Quigley, 1997). She regularly wrote “A Word From the President” columns in the quarterly Sunnydale newsletter (Sheila never did this during her term) along with many other articles and stories. Moreover, I thought about how much more time I spent listening to Annie’s “stories over and over again,” how dependent I was on her for information not only about herself and the history of the group, but other members as well. How much more had I encouraged her to tell her narrative compared to the others (Chase, 2005)? She had shared her story for her friend's Master's thesis and pointed out that the doctorate was “higher” than a masters. Despite my protestations, I found the attention flattering.

Considering this context, I would be remiss not to problematize the version of herself and experience that she “performed” for me (Chase, 2005). She was the one always willing to communicate with me, the one most eager to tell her stories, the one I felt closest to. How much had I privileged her voice and thereby even silenced the others (Gubrium and Holstein, 1999)? How much more compelling did I find Annie’s (my primary narrator) version of events? Upon having this realization, I felt an added urgency to attend the meeting Linda set. I did not want to rely on Annie’s account. I wanted to get stories from others and not leave Sheila thinking she could not trust me to tell her version of events.

The Group Goes On

Linda called a meeting in late January 2006, inviting the officers of the group to discuss why she was disappointed that everyone was “magnify[ing] each other's weaknesses instead of their strengths,” and “each one [was] complaining about the other.” She wanted to discuss what the group wanted to do from that point on since “they had some time to think about there being no student group” (personal communication, January 12, 2006).

I asked Linda if I could attend that meeting. She responded that she “would prefer to keep the meeting closed.” I quickly wondered if I had over-stepped my bounds. The combination of highly-charged topics, as well as the in-depth and very long-term contact did make those boundaries “fuzzy” (Gilbert, 2001, p. 12). When we had lunch earlier in the month, I seemed to be a friend and confidante, listening with empathy and keen interest because I cared and had “a heart for literacy.” Still, I was first and foremost a researcher. I only drank tea instead of ordering a full meal so the food would not distract me from my primary purpose: gathering data. I asked questions and made mental notes if not written ones as I sat across from her. Linda eyed my blank tablet—I kept it visible thus subtly reminding her why I was there (Wolcott, 2005)— and commented that I must be “getting a good conclusion for my paper.” Did she not want me to include the specifics of what happened at the meeting? I did not receive a report from Linda about the meeting and did not ask for one.

Gary, however, did call me as soon as he got home from the meeting to tell me the “very good news.” “We all agreed the group was going to continue. We’re back on. Isn’t that great?! We just decided that was what we wanted to do. I knew you’d be happy about that, Juliet.” Annie called too to let me know the group was going to continue. Annie reported that Dawn, a

learner who served as vice president in 2005, and who rarely says anything, spoke up and talked about how important the group was to her:

She said she felt accepted and comfortable here. It was really nice what she said. It reminded all of us why we started this group. We're gonna have elections next month and Linda wants to take whoever gets elected president and vice president to the PAACE conference with her.

I heard from Linda again in April of 2006. She emailed to let me know that one of the group members, a short brown-haired very thin student who was "just 34 years old," had died of liver disease. Linda, Gary, Annie, and Liz attended the viewing. "I was working with her," Linda wrote. "We had become friends and I will miss her. She was the only one her husband had. Her mother and brother who are coming to a viewing today had not been in touch for three years."

I was struck by Linda's choice of word to define her relationship with this woman: they were friends, not tutor and student. According to Suave (2001), one of the foundational principles that grounds participatory education is compassion. "Compassion sees the other even as ourselves and knows that, at some point, one's well being depends on the well being of the other" (p. 17). It is this compassion, as defined by Suave, that gives comfort to Dawn, leads Linda to describe her student as a "friend," and drew me to return to this group again and again. I have found encouragement, hope, and goodwill there, but there were also conflicts, anger, and jealousy.

Burnaby (2001) refers to a "kind of chemistry" that must develop among participants so they can set aside expectations they have of each other, themselves, and the organization. Both learners and practitioners must be able to take risks and do things differently. "Those who led before must let go of some of that control; those who knew must accept the knowledge of others and those who could act must stand aside for others to show their skills" (Burnaby, 2001, pp.

313-314). My findings indicated that in some ways the participants were able to embrace these principles and in other ways, they were challenged by them.

Summary

In this chapter, I described my findings. The group evinced several beneficial aspects. Specifically, I found that individual members benefited from participating in the group in several ways: individual members felt emotionally supported, were provided opportunities to enhance and expand their literacy practices, gained opportunities to exercise varying levels of power within the program, and opportunities to become more aware of and to become involved in macropolitical issues via discussions of the 2004 Presidential elections and involvement with VALUE. By tapping into the members' rich social networks, ideas and resources, Sunnydale Literacy Program benefited in terms of gaining greater public awareness as well as recruiting more tutors and learners. Furthermore, as learners took on these active roles, Linda began to share in than recipients of literacy services. Challenges in sustaining the group arose as members confronted the cultural, ideological, and ability-related differences among each other. For example, the ESL learners (all Spanish speakers) and literacy students and Linda were faced with a language barrier leading to feelings of "us" and "them." Additionally, Sheila and Bill grew resentful of Annie, "the star student." In the following chapter, I reflect at length on these findings and suggest ways that the group could have worked through some of its difficulties. Finally, I consider alternative ways of implementing participatory education, and conclude with recommendations for future studies.

CHAPTER 7: REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this chapter I reflect upon my experiences working with Sunnydale's Student Involvement Group. I consider both the usefulness of the group as well as its limitations. I also provide some suggestions based upon a literature review and experience of working with VALUE that may have helped the group function more effectively and smoothly. Finally, I recommend future studies that could further help policy makers, practitioners, and learners understand the "many faces of participatory education" (Burnaby, 2001, p. 307).

Reflections:

Annie reported to me in our conversation in January 2006 that Linda wanted to take a step back. "She's thinkin' about retiring within the next year and wants to spend more time with her grand kids. She said she wasn't sure whoever takes over her job will want to even have a group." Inherent in this comment is the assumption that the literacy practitioner is the one who determines whether the group even exists. Given her role and the administrative authority that comes with it, Linda is necessarily the ultimate decision maker. Liz underscored this point: "Well, she's in charge of the program, and knows the people. She has the connections and contacts, so we have to run things by her. But she's pretty open to our ideas." Drobner (2001) explains that within her organization, staff and students in the training program constantly faced the tensions of pursuing literacy work aimed at improving the community through a collective effort, and the reality that "students were basically clients seeking service" (p. 34). In this study, learners did expect Linda to take on the role of professional caregiver. Gary sought support with financial matters, and Annie was annoyed with Linda for not telling Sheila to "behave" after Sheila became president. "[Linda] just don't want to get involved, yet she's the professional! She

should be the one to tell Sheila to shape up.” At times, as described above, Linda’s maternal feelings further engendered too much dependency upon her among the learners. She did take charge of Gary’s finances, convinced that she was the only who could do so, lent money, and called them childish and immature.

This line of thinking leads me to wonder if the group *should* continue. On the one hand, the long-term interaction among the group members did establish a strong support network, fostered reciprocity, and provided opportunities to engage in literacy practices, all extremely powerful outcomes in literacy programs. On the other, that same close connection led to cliquishness among the core group, thereby leaving new members to feel unwelcome. For example, Carmen’s presentation was pre-empted by Gary, Sheila, and Liz’s birthday surprise for Linda, Annie, and me. The ESL learners were excluded. Gary also complained bitterly about “Dorothy” for trying, as he saw it, “to take over.” Moreover, maintaining student groups can become burdensome. I observed learners feeling burdened when they were expected to make long term commitments, hold positions that they did not want or were not able to fill, and participate in events that may not interest them. What about all the students at Sunnydale who cannot or will not make these kinds of commitments? Time constraints are an oft-cited reason for not engaging in participatory practices among both learners and practitioners (Campbell, 2001; Jurmo, 1989; McGinnis, 2001).

More troublesome were the tensions, divisions, and hierarchies evident in the group. Campbell (2001) sees these challenges as inevitable, yet perhaps not insurmountable. For example, one means by which the ESL learners and literacy learners could have perhaps forged a stronger bond is through one-on-one tutoring. Boyte (2004) describes the The Jane Addams School’s “reciprocal learning relationships” in which native-English speaking college students

and immigrants work together, both serving as tutors and students. This kind of pairing creates interactive, personal, and relational learning. Liz expressed some interest in learning at least some phrases in Spanish. I did not pursue this line of thinking while I was in the field and so cannot speak at length upon the feasibility and willingness of all the members take part in this activity, but the idea would have been worth discussing. Another way to encourage dialogue among all learners is to institute a “check in” at the beginning of every student meeting. The “Check In” provides chance for the participants to tell the group how they are feeling, and for the group to support and understand all of its members (McGinnis, 2000, p. 22). It provides a chance for the students to hear their own voices in a new context. This is especially important for those learners are shy and hesitant about talking in a group. It will encourage learners to participate more and allow everyone to speak as it becomes a part of the culture of the literacy program (p. 23). Carmen could have easily acted as a translator for this kind of informal, friendly exchange, and the check in could have lead to more in-depth dialogue over time.

Horsman (2001) recommends that groups engage in explorations of those differences as well as commonalities and causes of those differences. Of course in order to do this, there must be a tremendous amount of trust as well as willingness to risk and endure discomfort. As I described above, I did not engage in critical reflection with Annie because I clung to the traditional guidelines of what a researcher is suppose to do and not do in the field (Kleinman & Copp, 1993). Linda was stymied by the reluctance of the learners to “rock the boat” and the mandate from funders to maintain neutrality.

The structure of the group itself also contributed to these divisions. Although having set positions (president, vice president, and secretary) can be an effective way to teach leadership skills, they can also create a rigid hierarchy leading to resentment at the one student who is in the

highest position (Horsman, 2001). Calvin Miles, current chairman of VALUE, is quoted in a 1989 article about his experience: “[The group leaders] didn’t stop to see what was behind the anger [from other students]. Maybe they always saw us as a step up or saw us as threatening” (Boutwell, 1989, p. 51). By the same token, the ones placed in the high positions may see themselves as superior. Literacy organizations may contribute to a sense of hierarchy by publishing success stories, bestowing “learner of the year” awards, and showcasing the prized learner at the honorary banquets, adult literacy educators “validat[e] the privileges of an educated elite” (Heaney, 1996, p. 22). Horsman (2001) concurs: “Questioning the current possibilities for learner leadership in literacy programs and envisaging new structures for power sharing... might contribute to shifting the dynamics. New structures instead of traditional boards of governance might offer new possibilities” (p. 101).

So what are alternative models for student involvement? Finsterbusch (2004) avers: “Anything your organization is doing, literally anything, adult learners can be a part of it” (p. 1). Learners should be asked what they are good at, what is important to them, and how they want to take part in shaping the literacy program, for as Cain and Comings (1977) remind the teacher, adult learners will have their own idea about what participatory education is and what role they choose to play in it. The VALUE leadership training guides workshop participants in creating short-term projects around issues such as recruitment, retention, fundraising, and professional development. Designing projects allow students to become active in some clearly defined role for a specific length of time with a definitive end-point and sense of accomplishment of achieving the goal.

The Latino students at Sunnydale, for example, did not have time to attend every meeting nor participate in every fundraiser, but they may have gotten involved in a short term project,

such as designing a workshop to teach a key Spanish phrases to staff, tutors, and other students or recruiting other learners at their workplace. Moreover, Sheila was universally praised for her enthusiasm and ideas in creating fundraisers and games for children at picnics and covered dish events. But according to Linda and Annie, she became “difficult” during the three-day VALUE leadership institute in Washington DC, demanding to leave early, and was unsuccessful in delegating responsibility effectively while president. Finally, in our last phone conversation, Sheila told me bluntly that she did not want or have time to be in the group any longer. I do not know if she is still an active member.

For those who want and can afford a longer ongoing commitment, VALUE recommends developing voluntary or better yet, paid positions at the literacy program. Having a student group *can* be an effective, worthwhile endeavor, but in no way does it exhaust all the ways learners can be involved in adult literacy programs.

Regardless of how literacy programs do implement participatory education, an urgent need is greater support and resources for these programs. In the entire state of Pennsylvania, Sunnydale was the only program, that to my knowledge, had a functioning, ongoing student group; the statewide organization, PAVE, became defunct within two years of being established. Although national organizations such as, ProLiteracy Worldwide, the National Literacy Summit 2000 Committee, the National Council of State Directors of Adult Education, and VALUE are all urging local programs to embrace participatory practices, there are few resources, monetary or technical, to assist these programs in making programmatic changes. As this study, and others (Campbell, 1994; Demetrian, 1993; Drobner, 2001; Jurmo, 1989; McGinnis, 2001) illustrate, moving towards a participatory approach is very challenging. VALUE is the only organization that consistently makes a valiant effort to connect programs and adult learner leaders via

conferences, workshops, and leadership trainings. But with only one full-time employee, a volunteer executive board, and grant-based operational budget, the organization's efforts are limited; they do not have the means to provide ongoing assistance. Other organizations within the field must act collectively and decisively act if the 2000 National Literacy Summit goal of having "students participate meaningfully in every aspect of the system that exists to serve them" is to be fully realized (p. 3).

Recommendations for Future Studies

Clearly, there is a need to continue to explore and document the participatory educational activities occurring at the national, state, and local levels. Clearly, at all of these levels, organizations are implementing participatory education. In the spring and summer of 2005, over 50 messages were posted on the NIFL-Adult Literacy Professional Development listserv under the topic of student involvement (See <http://www.nifl.gov/nifl-aalpd/2005/> for these archived messages). Here I outline possible research that would be helpful to further inform policy makers, practitioners, and learners.

National Studies

VALUE is a very young organization—not even a decade old—and many of its plans are in their infancy stages. But VALUE's future is promising and it warrants much more focus, particularly in these times when adult education funding is constantly under threat. Learners and former learners are the largest group of potential advocates and need to be seen as valuable stakeholders (Demettrion, 2005; Merrifield, 1998). For example, the U.S. House of Representatives' version of the Workforce Reinvestment and Adult Education Act of 2003 (HR1261) defined literacy as the "ability to read, write, and speak the English language with

competence.” When HR 1261 passed in May of that year, VALUE urged its members to send letters to their respective Senators stating the following:

Please make sure the definition of literacy is broader than just ‘reading.’ As an adult literacy student, I can tell you that I need to be able to do more than just read to be successful in my job, my family, and my community.¹

Furthermore, VALUE held its 2005 leadership institute in Washington DC and arranged meetings with legislators. According to VALUE’s website, “During one meeting, Rep. George Miller (D-CA-07), ranking minority member of the Committee on Education and the Workforce told his constituent and VALUE board member Faye Combs that he would sponsor a Dear Colleague letter to the House Appropriations Committee opposing a 66% cut in adult education funding included in the Administration's 2006 budget request” (www.valueusa.org). About 100 learners and two dozen practitioners from 25-states participated in the 2005 leadership institute (valueusa.org). Why were there not more participants? Is it because of a lack of awareness among programs? Is it a lack of trust in a “student-run” organization? Was the cost of registration and travel prohibitive? Is it because too many programs do not recognize the strong advocacy role learners can play? A simple survey could shed light on this critical issue.

A national survey should also be conducted to examine how many literacy, ABE, ESL and GED programs offer opportunities for learners to take active roles within their infrastructure and in what capacities. VALUE encourages all levels of adult basic education to take part in its leadership institutes. As mentioned before, Laubach surveyed its affiliates in 1997. Has there been an increase in student involvement since the advent of VALUE and an increased emphasis on student involvement expressed in the ProLiteracy program standards and in National Literacy

¹ This draft letter was distributed to all in attendance at VALUE’s *Third Biennial Leadership Institute* in Tampa Florida in the summer of 2003 and posted to VALUE’s listserv.

Summit 2000 document *From the Margins to the Mainstream?* Have these national initiatives had an impact at the local level?

State-Wide Studies

Based upon my research, conversations with Finsterbusch, and employment with Tutors of Literacy in the Commonwealth (TLC), I gathered that Pennsylvania was a strong early supporter of student involvement, and Sunnydale was influenced by this as outlined in Chapter 4. The student involvement group developed in concert with the beginnings of PAVE, Pennsylvania's student state-wide organization formed in 2002. PAVE, however, has become virtually inactive; in fact, there was no state-wide student conference in 2005 nor has there been a Northeast Adult Literacy Conference since 2001. Why is that? Conversely, why and how have student organizations succeeded in other states? Through my involvement with VALUE, I have heard that state-level student organizations have achieved a level of success and stability in New Mexico, Delaware, Iowa, and Vermont. Investigations of their operations could perhaps provide some best practice guidelines.

Local-Level Studies

It would be useful to conduct case studies in a variety of programs (e.g., volunteer-based literacy, GED, ABE, ESL, workplace, family literacy) that have attended the VALUE leadership workshop. Does the VALUE training translate into the daily practices of local agencies? If so, how? Clearly, Sunnydale did not implement the training in any formal way. Linda did create, however, positions for Annie and Carmen (i.e., liaisons between the program and students) that she had hoped to fund in 2005; however, funding was not available. Thus conducting studies examining this issue would be very helpful.

In what other ways have learners become involved in the infrastructure of local programs? It is crucial to document the success stories and provide greater insight on the usefulness and limitations of the kinds of participatory education practices. Based upon my own experience and reading through NIFL electronic mailing posts, there seems to be some resistance or at least uncertainty as to why and how learners should be included in decision making. For example, on the 2004 Program Leadership and Improvement electronic discussion list, Finn-Miller wrote, "When it comes to learner involvement, I've heard practitioners in the field say, 'We've tried to get our learners involved, but most are not interested. Their lives are far too busy for that, and they are here to learn'" (p. 1). Another relayed one of her colleague's comments, "Until now, I've seen students as primary beneficiaries of program improvement efforts but not as participants in the process. I think a student's main responsibility is to learn" (Chaney-Bay, 2004 p. 1). Why is there this troubling dichotomy between learning and involvement in so many practitioners' minds? Learning does occur as students take active roles within their organizations; furthermore, adults should have an opportunity to participate in their programs for them. My ongoing project is to change that perception, to help adult basic education practitioners realize a "community vision" as elaborated in *The Careless Society* by John McKnight:

Those who seek to institute the community vision believe that beyond therapy and advocacy is a society where those who were once labeled, exiled, treated, counseled, advised, and protected are, instead, incorporated into community where their contributions, capacities, gifts, and fallibilities will allow a network of relationships involving work, recreation, friendship, support, and the political power of being a citizen. (p. 62)

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APPENDIX A

Excerpt from Transcript of Interview with Annie (July 24, 2004):

J: Tell me about your upbringing. You grew up in this town, right?

A: Yeah, we lived in a house made of tar paper. My Dad was of Eastern descent. He worked as a grinder, and sold rags the rag man. My mom never seemed very happy. I just wanted to please everybody. I gave away dressers to neighbors because I thought they needed them more than we did. I brought in a homeless woman to help bath her. I sent quarters in Christmas cards. I always felt like I should be giving and helping others. Anything I could give away.

J: What was school like when you were little?

A: Oh, ya know on the playground it was fine. We were all just playin'. Everybody was normal. Playing on the playground, no one questioned their intelligence until they went to school. And then there was this disability with reading. And from that time on, we were labeled. And that is something you have to live with for the rest of your life. Readin' out was so embarrassing. I was so embarrassed to the point that I'd pee in my pants whenever the teacher called on me to read aloud. I just wanted to get out there cause I felt so dumb all the time. When I was 14 my parents let me get married to a man seven years older than me. I think also that he knew about my mother's affair and threatened to tell my dad if she didn't give her permission

J: And where do you live and how did you survive during that time, being so young and all?

A: You name it, and I did it. We lived in cars, run down apartments and even grave yards. My husband was always running from the law. He stole hog wire and horse saddles. We moved around a lot. We lived in Nebraska, Wyoming, Virginia, just every place. I got to see a lot of the country! (*chuckling*) And I worked in factories. I did whatever I could to help my kids. And I got them all through high school. They all graduated and are makin' a living. I'm so proud of them.

J: That's great! Really. But when did you come back to Pennsylvania? When? How did you get to be able to leave your husband? Did you get a divorce?

A: In 1976, I left her husband and returned to here with my four kids. And I got them through high school but I felt so much guilt and shame, never telling anyone about not bein' to read. In 1991, I came to the point of planning my suicide. I even had a will drawn up. But God intervened by bringing two married Mormon missionaries to my door asking if I wanted to hear about the Gospel and asked me to read a scripture. I started to lie tellin' them I didn't have my reading glasses or that my eyes hurt, but ya know I was emotionally tired of running away from people and making excuses for all things I can't do. So I told them I couldn't read. The man, he didn't believe me. But the woman, she was a teacher and she knew what I meant. She told me to call the reading program. Ya know, I used to be so angry at God. Why Me? But now I turn it around and say, Why not me? God has put me in this particular place and circumstance for a reason. I want to help others.

APPENDIX B

Reflections on “Day at the Mall” June 19, 2004

June I arrived at the mall around 9:20 am. The rain gathered heavily in the cracks and potholes on the parking lot. Circling the mall were fast food restaurants, gas stations, and a Super Wal Mart. The sign at the entrance advertised that it was a “community weekend and that everything was 30% off at Bath and Beauty.” The contrast between these two notices was startling illustrates Putnam’s point, “that large impersonal malls constitute America’s most distinctive contemporary public space [yet they] are carefully designed for one primary, private purpose—to direct consumers to buy (Putnam, 2000, p. 211). I walked through the JC Penny’s and into the main corridor where I saw a series of tables set up. Even the community weekend was another excuse for agencies and private businesses to hawk their wares; the animal shelter had caged kittens to adopt; the “B-Dry” company and its waterproof system to demonstrate; the Tae-Kwon-Do school had its classes to advertise; and Sunnysdale’s student involvement group had its baked goods and used books to sell. Linda, Sheila, and Bill looked tired. Sheila and Bill with the help of Sheila’s two daughters stayed up late the night before making chocolate lollypops and oatmeal cookies. Linda stayed up until 2:00 am dividing the baked goods into individual sized-servings and pricing them.

Linda confirmed that both Sheila and Bill needed assistance with counting change, so she asked that I work a shift with Sheila and then Bill and she would take a turn. Sheila and I sat behind the table talked as the long continuous loop of fifties and sixties music droned in the background and shoppers-- mostly white, middle-aged, middle-class--milled about. Soon, one such shopper stopped by to rummage through the books and peer at the cookies. I explained to her while she looked that we were with a literacy program. “Oh yeah? Well, my ex-husband is

an illiterate!” She retorted sarcastically. Taking her comment at face value, Sheila spoke up, “Well, I can’t read either, and we do need tutors real bad”; she handed the literacy program literature to the woman. The woman seemed taken aback; she looked at me directly and said faltering, “Oh yes it is a serious problem, and there are so many people who need help, and everyone is just too busy to volunteer, but I’ll try to find some time.” Taking the brochure, she hurried off.

Later when I was sitting with Bill, an older man came by and carefully looked at the program’s sign. I interjected, “Are you familiar with the literacy council?” He replied, “Oh I can’t read.” I honestly could not tell if he was being sincere or flippant, but Bill took him seriously, and answered, “Neither can I, but I’m learnin’,” The man gave him a strange look and then walked away. An older, bent lady with a severe, short haircut dressed in a faded house-coat and beat up tennis shoes wandered past our table several times, casting furtive looks. She eventually approached us asking our names we told her and she said hers was Betty and that was 72 years old. We told her we were with the literacy council and Bill again openly acknowledged he was a student. In a nervous rush Betty told us that her mom left her when she was very young, and that she had to teach herself how to read; she also told us she was raped when she was nine and was still afraid of men to this day. I asked her if she had a ride and a place to go. Betty said yes and hurried off. “That lady was *strange*,” Bill said. “Well, she has had a very hard life.” “Yeah, that’s true.” Bill said contemplatively. We sat quietly for a few minutes.

Although mall culture is “not about overcoming isolation and connecting with others” (Putnam, p. 211, 2000), I was struck that those three brief, anonymous encounters among all of

us during that “community weekend,” how striking the differences were demonstrated differences of class, education, physical and mental health, and life experiences.

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