Education not by the book: oral histories from the NYC adult literacy community

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Introduction

According to the 2003 National Assessment of Literacy Survey, 93 million people in the US are at either basic or below basic levels in prose or quantitative literacy and many argue that in America literacy continues to be about regulation and access. While texts may be plentiful, the politics of literacy and gate keeping is still very much intact (Macedo, 1994). This paper reports on a dissertation study chronicling the history of an adult literacy community-based organization, called The Open Book, through participants' voices, highlighting systemic connections between literacy, race, and economics in this country, using the lens of critical race theory/critical theory. While this oral history study was conducted in NYC, we believe the findings and implications to be relevant to an international context, particularly to publicly funded literacy programs.

The open book

Cecilia, a counselor at The Open Book and former student of WISH (Women in Self Help) program says of her early years working at The Open Book,

I remember talking to students. I said you know, I have struggled too and I have struggled with reading and with studying. I know how difficult this is. I said you just ask me if you want any help. You know I can't give too much but I can give a little grain of sand; you know a few grains here, a few grains there, we can make a beach. So that's what we're going to start to do here, we're going to start with a little grain of sand…

From its inception in 1984, The Open Book, attempted to place students at its center, honoring the multiple contributions they brought to the educative process. With a deeply embedded culture of simultaneous co-teaching/co-learning, and at its core a critique of dominant culture, this program represented a site where ideologies were contested, forever shifting, being navigated and re-navigated. The Open Book was deeply committed to situating literacy in a human rights/social justice struggle for societal/political transformation. Surviving for 17 years in Brooklyn, NY, as a counter-narrative to dominant frames, this program found ways/spaces to grapple with diverse positionalities/shifting landscapes and to negotiate/re-negotiate them. A microcosm of a more equitable world, rooted in people interacting and living together in more humane, just ways, it modeled the possibility of people re-defining themselves (and the worlds) as well as how others perceived them. By developing educational practices that legitimized people’s multiple struggles, perspectives, and discourses, space was made for new possibilities.

Antonia, a student at The Open Book says

I had been in and out of programs for a long time. I would end up leaving because
they weren’t giving me what I was looking for. I think that was why The Open Book was special. They focused on our needs and how to fill those through education. Not just education by the book. When we read other students’ books, we were learning who these people were. Although we are adults, we come to these programs because something in our lives didn’t go right. Something didn’t happen in school for us and we need encouragement. We need to hear you can do this, we need to hear it doesn’t matter what level you are, you can bring yourself higher...we need someone to say you’re not just another number passing through here, you’re a complex human being and you came here with so many struggles and dreams. People need to understand that most of these people are poor, people who have struggled.

Hazel, another student at The Open Book adds,

I think the main thing about The Open Book was that they never really followed the book. We took care of each other and brought each other up. We never left anybody behind. I always thought I was at the bottom of the barrel but by the time I left the program, I knew I could climb out.

Antonia and Hazel clearly point out some ways this program was different. With a focus on collectivity and community as cornerstones upon which this program’s culture was built, there was access to new words and worlds, with opportunities to re-author new narratives, of being actors in new scripts. For many, this was the first time of experiencing visions of a more compassionate and equitable future where people could re-define their possibilities and co-create new narratives rooted in dignity and love.

**The workforce investment act**

However, a shift in literacy policy occurred when the Workforce Investment Act of established the one-stop delivery system as the access point for employment-related and training services. With this legislation all core services were to be available at one physical site (however multiple additional sites and technological networks were allowed).

Funds allocated to local areas under the adult and dislocated worker funding streams were to be used at local levels to provide core services through this one-stop system, as well as to provide intensive and training services for program participants. Core services under this Act include: job search and placement assistance, career counseling; labor market information identifying job vacancies, skills necessary for occupations in demand, and relevant employment trends in the local, regional and national economies; initial assessment of skills and needs; provision of information on available services and programs; and follow-up services to assist in job retention.

Adult and dislocated worker funds under this title were also to be used to provide intensive services to unemployed workers who were unable to obtain employment through the core services and also to employed workers who were determined to need additional assistance to obtain or retain employment. Authorized training included: occupational skills training, on-the-job training, entrepreneurial training, skill upgrading, job readiness training, and adult education/literacy activities in conjunction with other training.

WIA was reauthorized in 2003 as the Workforce Reinvestment and Adult Education Act of 2003. The purpose of which was, ‘To enhance the workforce investment system of the Nation by strengthening one-stop career centers, providing for more effective governance arrangements, promoting access to a more comprehensive array of employment, training, and related services, establishing a targeted approach to serving youth, and improving
Unfortunately, *The Open Book* represented an explicitly different vision to that of WIA, the main source of public funding for many NYC programs. This funding stream which solely recognizes guidelines mandated by the National Reporting System (NRS) essentially interprets gains on standardized tests as the only legitimate marker of student progress. Under WIA, adult literacy is being re-defined minus any connections to social justice struggles. Giroux (2001) states that dominant ideologies penalize and alienate its most vulnerable, adding that literacy is deeply inscribed in ideologies of domination and colonization. Becoming literate therefore signifies in part, the ability to conform. (Stuckey, 1991). In this bleak landscape, there is no space to address institutionalized inequities or multiple, interlocking oppressions (both external and internal) that work to keep us shackled and imprisoned. Stuckey (1991) says, when societies dissolve forms of oppression against their own citizens and other societies, they will also dissolve the questions of literacy. Nesbit (2004) adds that all social inequities in capitalist countries are fundamentally rooted in economic exploitation. By legitimizing particular systems of structured inequality, educational systems uphold a particular order of social relations which might privilege some while further de-privileging others.

John, the Teacher-Coordinator at *The Open Book* says

"Many of us came into adult education because we believed in the transformative power of adult education. We believed that learning to read and write would not just open doors for some individuals but had the potential to give students the skills to understand and act on their world more effectively, to gain control over their lives, to act in concert with others to change the conditions of life in their communities. Implicit in this view was a notion that education itself was good, that by learning to read people would be opened up to new experiences and ideas, and in the process become different and perhaps more powerful people...but literacy funding is primarily directed not at providing people with an education but at re-education, not so much at giving people the academic and intellectual tools they need to better control their destiny, but rather to change their attitudes, to convince them they have to take a job, no matter how bad, no matter how personally fulfilling...people resist bad choices. The function and purpose of adult literacy funding is, more than anything else, to break down that resistance. This direction, this orientation in literacy policy has been straightforward, out in the open and clearly stated for a long time. (Gordon, 1995)."

How then can we as literacy workers reconcile our lived realities/everyday struggles of working towards collective social transformation in ways that unleash people’s political imaginations when our work is so intimately connected to larger issues involving institutionalized social inequities and further oppressions? To what extent are we as adult literacy workers complicit in perpetuating policy makers’ visions which privilege reductionist, discrete skills that actually de-skill, anesthetize, and deaden the spirit? In what ways are we space-makers and gate-keepers simultaneously? Engaging in social justice struggles while complicit in keeping intact inherently oppressive systems? How can these two oppositional narratives co-exist simultaneously side by side? Freire (1972) says, education either domesticates or liberates. It either supports status quo or challenges it. There is no middle ground. The choices seem clear, the consequences stark. Is it futile to think that the field can contain spaces of autonomy in the face of this insidious climate we currently toil in?

John says,
These are confusing issues, and the alternatives are not clear. But I think we all need to take a good, hard look at what we are doing. We need to think not only about what adult education is, but what it is in the process of becoming. We need to listen to the students…to expand our focus from 'how much' to 'what' and 'why.' And we have to make some choices… (Gordon, 1995).

Heaney, (June 5, 2007. Personal Conversation) reminds us that it is only through large numbers of people uniting and working together that social change becomes possible.

What lies ahead? Is it bypassing federally funded programs? It's especially problematic to note that few policy-makers have spent time in classrooms with students, or attempted to understand the complexities of their worlds. This leaves unchallenged and intact the multiplicity of deficit-driven stereotypes that float in and around mainstream society’s consciousness - of students being broken and in need of fixing. Shifting the blame to poor communities of color is something the dominant culture does effectively; refusing to see how much less these communities have always had to begin with. Macedo (1994) says, this struggle of attempting to overcome discrimination and the deep structuring of subjectivities with classist and racist overtones has had a long history and this is no time to nurture historical amnesia. In the shrinking spaces (that seem on the verge of existence) for resistance, how can we support emancipatory visions and narratives such as The Open Book, sites of struggle over democracy, in all its possibilities and contradictions? If truth is conceptually provisional, particular, and subjective, whose truth is being privileged in literacy policy? What will it take to subvert these dominant frames, locating alternative landscapes of power in which to collectively unite and strengthen?

**Why the open book’s vision was doomed: a critical race analysis**

In order to understand why an important and seemingly successful program like The Open Book was forced to close one must delve a little into the history of adult literacy programs in the United States and perceptions mainstream Americans have about adult literacy and the people who are served in literacy programs. While the closing of this particular program (and others like it) was complex, the shift in adult literacy priorities undeniably contributed to its sometimes precarious existence and ultimate closure. Historically adult literacy programs have largely served Blacks and other people of color (Chisman, 2002). In fact, Chisman notes, ‘the first concerted attempt to combat adult literacy was the remarkable national effort to educate blacks in the former slave states after the Civil War.’ Chisman goes on to explain that despite popular belief it was never illegal for slaves to be educated by their masters, but this was perceived to be the case. The economic interests and need for control on the part of white land owners were best met with an uneducated slave population.

Economic interest, then was a major factor bounding education of blacks under slavery. Low skilled, exploited labor did not need or deserve education... In addition to economic interest (and closely allied to it) were considerations of social control. Slavery was based on humiliation and terror. . . Education it was agreed would make slaves 'uppity' and harder to control (Chisman, pp.2-3)

That the first national literacy campaign was 'highly successful' is something that has often been overlooked. Freed men and women filled classrooms in the evening even after working all day in the fields. Many of them not only learned how to read and write but went on to further their schooling by attending one of the historically black colleges that sprang up throughout the South. But after a decade, 'the fad was over’ and white interest and philanthropic efforts to support literacy ran out. (Chisman, p.4)
From the time the first literacy movement was launched illiteracy has been seen as a problem affecting primarily blacks and other people of color. For example in South Carolina, the state’s first adult education director, Wil Lou Gray in her 1943-1944 annual report stated that Blacks were ‘awake to their needs’ and that out of 4419 program participants, 3,077 were blacks who were under the fifth grade reading level (Peterson, 1996 pp.84). Even with this level of interest exhibited by the Black community, adult literacy programs continued to operate on minimal budgets while in general the white population was content to think of illiteracy as a ‘negro’ problem—something that did not affect them in the least. Poor whites, also often undereducated and illiterate were considered equally worthless and undeserving.

In today’s ‘politically correct’ climate people will not own up to the fact that they still believe illiteracy is a problem for minorities and the poor yet, the perception remains that the vast majority of Blacks and other people of color are more likely to lack basic literacy skills than whites and the fault is theirs rather than inequities in the system. Educators have used Critical Race Theory to examine the inequities that people of color face within the educational system with the hope of someday transforming that system into one that treats people of color more justly and equitably.

From its inception CRT has challenged liberalism as a falsity, a way of duping the masses into believing that racism no longer exists as the oppressing force it once did for people of color. Derrick Bell, considered the father of CRT, used stories and allegories to illustrate the insidious nature of racism and how racial inequalities are only addressed to the extent that white interests are also served. Bell (1992) used the term ‘interest convergence’ to explain how legislation that on the surface appeared to open doors for people of color benefited whites interests even more. CRT acknowledges and honors that the insidious nature of racism is only revealed when people of color tell their experiences. It is the unique voices of people of color that provide the stories and counter stories that contradict the liberal, colorblind, majoritarian discourse. (Solorzano and Yosso, 2002).

When the story of The Open Book is examined through the lens of CRT it is clear that one day it would be forced to end in much the same way that the national literacy campaign that followed the Civil War had ended. The fact that this program had changed forever the lives of the students and teachers alike carried little weight. This program, like countless other literacy programs in the past suffered when sentiments shifted, when ‘the fad was over’ and the federal government and other private donors could see ‘no benefit’ in continuing to support adult literacy programs when the adults ‘already had a chance.’

With the passage of WIA and the Workforce Reinvestment and Adult Education Act the literacy paradigm shifted and our understanding of what it means to be literate became strongly connected to the skill sets that employers stated as necessary in order to meet their employment needs going into the 21st century. But even that connection is a stretch for employers who realize the skills of those most in need of literacy services will take years to build when their needs are much more immediate and they would see investing in programs like The Open Book as doing little to increase their bottom line.

In this changed climate programs like The Open Book were doomed not because they were not successful, but because their mission to support liberatory visions of education and to provide a space for individual and collective transformation ran counter to what was now considered the true purpose of literacy (as defined by the dominant culture) which was for adults to ‘function on the job and in society’ (National Literacy Act of 1991)
regardless of whether the job they would eventually hold would be one that allowed them to sustain their family, provide opportunities for continued growth, or enable them to access systems of power for themselves and their children. This argument, bound in race and economics, states that students' literacy should be driven by acquiring employment (no matter how deeply rooted this is in perpetuating a human underclass).

**Literacy is not colorblind**

During the 1980's when *The Open Book* was born the attention of the nation was once again focused on adult literacy. This renewed interest was due in large part to the fact that then First Lady Barbara Bush championed the cause of family literacy, launching a campaign through her foundation to end the intergenerational cycle of illiteracy. The thought of mothers reading to children was appealing to people. The public school system, reeling from the 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*, found that the 'educational foundations of our society are being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity' (*Nation at Risk*, 1983). Investment in adult literacy was seen as being part of a larger initiative aimed at 'stemming the tide.'

The media and even Hollywood jumped on board. News briefs ran on television, designed to bring attention to illiteracy. Movies were made featuring prominent actors like Robert De Niro and Jane Fonda depicting non-readers as being like the guy next door, hard working, low key and white. They also unrealistically depicted the problem as being one that was easy to solve. All you needed was a loving, patient, untrained volunteer to go from being virtually a non reader to being in charge of your own company.

Even though programs like *The Open Book* served a diverse population it was made up primarily of people of color, people who were already marginalized. When the general public failed to buy into the Hollywood portrayal of adult learner, the tide shifted and interest waned over time. The fact that *The Open Book* (and other similar programs) survived for any significant length of time is a testament to the strength and determination of the people who found a place there where they not only expanded their knowledge of basic skills, but where they also gained the knowledge they needed to know to transform their world (*Freire*, 1972).

**References**


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