Oral Histories to Change the World: Stories of Democracy from the NYC Adult Literacy Community

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Introduction
Slim and Thompson (1995) state that research which does not reflect, acknowledge, or build on local values, culture, and knowledge is unlikely to succeed (Thompson, 2000). In NYC and elsewhere in America, adult literacy policy has made this virtually impossible. Terms such as ‘evidence based’ has permeated the narrative and is used by policy makers to perpetuate and further colonize already marginalized communities. In this paradigm, there is no space to honor people’s lived realities (in all its inherent contradictions and dilemmas). This has led to a stifling of any flourishing research connecting literacy to social justice movements that might support political/social transformation. Instead there has been a steamrolling of numbers to inappropriately maintain a dysfunctional system (Macedo, 1994). Who benefits? At what cost? This paper reports on an oral history study chronicling counter-narratives from the NYC adult literacy community that explicitly connect literacy to social change and democracy in an effort to preserve the field’s collective historical memory. This study was an extension of my dissertation study which chronicled the history of The Open Book, an adult literacy community based organization, partly through participants’ voices. The Open Book, rooted in participatory ideologies, was inspired by Freire, Horton, and other grassroots adult educators.

The primary questions guiding this study were:
- What narratives can be elicited, from the NYC community, that explicitly situate practice within a struggle for human rights and social justice?
- What role can these narratives play in preserving the field’s historical memory of adult literacy being connected to social justice education?

Literacy Funding in NYC: A Brief Overview
Adult literacy in this country has long been inextricably linked to larger institutionalized inequities which has not been acknowledged or recognized by dominant interests (Macedo, 1994; Martin, 2001). How is ‘evidence based’
Policy and research currently defined? By whom and in whose interests? Whose voices prevail in decision making? Whose are drowned out? How can there be space within this paradigm to address the multiple braids of oppression where strands of racism, capitalism, and other institutionalized inequities are interwoven so tightly together? Currently, the National Reporting System as part of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) defines programs’ success primarily based on students’ attendance and educational gain (as defined solely by standardized pre and post tests). WIA is the main federal funding source for adult literacy publicly funded programs in the United States. Nowhere in this equation is there space for conversations about how programs can serve students better. How can educational processes be democratized to include students’ voices? How could this shape the classroom, literacy programs and the field? Many literacy workers say attempting to fit the complexities of education into reductionistic and deficit driven formulas drains their energy, morale, and creativity.

Vincent, one of the primary architects of adult literacy policy in NYC with a long history in the adult education field reflects on changes in policy within the last two decades.

*It felt like there was more space for progressive dialogue in the 80’s. When we developed literacy funding proposals, they were rooted in progressive philosophies. In the 1980’s the struggles were about building capacity that was high quality. We looked at all the key elements, not just federal accountability measures. We asked: do we have the voices of learners? Are we collaborating in ways that make the best use of resources? Can we strategically expand the resources available in equitable ways? We were constantly asking people, ‘What do you think?’ That’s much less the case now. Before funders and practitioners would talk about how we could make learning relevant to students’ lives. How can that learning be transformational? How does it impact the community in ways that create more equity? Now that has changed. With only part time teachers, the field is weak. Short term funding changes constantly, legislative priorities change, amounts of funding change and programs are chronically underfunded. The implications of these priorities are enormous. The students certainly are marginalized; the practitioners are also marginalized even though they may have been in the field their whole lives. Data collection has come more to be seen as an accountability measure as opposed to informing policy and developing quality practices. The students’ voice at the table and active participation has been totally lost or marginalized. Now there really is no organized access to funders. Welfare reform also shifted things enormously. Literacy programs were forced to shift their focus from education to employment. There was no model of empowerment, of community development, of change. Popular education, as practiced by The Open Book, without sufficient funding, will be marginalized forever...*
Why Oral History?
Oral histories offer people opportunities to author scripts (Thompson, 2000). Opening up spaces to recover experiences of the silenced can offer new ways of understanding histories of oppressed groups and access powerful opportunities of possibility. Unpacking whose knowledge and voices ultimately prevail in the dominant culture can lead to radical questioning of knowledge production in our society. Coles (1989) reminds us that stories are all we carry in our journeys, and we owe it to each other to honor and learn from them. In a marginalized field like adult literacy, oral histories can support learners and literacy workers in understanding the critical importance of their experiences. By telling and re-telling their stories people can understand the complexities of their lived realities which is too often excluded from debate. But as Slim and Thompson (1995) caution, words can change lives, but only if people can be persuaded to listen and act. By honoring community constructed knowledge, oral histories can support democratizing education and society, offering critiques of dominant ideologies that perpetuate legacies of interlocking oppressions. (Slim and Thompson, 1995). In chronicling these counter-narratives, I was aware that even though I strove to be meticulous, something was lost by putting people’s words on paper. Slim and Thompson (1995) remind us that meanings exist not simply in words but in the spaces between each word, in the silences, the hesitations, in the emphasis, inflection, and intonation. Though lovingly transcribed, once each word touched the paper, I was aware that its meaning was being injured.

Oral History, Adult Literacy, and Democracy
Antonia, a student at The Open Book says,

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.

John, the teacher – director of The Open Book, says the following (in an unpublished paper) about attempting to practice emancipatory literacy in the era of the Workforce Investment Act,

We have focused particularly on trying to build a democratic community within the school, so that the values and culture of the Open Book would be defined largely by the students and the educational program would respond to the real goals of the student body. This has been an imperfect process, littered with struggles and difficulties, errors, and confusions. It has been at the same time a very exciting project, one that
we feel has resulted in an atmosphere of tremendous personal and collective growth, one in which the students have felt valued and affirmed, and of course, one in which many, many people have learned to read and write better and transformed their sense of themselves, but the truth is that as we enter the 2000-2001 year, I fear for the survival of the Open Book and others like us.

When legislators in Washington pass laws like the Workforce Investment Act, I don’t believe it’s because they think the best way to help educate people is to help them find jobs. Rather, they are encouraged by corporate leaders and economic think tanks, looking at ways to bring down the high cost of labor and make cheap labor more plentiful. Their view is that there are hundreds of thousands of undereducated, unemployed people who could be working, and if all those people are brought into the labor force, the pool of potential workers will grow and the price of labor will be driven down. This will encourage investment, and the economy will grow. Literacy policy is, and probably always has been, at the service of economic policy – as defined by the business community. I sometimes feel the best metaphor for the whole job readiness business is a big flatbed truck driving through the neighborhood. On the truck is everyone who is working. My job is to help people get on that truck. But the truck is so full that every time I push someone up onto it, someone falls off the other side….Now we have the Workforce Investment Act, which by folding adult education into workforce development has enshrined this tendency into law, and along with it a series of accountability measures and performance goals designed to ensure that literacy programs across the country turn their attention to job placement. Almost lost in the discussion of goals and accountability is the dire financial situation that many programs find themselves in…

What has all this meant for the classroom? Everything is being squeezed. Teacher time is devoted more and more to collecting data of dubious value, which in any case has little to do with educational progress. Our staff meetings have less time to talk about what is going on inside the classroom….there isn’t space to ask ‘how can this class be improved?’ ‘What kinds of things do you want to do next?’ ‘How are you feeling about the class?’ ‘What would you like to learn about next?’ These are questions which we ask regularly and informally in the class. They are not designed to bring out yes and no answers, but thoughtful responses, in which students take increasing responsibility for the class and for their own learning…Literacy practitioners need a place at the table. We need to advance a vision of adult education that is aimed at meeting human needs, helping students realize their potentials, helping them learn the kinds of things they want to learn. We need to be careful about accepting things that may bring us more money in the short run, but move us further away from a humanistic and democratic educational project. (Gordon, 2000).
John revisited these themes in a later conversation about democratizing spaces in adult education. He says,

_In the early years, the conversations were open and fluid. They were really about ‘how can we teach?’ ‘How can we learn?’ ‘How can students be involved in this process themselves?’ Now the conversation is ‘how can I get more people to improve their grade level?’ It’s all about the test. The larger purpose of what adult education is for has, in a way, been lost. It’s not really talked about now…I would like to see the field push back against the federal government on the National Reporting System and the emphasis on test scores. Because if I’m a program director and you’re going to give me 200,000 dollars to run a program and you tell me you’re only going to be evaluated on test scores, and how many students got a job, that’s what I’ll focus on. No-one wants to know whether or not you helped students feel better about themselves, whether or not students are more involved in their community…nobody really wants to know about that. In fact there’s not even a place to tell them about that, not even a report where you can write about it. All they want to know is about numbers. So what am I going to focus on? I’m going to focus on numbers otherwise I might not get the money next year. Andy they really don’t give you enough money to do this work in the first place…._

_I feel like in literacy programs it’s really a matter of organizing the program so people have a say in what they’re learning and that what they’re learning relates to their lives and helps them to go out and be more effective in changing their lives and changing their community. In order for that to happen, students need to have a voice but I think students don’t necessarily come in wanting to have a voice or imagining they could have a voice so I think you have to work at that. You have to work at creating that kind of environment....

_During the civil rights movement people started organizing and organizing often involves reading and writing. But also people needed to pass this test to be able to vote down South so they started setting up these schools, these adult citizenship schools…it feels to me that adult education programs could be that kind of resource for communities. We don’t really think of them that way. We think of them as a place that people can get their GED (high school diploma). In some ways some of that depends on what’s going on in the community like organizing parents for better schools. In that kind of environment where there is a movement, then the adult education program in that community can be a resource for that…you spend time talking about it where people learn the skills they would need to challenge the school board in a more effective way. That to me is what these programs really ought to be about. To me, that’s something worth fighting for..._
Emancipatory Literacy on the Margins: A Critical Theory Analysis

It is important to remember that systems are interested in maintaining themselves. Social change lies in direct opposition to that. The government will not support visions that threaten or undermine the status quo upon which capitalistic interests are based. In the current landscape, the technocratic discourses of accountability, concerned with order and uniformity, have established standardized units of measurement, counting student hours, measuring grade levels gains, reducing literacy to a technical problem in need of a technical solution (Sparks and Peterson, 2000). On the other end of the pendulum, lie community empowerment models of literacy advocating for social and political transformation, instead of fragmented, isolated skills. In the current climate where accountability presides, where is the locus of power? What would it take to shift and splinter that? Freire (1972) says, society cannot integrate people into the current structures of oppression but transform those structures in the interest of liberation for everyone.

Currently, in NYC, there is no space for people to read words and worlds. Instead, as John says, the business and industry have defined and co-opted the goals and purposes of adult literacy education. However, Sparks and Peterson (2000) caution that by adult literacy becoming a system designed to meet economic imperatives, where a premium is put on technical knowledge, learners and practitioners end up being deskilled. The complexities of moral and ethical issues are neglected for the sake of efficiency. Apple (1990) adds that capitalism has invaded education and now defines what many now assume to be appropriate knowledge. In this treacherous terrain, the economic discourse now prevails, determining and defining who are knowledge producers and consumers, who teaches and who learns and who gets to define and talk about what counts as knowledge. In this expert driven paradigm, locally constructed knowledge exists in spaces on the margins and beyond, almost always never intersecting with dominant practice or understandings. In short, adult literacy funding is currently intricately tied to perpetuating and maintaining a human underclass, severing opportunities and rights of its poorest and most vulnerable (Stuckey, 1991). However, Foucault (1980) reminds us that power can only exist if the possibility of resistance exists contemporaneously. According to Foucault, power isn’t monolithic but omnipresent, splintered; which makes resistance more feasible at local levels (Brookfield, 2005). Because of this fluid shifting state, there are spaces to contest, resist, and interrupt dominant discourses and regimes of truth. It is in these sites of struggle where truths, knowledges, and discourses are provisional, particular, and subjective, that spaces to struggle can be re-negotiated and re-written. Landscapes of power can be re-conceptualized.

Implications
Phyllis Cunningham (November, 11, 2005. Personal Communication) says, if as a society, we’re to hold any hope of a more democratic society; we must be able to facilitate the right of those who have been marginalized to gain
meaningful access to the decision-making table. Oral histories can support this process.

We must unpack practices around program accountability. By scrutinizing the constructedness of accountability - who is accountable to whom, in whose interests and for what purposes - we can begin to understand power dynamics and implications embedded in the present social arrangements. Through understanding this, we can begin to engage in sustained resistance and transformation.

There is an urgent need for stories (such as the excerpts presented in this paper) that recognize alternative sets of possibilities, especially in the current reductionist climate that privileges exploitative and dehumanizing definitions of adult literacy. If we can chronicle, in our own words, the dilemmas and contradictions of the adult literacy field, this can be a powerful antidote to our current toxic situation. Today, the public collective historical memory which connects literacy to something other than workforce development is fast receding. The history of adult literacy as a human rights struggle is hardly mentioned. Who benefits? Stuckey (1991) says that literacy education begins in ideas of the socially and economically dominant class, taking the form of socially acceptable modes. Becoming literate therefore signifies in large part the ability to conform. When students fall outside mainstream categories, they are at an instant disadvantage regarding the value laden culture of schooling. Freire (1972) adds education either liberates or domesticates. There is no middle ground.

As John points out, at The Open Book (and other similar programs) people co-created new visions of what could be, while acknowledging existing and emerging pockets of hope. This narrative honored students as actors and agents of culture and knowledge production. However, John says, as in the South, it is social justice movements that need to infuse literacy not the other way around. We must collectively question what it would take to dismantle dominant structures and unequal power relations in sustainable ways. Is alternative classroom practices enough? Tom Heaney (June 5, 2007. Personal Communication) says it is only through large numbers of people working together in solidarity that social change becomes possible. For countless people, adult education represents a quest to re-define what is possible in their lives, chances to re-write imposed scripts with different endings. Oral histories can be one way to support this journey. Students can write their own complex and fluid truths on their terms. Allman (2000) states that simply verbally denouncing social injustice while leaving intact the structures of society that promote this inequity and poverty is thoroughly ineffective. Adult education programs must become a space to rethink and implement more equitable structures and reject the current definition of ‘evidence based’. We can no longer afford to continue working in varying degrees of historical amnesia or paternalistic colonization. In order for adult
education to be consistent with fostering democracy, students’ voices must be heard at every level of program planning, decision-making and policy. Programs must engage in emancipatory models of education if the field is to be true to its historical roots and become a true site for social transformation.

References

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