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ABSTRACT

The Bob Steele Reading Center was established in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1986 under board and staff leadership of the Literacy Volunteers of America-Connecticut (LVA-CT). The center has been under the management of Literacy Volunteers of Greater Hartford (LVGH) since 1989. Located in an alternative high school in a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood, the center's initial mission was to operate as a neighborhood reading center serving students and drawing on staff and volunteer resources in the school's immediate vicinity. In 1986, the center was viewed primarily as a pilot program providing one-to-one tutoring. In 1986-1996, the Bob Steele Reading Center shifted its focus from the neighborhood concept to pedagogical development and developed from a pilot project into a well-run urban affiliate of LVA-CT engaged in cutting-edge literacy activities. In the 1990s, the center introduced a series of innovative programs and services, including the following: (1) small group tutoring (including for bilingual and English-as-a-Second-Language students at the beginning, intermediate, or advanced levels); (2) student-developed anthologies and magazines; and (3) an oral history project. During its existence, the Bob Steele Reading Center has balanced the competing goals of program stabilization and project innovation. The center is currently working toward instituting a laboratory/research setting reconciling the needs of practice and research. (Contains 31 references.) (MN)

Crossing Critical Thresholds at the Bob Steele Reading Center: Transforming Potentiality into Actuality

George Demetron

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Crossing Critical Thresholds at the Bob Steele Reading Center: Transforming Potentiality Into Actuality

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ABSTRACT

This historical analysis explores key aspects of the Bob Steele Reading Center from its inception in the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s. This highly selective presentation concentrates on critical transformations propelled by a vision held by its manager of an adult literacy laboratory/research center as the ultimate directional focal point that drove the ongoing operation of the program. Of central concern in this essay was less the ultimate destination of the program than an appreciation for the force field of its potentiality reinforced in the mind-set of its manager by a Deweyan concept of growth as the enhancement of experience through critical reflection. This Deweyan metaphor of growth, in turn, was mediated by what Harvey Graff (1979) refers to as the "literacy myth" that provides a more positive twist than Graff without discounting his ironic intent. While disclosing something of this energy field through the various programmatic transformations of the Reading Center, the essay also acknowledges some of the ambiguities as well as the evident empowerment inherent within this vision that marked the program's first decade.

We always live at the time we live and not at some other time, and only by extracting at each present time the full meaning of each present experience are we prepared for doing the same thing in the future. This is the only preparation which in the long run amounts to anything.

_____ John Dewey

The ambition of man to be something is always partly prompted by the fear of meaninglessness which threatens him by reason of the contingent character of his existence. His creativity is therefore always corrupted by some effort to overcome contingency by raising precisely what is contingent to absolute and unlimited dimensions. This effort, though universal, cannot be regarded as normative. It is always destructive. Yet obviously the destructive aspect of anxiety is so intimately involved in the creative aspects that there is no possibility of making a simple separation between them. The two are inextricably bound together by reason of man being anxious both to realize his unlimited possibilities and to overcome and to hide the dependent and contingent character of his existence.

_____ Reinhold Niebuhr

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Introduction

The Deweyan quote points to a key factor in the development of the Bob Steele Reading Center as it developed from a germ of an idea in the mid-1980s to one of the most cutting edge literacy sites in the LVA network a decade later. That factor is the unleashing of potentiality as the underlying force that undergirded the transformation of the program through several critical incarnations. I linked such a felt sense of potentiality formally with Dewey's (1916, pp. 41-53) concept of growth defined as the enhancement of experience through the exercise of critical intelligence as a compelling heuristic to both grasp and shape the Reading Center's organizational culture.

Growth on Dewey's interpretation contains two dimensions, a productive component through the "extraction" of maximum potential within a given situation, and an aesthetic component in the "consummation" of experience into art (McDermott, 1981, pp. 525-573; Alexander, 1987). Such a self-realization ethic reflected some of the most profound aspirations of students and tutors at the Bob Steele Reading Center, which enabled many program participants to enact the "literacy myth" (Graff, 1979). Consider the following conversation between a student and myself (Demetron and Gruner, 1995, p. 58):

- George:** How strong is your motivation to continue?
Elaine: It's very strong.
George: What is the source that drives it?
Elaine: I want something. I want to do something; to have a goal. That's the motive. I want to go up in life.
George: You want to go up?
Elaine: To the top.
George: Where's the top?
Elaine: To be a nurse.

That sentiment, expressed in a variety of ways represented a dominant quest among students at the Bob Steele Reading Center. Such a climate of potentiality motivated not only the students, but represented a major organizational drive which shaped the program's development through major transformative stages during much of its first decade (Demetron, 1994; Demetron and Gruner, 1995). However "mythical" this perception of growth through literacy may be, it is the argument of this essay that such a belief played a significant, although ambiguous role in shaping much of the emotional, cognitive, social, and cultural climate of the program during its first decade. Without such "illusions," what William James refers to as a "A live hypothesis...which appeals as a real possibility to him to whom it is proposed" (Wilshire, 1984, p. 309), the program very well could have deconstructed under the depressing weight of "objective" reality. My objective in this essay is to unearth something of the phenomenology of key transitional events during the program's founding decade to provide the reader with a felt sense of the issues as I interpreted them. I want to examine the role of potentiality both as vehicle of program transformation and as a means of mediating and mitigating organizational and my own intrapsychic conflict.

In order to grasp something of such a force field, a historical overview of events surrounding the Center's founding may be useful. Although public documentation for this early history is scarce, as an observer-participant, I draw on a profusion of local knowledge, while recognizing that others may have different slants on this history.

Early History

The concept of a learning center was developed among the board and staff leadership of Literacy Volunteers of America-Connecticut (LVA-CT) in the early 1980s. LVA-CT was formed in 1972 and focused its first decade on the development of eighteen local affiliates across the state. In the LVA model the affiliates provide direct services while the state organization offers auxiliary support in training, public relations, fund raising, and other related areas.

Literacy Volunteers of Greater Hartford (LVGH) which in 1989 took over the management of the Bob Steele Reading Center, also formed in 1972. For a number of years LVA-CT raised the budget of LVGH until newly formed affiliates objected. Throughout the affiliates, but particularly so with LVGH, a parent-child metaphor colored at least certain important perceptions between the local and state organization. Several factors went into this, but among the most important included a divergent sense of how an ideal literacy program should be comprised. Grounded in the ethos LVA founder, Ruth Colvin, the early pioneers of LVGH emphasized the spirit of volunteerism with a program operated essentially by upper middle class women who used their homes to carry out various managerial functions of data collection, tutor support, and the matching of students and tutors. In its initial stages, the LVGH program was completely decentralized with students and tutors meeting as isolated dyads, typically in libraries and other locations throughout the greater Hartford community. This LVA based model characterized the way the vast majority of local affiliates operated in Connecticut through the early 1980s.

LVA-CT operated out of a different organizational culture, which reinforced its role as the "parent." It exuded an ethos of "professionalization" which it desired to foster at least among the larger affiliates, often without a substantial grasp of local culture. Unlike the local affiliates, LVA-CT possessed the resources to develop a full time paid staff, which included an executive director, field services personnel, clerical support, and eventually a director of development. Although local affiliates had representation on LVA-CT's board of directors, the major sources of authority and legitimization within the agency stemmed from the corporate sector and the Connecticut Bureau of Adult Education. Both of these entities stressed the importance of statistical accountability, a management by objective organizational structure, and a functional literacy orientation geared to "re-tool" the workforce to meet the "informational" needs of the post-industrial economy (Adult Education Study Committee, 1985; Alamprese, 1988, 1989, 1993).

Much of the revenue raised by LVA-CT came in the form of grants, which required the state office to move in directions that differed from that of most of the local affiliates throughout the 1970s and 1980s. However, the more sophisticated affiliates shared certain affinities with LVA-CT in the embrace of a managerial, "corporate" vision while maintaining the volunteer ethos of Ruth Colvin as an important dimension of their organizational culture. Thus, while most of the affiliates stressed the centrality of the

student-tutor relationship, often from a maternalistic perspective, the state organization emphasized a "systems" approach. The latter prioritized management over pedagogy and identified the center of organizational power and legitimization with staff and key board members. This was buttressed by a "professional" ethos, which subordinated volunteers and students within the iconography of the state office's organizational culture, notwithstanding LVA's rhetoric, which placed the students at the top of the agency's organizational chart. As founder Ruth Colvin put it, "[t]he most important person in the LVA organization is the student, next is each individual tutor" (Colvin, 1992, p. 81). The gap between this ideal and the reality of practice has generated considerable conflict within the cultural politics throughout the LVA network.

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In the broadest of socio-cultural terms, the conflict of interest and values within the LVA network in Connecticut may be described as that between the old Yankee traditions of benevolence, charity, and voluntarism on the one hand against the interests of the managerial class on the other hand. Conflict over pedagogy, funding, and organizational development has had their foundation in these cultural tensions which became defined through a pervasive parent-child metaphor. Such a relationship proved functional to a degree, but generated considerable conflict and a certain level of co-dependency that inhibited the development of a more interactive LVA network in the state. The relationship between the affiliates and the state office never really jelled and in 1998, LVA-CT disbanded.

It was within this tense climate that the Bob Steele Reading Center was formed in Hartford in 1986. The idea for a centralized learning center surfaced within LVA-CT in the early 1980s, which presented it to LVGH for consideration. In the LVA system only the local affiliates provide direct services. To the state office, also located in the capital city, Hartford seemed the only reasonable location for such a center. It was also the most likely place where funding sources would be found. Setting up such a center in Hartford, then, would enable LVA-CT to exercise some control over the program that it felt it would need, given the fledgling structure of the local affiliate.

The local agency declined to move forward on pursuing this initiative on the grounds that it lacked the resources to finance and manage such a program. The state organization went forward, nonetheless, in large part because staff believed that such a model would serve as a viable way of providing support services to students and tutors. LVA-CT staff also believed that such a center would help move LVGH toward the more professional model that the state agency deemed essential for program efficiency and organizational survival in a major urban context.

These efforts ultimately proved successful and in November 1986, the Bob Steele Reading Center opened with the assistance of a ten-year \$50,000 seed grant from the 1080 Corporation. LVA-CT, which procured the financial support, would manage and finance the program while tutoring hours at the Center would be reported to LVGH. A program director and VISTA Volunteer with strong community activist leanings were hired to operate the Center. The Center was located at the Moylan Alternative High School in a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood in Hartford's southwest end. LVA-CT sought to develop the program as a neighborhood reading center, which would serve students and draw on staff and volunteer resources in the immediate local of the school. The Center's first director set up an advisory committee comprised of representatives of Moylan School, social service agencies in the neighborhood, and LVA-CT and LVGH staff. The VISTA volunteer, who eventually became the second director, spent considerable time creating linkages between the Center and various schools, head start centers, and social service agencies in the neighborhood. She particularly made a strong effort to link the Center with various Hispanic neighborhoods around the school.

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I came on board in September 1987 as the third director and de-emphasized the centrality of the neighborhood concept. Instead, I concentrated more on developing the instructional program. The executive director of LVGH and I worked closely to identify students and tutors throughout LVGH who might enjoy the support of a centralized site. Drawing upon the rationale written in the initial grant proposal for the Center along with my own reconstruction of the mission, I redefined the purpose of the Bob Steele Reading Center as the following: to provide a staff operated, materials rich centralized site to support students and tutors in individual tutoring matches; to develop programs and projects in small group tutoring, writing, and in other innovative instructional areas, and to serve as a model program for other LVA affiliates particularly in urban or highly populated suburban areas. Much of this was explicit in the original vision articulated by LVA-CT in 1985 and 1986.

The primary difference was the elimination of the neighborhood concept and my stronger orientation to pedagogical development. Nonetheless, LVGH's Manager of Outreach, Steve Bender's path breaking work in the formation and expansion of the affiliate's Family/Community Literacy programs in the early 1990's, with a multitude of sites located throughout Hartford, may be read as a reconstruction of the neighborhood concept. Personalities and events have brought LVGH into some very specific directions that contained some unanticipated twists and turns from the original vision, but there has emerged an underlying coherent urban vision, which has undergirded the program since the mid-1980s.¹

It is this underlying drive shaped by a mix of ideologies and visions empowered by the "literacy myth" that provided the energy for the creation of the reading center "pilot" model. The program in turn acted as a catalyst in the transformation of LVGH from a fledging volunteer managed program supported by minimal part time paid staff to a fully staffed urban oriented program. Through this transformation, the affiliate became engaged in cutting edge work in small group tutoring, the creation of learner-generated texts, and the proliferation of neighborhood sites supported in part by paid neighborhood tutors. Thus, in the ten-year transition from 1986-1996, the expansion of LVGH into a well run urban affiliate fulfilled the mid-1980s vision of the LVA-CT leadership. The development of the Bob Steele Reading Center represents an essential component of this broader story which extends beyond the purview of this essay, except for the traces that I am able to provide. Allow me to continue with the main narrative.

¹ I discuss the early history of the Bob Steele Reading Center in more depth elsewhere (Demetrian, 1993).

During the Moylan phase (1986-1989) the staff at LVA-CT viewed the Reading Center as a "pilot" program that may or may not have proven viable within the essentially decentralized LVA organizational structure and culture. By the end of this time frame, the Center had experienced modest growth in numbers of students served, but that was not the only reflection of its viability. An intangible factor emerged of an esprit de corps among students and tutors where sense of community began to develop even in the borrowed space and even in an essentially one-to-one tutoring program. The viability of the space, the accessibility of materials, and the presence of a staff person seemed sufficient to establish an inviting learning climate not usually available in the more common decentralized LVA program. Thus, the model began to bear fruit.

Opportunity to recruit several workshop leaders and tutor support personnel among the Center's volunteers for the entire LVGH operation represented major, unanticipated outcomes of the program. This bolstered the credibility of the program both with LVGH and LVA-CT and helped to place the development of the Center as a high priority within these agencies by early 1989. This legitimization represented a critical threshold, one that I deliberately sought as an antidote to the underlying tensions between the state and local agency over the Center that could have derailed the program (Demetrian, 1993).

Thus, a dawning recognition emerged within both programs that the "pilot" stage of the Center was over and that the program worked. In order to stabilize the program many of us involved argued the need for a permanent location. Certain decision-makers within the local affiliate also desired better headquarters for its operation. Through the efforts of the affiliate and state agency leadership, a two-year Hartford Foundation for Public Giving grant was obtained. This supported the transfer of the Reading Center's supervision from LVA-CT to LVGH and the move of the program along with the administrative office of the affiliate to 56 Arbor Street, in the ethnically mixed Parkville neighborhood. The grant also included an agreement that within a five-year period LVGH would assume total fiscal responsibility for rent and for the Reading Center manager's salary, with LVA-CT playing a gradually decreasing fiscal role each year.

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It was this legitimization, in particular, not only of the Center, but also of LVGH that galvanized both programs into an imminent expansive mode. During the early 1990s, the role of the Center shifted from that of catalyst to affiliate sustainer that enabled other dimensions, particularly Steve Bender's work to expand into one of the more innovative family literacy program in the state. This, in turn, provided further legitimization of the affiliate's expansive energies. In 1992 as a result, the Board of Directors hired Susan J. Roman as full time Executive Director. She, in turn, has fulfilled the quest for organizational professionalism and the shift in the agency's from its founding suburban to an urban design desired by the state leadership since the mid-1980s. Synergistically, the growth of the affiliate provided the institutional infrastructure for the transformation of the Bob Steele Reading Center described below.

While this may seem like uncritical description, there was much within the environment surrounding the Bob Steele Reading Center and LVGH that could easily have derailed the progression described above preventing the crossing of critical thresholds. Yet what happened instead was the creation of a force field that transformed not only the Reading Center program, but also LVGH, moving the affiliate toward what eventually has become its very conscious urban design. The potentiality unleashed via the "literacy myth" has galvanized a powerful presence in the city of Hartford in a program that is both cutting-edge and perplexed by persisting problems. Still, a forward momentum driven by a pragmatic optimism has gripped the agency leadership based both on a quest for social justice and a belief that intelligent adult literacy education represents a pathway toward its fulfillment. The Reading Center story, beyond its inherent value, provides a microcosmic examination of the transformation of Literacy Volunteers of Greater Hartford. That broader narrative remains to be written.

In the affiliate at-large, the Center played a stabilizing role between 1990-1995. Within its own life-history, it experienced its most expansive growth in terms of numbers of students served and in its prodigious programmatic achievements in small group tutoring, student writing anthologies, and in the development of a major oral history project with Trinity College. The program also spawned two books of student interviews and a collection of tutor essays and interviews which provided material for direct instruction, in-service training sessions for tutors, and as primary documentation for an on-going research project in which I have been engaged for some time. While some of these initiatives, particularly group tutoring and student writing are well established practices at least among progressive literacy sites, it is the cumulative dimension of the Reading Center's programs and projects that have placed it on the cutting edge. What is particularly relevant for this essay, however, is not so much the content of the program than an elucidation of the energy field through which it achieved its various transformations. Lest this seem overly optimistic and "celebratory," I draw out something of the enduring ambiguities in pursuit of the "literacy myth" as well as the evident areas of growth and transformation that provided the spark of the program's motivation and vitality. In this, I am not attempting to narrate the story of the Center itself, but rather, critical aspects of the motivational dynamics that have influenced me which in turn engendered and drew upon powerful sources of energy inherent within the "literacy myth" refracted through Dewey's concept of growth.

It is through this "myth" that I constructed the imagery of an adult literacy laboratory/research center as the ultimate focal point, what Dewey refers to as an "ends-in-view" toward which I aimed as a personal symbol in shaping the direction of the Bob Steele Reading Center. This directional vision influenced the program as a whole, although not exactly as I envisioned it in my more utopian moments. Throughout my tenure, I was less interested in achievements per se than that the created learning climate stimulated maximum growth at each moment in the program's life. In Dewey's terms I sought the extraction "at each present time" within the various phases of the life-cycle of the program, "the full meaning of each present experience" as "the only preparation which in the long run amounts to anything" (Dewey, 1938, p. 49). My desire to stimulate a learning and organizational climate propelled by streams of continuous growth was fortified by my reading of Dewey. On his account:

[T]he ideal of growth results in the conception that education is a constant reorganizing or reconstructing of experience. It has all the time an immediate end, and so far as activity is educative, it reaches that end- the direct transformation of the quality of experience, and in the sense that its chief business of life at every point to make living thus contribute to an enrichment of its own perceptible meaning (Dewey, 1916, p. 76).

The learning climate of the Center during my administration proved more ambiguously shaped than this Deweyan vision. Nonetheless, it provided what seemed like a coherent course of direction that linked my internalization of the "lived experience" of the program with an underlying philosophical rationale that promised the realization of a powerful praxeology. Although I would later realize more tension in this vision than I originally perceived, it nonetheless unleashed creative heuristic energies that sparked the program's innovations described below. The vision as I conceived it may be summarized in the following manner:

The essential...idea of education as continuous reconstruction... is that it identifies the end (the result) and the process.... It means that experience as an active process occupies time and its latter period completes its earlier portion; it brings to light connections involved, but hitherto unperceived. The later outcome thus reveals the meaning of the earlier, while the experience as a whole establishes a bent or disposition toward the things possessing the meaning. Every such continuous experience or activity is educative, and all education resides in having such experiences (Dewey, 1916, p. 78).

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It is not the argument of this essay that "growth" unfolded in any continuous evolutionary way, as the complex relationship between the Center, particularly on my reading of its long-term destination, and the broader goals of LVGH contained at times considerable conflict and often simply a divergence of goals. I wanted to probe the depths of the many "meanings" of the Reading Center experience, through an analysis of the various narrative voices of program participants, for example, while searching for ways to infuse such knowledge back into the core program. It would be through such a proliferation of insight, I hoped, that the "meaning" of literacy would become articulated and communicated throughout the Reading Center, the affiliate, and the broader LVA network. I realized certain limitations of such a vision that relied principally upon the elucidation of consciousness that did not include a vivid regard for the social contexts of the lives of adult literacy learners. Yet in the "real world" dynamics in which I was enmeshed that vision represented my singular passion by which I felt I could make my most significant impact. I pursued it unrelentingly, therefore as my internalization of the "literacy myth" which tapped into the belief systems of many students and tutors.

Meanwhile, as LVGH became increasingly sophisticated, the broader affiliate need as defined by significant agency players, consisted of a quest for legitimacy, "normalization," and "accountability" that would satisfy the interests of funders as well as other "major" social players in the greater Hartford community. This came home to me in a striking way when a major power broker on the Board of Directors prevented me from pursuing a small grant to support a qualitative assessment project designed to articulate something of the phenomenology of the Reading Center experience. In impeding me, he reasoned that fiscal resources in the city were limited and that the affiliate should tap into granting support in more "primary" areas of need. Unless I found compelling ways to narrate the Center's story in a manner that evoked something of its unique organizational and learning culture, I feared the program could still become absorbed within the prevailing ethos of "functional" literacy defined by the market realities of the "post-industrial" economy (Chisman, 1989, 1990). It is important to stress that both this individual and I were operating out of the "literacy myth." It's just that we interpreted it in some markedly different ways.

The Family Literacy program, developed by Steve Bender, also engendered significant organization energy in expanding the social environment of the affiliate to become increasingly responsive to the needs of the African-American and Latino groups in the city which represent the primary racial and ethnic constituencies of Hartford. This initiative played a major role in the transformation of the affiliate from a suburban ethos to a very conscious urban design, shaped in turn by a quest for greater cultural diversity and programmatic innovation. This, too, was a reflection of the "literacy myth" based again on a vision different than my own emphasis on the articulation of the "consciousness" of students, individually and collectively.

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While ideally, social and intellectual sources of motivation should operate in concert, especially in such an invigorating environment like LVGH, in the "real world" of adult literacy provision where fiscal resources, psychic energy, and time remain scarce, this is not always the case. This is not, of course, to deny its potential, as some such realization is essential for the long term vitality of the program that could build on the pursuit of "growth" in its multitudinous social as well as psychological dimensions. Such a dynamic, in fact, could serve as the very means of stabilizing an enduring organizational and learning climate. Yet in the environment that existed in Hartford during the early 1990s my concept of a laboratory/research center proved a hard sell. This was due in part to the limitations of my own political and interpersonal skills, but more fundamentally, perhaps to the persuasiveness of these other critical areas of agency "growth" that linked the "literacy myth" with more articulated public voices and aspirations than my phenomenological probing could achieve. The fact that I felt compelled to make explicit my vision of the Reading Center represented a certain literalism which acted as a compensation against the ambiguous milieu in which I sought its realization. By "speaking," I could claim the authenticity of my voice, which was certainly better than the autistic ruminations reverberating in my consciousness. Yet I lacked the power to garner the resources to bring the vision to fruition against the press of more "realistic" and socially evident concerns of my colleagues. The ultimate outcome of such tension was an increasing psychic withdrawal from large aspects of the program's activities in order to concentrate energies on probing the depth of its experience, or at least a portion of it, clearly on my own limited, but far from unimportant understanding. This enabled me to bring out aspects of the program's experience that would otherwise remain mute. Yet over time, this effort also resulted in considerable social isolation from the on-going dynamic of the program.

It is useful to keep this broader ambiguous context in mind in assessing the "deep structures" that shaped at least my participation within the Bob Steele Reading Center. It is also critical to grasp such ambiguity as only one dimension in the organizational culture of the program. The other major dimension was the energy that was unleashed at the Bob Steele Reading Center through such an effort in "consciousness raising" and the creative transformations that the beckoning image of the laboratory/research center spawned, well beyond the recesses of my imagination. The remainder of this essay will focus on the duality of such experience through an "inner" exploration of the program's various transformations.

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Small Group Tutoring

With both trepidation and hope the Board of Directors of LVGH anticipated the expansion of the Bob Steele Reading Center housed in its new environment. As the program manager on site, I realized I had considerable freedom to operate, but also knew I had to deliver some tangible outcomes (particularly program growth) in a short period of time. Although I realized the potentiality for extensive programmatic development that the new environment afforded, the means required for it did not appear immediately accessible. Opportunities would have to emerge from the environment and my job would be to capitalize on them. I sought to extract "the full meaning of each present experience" wherever I could.

The vast influx of students became one of the primary vehicles for programmatic growth and transformation. At the time, around 1990, I sensed that the Reading Center required a deeper commitment from the affiliate. I pressed the issue by increasing the program with significant numbers of students. I sought to establish what for me would be a creative instability at the Center as a means of galvanizing affiliate resources, primarily tutors, but also increasing psychic investment among the program's stakeholders in order to meet the needs of expansive growth. Through the energized force field that this stimulated, we created an extensive small group tutoring program which in itself marked it as one of the more innovative literacy sites in southern New England and throughout the LVA network.

The proliferation of small group tutoring enabled us to accommodate a four-fold growth in student population within an eighteen-month period. In addition to this expansion, it was our expectation as well that small group tutoring would strengthen instruction by providing students with additional time to study, opportunity to work with tutors often exhibiting markedly differing approaches to literacy, and ability to collaborate with each other. As one student put it, "The group lets you share your experiences with other people. You tell the group about your ideas and the group tells you about their experiences, too" (Demetrian and Gruner, 1995, p. 35). Expressing the same sentiment, another student put it this way, "You talk to other people and learn something you don't learn one-on-one; sharing life experiences" (Demetrian, and Gruner, 1995, p. 44). These bare statements provide little of the intellectual, emotional, and social substance of the small group tutoring program that we created at the Bob Steele Reading Center (Demetrian, 1996, 1999). Yet they telegraph something of its dynamic influence on the lives of students in opening up collaborative educational opportunities that otherwise would have been closed.

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At the end of the Moylan period, the program supported two small groups, one in Basic Literacy (BL), the other in English as a Second Language (ESL). It was my intention to expand this component of the program once at Arbor Street, although I had no clear plan in mind specifically how this would happen. I had faith however, in the potentiality of the environment to stimulate opportunities for which I waited.

Resources soon opened up. In January 1990 a tutor asked for an additional assignment. I suggested the development of a Writing Clinic, which we began to expand with additional tutors. The atmosphere proved somewhat chaotic, but also invigorating. Students slipped in and out of the Writing Clinic even as they participated more regularly in the other aspects of the program. This was so, I think because the creative energies the Clinic unleashed pushed students to the edge of their expanding learning experiences. While that proved energizing, its improvisational learning climate may have proven too challenging, interfering with a greater sense of order that most students believed they needed. Initially, the lead tutor tried to individualize instruction, yet eventually, tutors established a regular pattern of instruction that included the use of common material. This model, initially established at the Writing Clinic, remained the prevailing instructional mode of the small group-tutoring program at the Bob Steele Reading Center. It has resulted in a profoundly collaborative atmosphere. It also represented a pragmatic compromise between student need for an individualized approach on the one hand, even within a group context, against an equal need among tutors for manageability. Through team tutoring, a collaborative atmosphere, and selection, often, of interesting readings on a wide array of themes, this pedagogical format proved highly responsive to the *generalized* literacy needs and aspirations of many students.

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Because students and tutors continually entered and exited the sharply focused intent of the Writing Clinic gradually waned. That program did not obtain the critical mass to establish its peculiar vision against a more flexible instructional program that proved more responsive to the flow of students and tutors in and out of the Clinic. The difficulty of writing at the adult basic literacy level requires a major commitment of time and psychic energy among students and tutors. It is easier and more "natural" to focus on reading and discussion while allowing writing opportunities to slip by. Eventually, the sharp focus of the Writing Clinic waned, but only after an experimental 18 months which produced a prodigious quantity and quality of student texts particularly through the leadership of Sharon Smith and Sheila Lehman.

Programmatically this improvisational experiment established a well defined time slot to launch the advanced Monday evening Basic Literacy small group tutoring program that continued to feature writing, but not as the overarching purpose of the instruction. By 1991 Teri Fuller joined the Monday group to work with more beginning level students. With Sharon and Sheila facilitating the still existing Writing Clinic, two levels of general topic groups began to emerge in response to the pressing need of student growth. Committed tutors ventured forth with considerable emotional support and enthusiasm from staff. Yet they received only minimum support, through the tutor training workshop, occasional in-service sessions, informal discussions with me or other colleagues, and through the framework of an emergent group instruction model that featured the selection of a common text, with discussion, skill work, and sometimes writing built into each lesson. We relied principally upon the creativity of the group tutors to develop their own innovative teaching approaches and concentrated on appropriate recruiting. I pitched in where needed to take over time slots whenever there was a gap.

]To return to the historical chronology, opportunity struck again to further develop the small group program in 1990 as Dawn Johnson, a college student, contacted us about taking on a summer internship. I was impressed with her enthusiasm, commitment, and intelligence and suggested she form a family literacy group program on Tuesday evenings. Although developments unfolded differently than Dawn had expected (men instead of young mothers, among other things dominated the group), she exhibited remarkable creativity in establishing a direction that contained considerable potential for chaos and disintegration. After Dawn completed her assignment, Judy Pronsky, who remained in her Tuesday evening position for more than five years, took over. Expanding upon Dawn's pioneering efforts, Judy brought great stability to the program through her steadfastness, competence, and the phenomenal rapport she developed with the students. Building from a similar experiential framework as Dawn, Judy transformed the specific family focus into a general literacy session that better accommodated the fluidity of the environment. Gradually, the permanent structure of the Bob Steele Reading Center's small group tutoring program was coming into focus with general topic oriented groups at different reading ability levels.

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The group-tutoring program developed quickly thereafter. A student who had recently completed his GED expressed how difficult the process of preparation had been. Two other students desired to study for the test, but were not prepared to enter the local Adult Basic Education (ABE) program given their sense of attachment to the Reading Center and still limited literacy skills. After thinking about Danny's difficult experience I decided to initiate what I deliberately referred to as a pre-GED group. I stressed with the students the importance of understanding the requirements of the exam and provided much slow-paced practice in the test taking areas. I emphasized that the purpose of the group was not to prepare students to take the test, but to equip them to enroll in a regular GED program. I worked with the group for several months until Bruce Franklin took over. Eventually several students joined, although attendance lacked sufficient consistency to enable students to build their skills as systematically as they needed to effectively enter into a GED program. Bruce identified the difficulty in the following way:

I haven't actually developed a strategy. I've just tried to respond to ... what conditions there are, as our game plan.... So we don't really have much continuity with our goals. The goal initially was to get ready for these tests, and now I think we're just trying to develop a critical mass: to keep the attentive members involved and to attract other prospective members. And the material itself that we're supposed to cover, you know, the five different substantive areas, is so far-reaching, that it's hard really to [focus upon].

Bruce stayed with it for about a year. Soon after he left, the pre-GED preparation group shifted into the Thursday evening advanced Basic Literacy group that became a permanent feature of the program. Thus a general pattern emerged of initially specific topic oriented groups which gave a symbolic crystallization to the early history of the small group program that ultimately became transformed into general literacy groups as an experiential response to the constraints and opportunities of actual conditions. This latter pattern still remains in place almost three years after I left the program. The reason this is so, I believe, is because students and tutors find considerable value in a flexible, open-entry small group tutoring program which resonates more compellingly with their own (students and tutors) diffusive, complex goals and life situations that inhibit a more systematic, topic-centered approach from taking hold.

At first, the program supported a single group (sometimes with multiple tutors) each evening, which eventually evolved into beginning and higher level groups. By 1992 the primary structure of the small group-tutoring program came into place. Both in BL and ESL students were able to cycle through the program three evenings per week either at the beginning, intermediate, or advanced levels. In 1990, the Center also began offering group tutoring on Saturday mornings, thus helping to create the weekly cycle of activity that still characterizes the Reading Center program.

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Ingrid Arrojo who led the Saturday Basic Literacy group tutoring program for three years described a sense of the energy that she both brought to and derived from the Center:

For three years after every Saturday lesson I leave here and I'm exhausted. I go down stairs and sit in my car for ten or fifteen minutes and listen to the radio because I can't drive. But at the same time I'm very energized because half my brain's asleep and the other half's going about 90,000 miles per hour trying to figure out, "Well, this was a great lesson which created a lot of energy. How can I keep that going?" Or, "This lesson did not fly. What can I do next week to rescue this and still get the learning task I want across in a way that's not going to turn people off and put them to sleep?" So I'm constantly thinking about my tutoring (Demetrian, 1996, pp. 192-193).

Her sense of intellectual curiosity characterized much of the program as a whole among tutors and students.

A long time student of the program, Darrell, put it this way about the small-group tutoring program:

...I was speaking with the tutors right after we read. They say do we know what we're reading about. And that's opening up a conversation. And, it was working. Some people grasp it very fast, some people, you know, grasp it kind of slow. But it's good for all of us to get to understand, because you need to understand what you read. It's very important (Demetrian and Gruner, 1995, p. 67).

The small group-tutoring program emerged first as a response both to need and opportunity. Its development stirred a degree of chaos and some false starts. When I left the Reading Center in 1996, it had become the primary stabilizing force in the program even as we still groped to obtain a more coherent sense of how group tutoring works. That is, we were still experimenting, even as a significant number of tutors had become seasoned practitioners, who took on their assignments with considerable acumen. Implicitly, we "knew" the program worked, even as many of its participants realized that the need for further development remained continuous.

Although the environment required continual nurturing and refinement, what we had established at the Bob Steele Reading Center was a community of adult literacy learners (students, tutors, and staff) bonded by a powerful sense of purpose and vision. It was through the small group-tutoring program in particular that chords of friendship, mutual respect, and the continual quest for learning were most tightly woven. Small group instruction exists in many adult literacy programs. Its significance for this essay is that it was created as a new approach out of a broader organizational culture grounded in a tradition of one-to-one tutoring which exerted a powerful pull within LVGH that easily could have marginalized the emerging effort.

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Even though the founders of the Center anticipated that group tutoring would emerge at the new site, they had little idea of how this might take place. I have attempted to describe something of its dynamic creation. This included certain activity primarily of an improvisational nature that the Center's founders and affiliate supporters might not have approved, including bringing in some tutors who had not gone through the tutor training workshop. Yet I believed such steps were essential in order to integrate the program within the LVGH organizational culture as it existed around 1990. This was so because an evolutionary trajectory from LVA's one-to-one model did not contain sufficient dynamic force to reconstruct the environment in a collaborative mode. An organizational "paradigm shift" was required.

Given the affiliate's normative influence over the broader organizational culture, in which the Reading Center was so deeply enmeshed, it could have easily absorbed the work of the Center. That, I believe is what has happened to many fledging small group tutoring Basic Literacy programs throughout the LVA network. In Hartford it succeeded by establishing a threshold within the existing system which when activated attained the organizational legitimization the small-group tutoring program at the Reading Center needed. The Deweyan dynamic of growth articulated so cryptically in the essay's first epigraph, energized by the "literacy myth," represented the enduring force field, which both stabilized and empowered the program. Synergistically the Center's emerging critical mass played a significant role in facilitating the transformation of the affiliate from a suburban to an urban design with small group tutoring one of its critical features.

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Student Writing

Student writing at the Reading Center grew out of a similar dynamic that shaped the small group-tutoring program. That is a processual learning climate was nurtured by a Deweyan concept of growth as the enhancement of experience through the exercise of critical intelligence (Dewey, 1916, 1938), mediated, in turn, by the "literacy myth." On this reading, what was fundamental was not so much learning outcomes. More critical was the nurturing of a climate that enabled the expansion of critical intelligence to emerge through a "scaffolding," or bridge building capacity where students and tutors worked together to move through successive stages of development, however those were defined by particular individuals. Such a bridge building model characterized much of the Reading Center history both in its organizational development and unfolding instructional program (Demetrian, 1994).

This emphasis on development is particularly important in adult literacy where sense of "failure" in formal educational settings is so pervasive. An outcomes orientation not grounded in "growth" places an external standard of achievement both upon the program and upon emerging literacy learners that may not appear realistic within a given time frame in the learning "life-cycle," yet which may prove ultimately realizable given a consistently supportive learning climate.

Thus, during the Moylan period, I sensed the potentiality of what a literacy program could become. Yet I also realized that if I attempted to push factors beyond their continuously emergent development a sense of "reality" might then set in that could crush what might be interpreted as the utopian energies that I was seeking to progressively nurture. Therefore, I sought to proceed one step at a time, with an overall, but not highly specific vision in the expectation of creating certain critical masses that would propel the program forward in some visibly pronounced ways. Thus, a sort of force field of potentiality characterized not only the *modus operandi* of the program as a whole, but also the more specialized effort of fostering student writing.

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LVA promotes process writing as an integral aspect of literacy. Its training manual Tutor contains a full chapter on the topic (Cheatham, Colvin, and Laminack, 1993, pp. 76-97). Student writing anthologies and magazines abound in many literacy programs reflective of a progressive pedagogy that integrates whole language reading theory, collaborative learning, and process writing. The progressive credo on writing is clearly articulated in Tutor, which represents LVA's most formal position on all aspects of Basic Literacy instruction:

ONE OF THE THEMES OF THIS BOOK [original capitalization] is that we view language as a whole, consisting of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, as mediated through thinking. Furthermore, successful teaching programs recognize that the best teaching occurs when these language components are not taught in isolation from each other. Though this chapter is about writing, a great deal of emphasis is given to reading, speaking, and listening as they relate to the writing process (Cheatham, Colvin, and Laminack, 1993, p. 77).

I agree with every aspect of this statement and drew upon this expressed philosophy to promote writing. Yet the common practice at the Reading Center focused predominantly on reading. This was so, I believe, because writing in adult literacy programs remains problematic and at best, episodic even though it does happen and often, in an expressively profound manner. Writing is inordinately time consuming. It is not something that can be tacked on to the end of a lesson that the student can then complete at home. It requires, rather, a major investment of time. Writing takes much work and psychic investment, which invariably cuts into reading time. As one student related to me, "It's hard, George. I used to, but I don't write a lot" (Demetron and Gruner, 1995, p. 56). The challenge of writing in adult literacy settings may, although does not need to set up a profound ambivalence. It is a common axiom that student satisfaction requires a felt sense of success within each learning session. Engaging in the flow of reading by covering a set volume of text provides a sense of completion, however illusory, perhaps.

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For most students, this sense of moving forward is one of the most powerful sources of motivation achieved most readily through extensive reading which needs to remain a staple for any school based modeled literacy program such as the Bob Steele Reading Center. As that same student put it, "The most important" thing "is the reading":

No matter what it [the content] is, it's the reading. I like to do the spelling. Spelling is one of my problems. As long as I can read, I think I can learn to spell (p. 56).

As anyone may discern who has first hand knowledge of mainstream literacy programs, this is a representative statement that requires phenomenological probing if it is going to be explored in any depth (Fingeret and Danin, 1991, Demetrian, 1994). Any overlay of a writing program, therefore, needs to respect the importance students attribute to reading as a centerpiece around which to include additional instructional components. This is not a contradiction of the preceding statement from Tutor that focuses on the integration of the language components in the support of process writing. It is to argue that the on-going implementation of writing requires a more nuanced attention to the constraints and opportunities inherent within particular programs than any training manual can provide. To state it baldly, it takes a steely-nerved commitment among staff, tutors, and students to writing to overcome the many entropic forces that can easily derail the best of efforts and intentions. At the Reading Center we were able to encourage writing through various concentrated efforts which temporarily raised the threshold among significant numbers of students and tutors to include it as an integral part of instruction. To sustain such intensity requires considerable managerial attention and focus that we did not sustain despite the creation of three substantial anthologies of student writing. Writing became an important part of the program, but only vigorously promoted while constructing writing anthologies or when tutors or students were available who had a special affinity for it. Competing demands shifted energies elsewhere. Thus, a historical review (below) of the role of writing at the Bob Steele Reading Center illuminates important aspects not only of the program's pedagogy, but also its organizational culture.

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I had only a limited *formal* knowledge of process writing when I began at the Center in 1987, but instinctively sensed its critical potential function in an adult literacy setting. I gradually nurtured writing among students and tutors while at the Moylan setting in the late 1980s, realizing it needed to fit within the culture of the program if it was going to "work." I did so by encouraging occasional efforts at writing, then sharing those few pieces with other students and tutors, in part, as a stimulus to encourage additional writing efforts. I never attempted to force the issue, nor wanted to interfere in the more primary work of continuous reading. Still, I sensed if students learned to "crack the code" of writing, that would serve as an undeniable source of renewal which would carry the learning process into a new threshold. In facilitating this process, I identified my task as making the possibility of writing "visible" to students and tutors, then "marketing" what had been completed through the program. Writing would have to emerge, however, in its own time and place grounded in whatever force field of potentiality that might be constructed as part of a broader process of programmatic development. I was convinced that writing represented an important, although neglected dimension of the "literacy myth."

At the time of the move to Arbor Street in 1989 only a few student essays had been completed, but the new location (our own space) proved more conducive to student writing. The formation of the Writing Clinic played a major, early role in the fusion of the program's organizational and pedagogical dynamics, where a core of tutors and a large group of fluctuating students first took on the task of writing as a deliberate, central process of instruction.

Many of the essays in LVGH's first anthology, **Welcome To Our World** (Smith, 1991) came out of these Monday evening sessions. With variations a common strategy emerged. The first hour of instruction stressed reading and discussion of interesting texts, with the second devoted to the actual process of writing. I remain convinced that this integrated philosophy of learning stimulates the best approach to writing (Cheatham, Colvin and Laminack, 1993, pp. 77-99). Yet this necessitates considerable discipline and consistency among students and tutors since it is easy to slide by the thorny task of writing, to satisfy more immediate longings stimulated by successful reading and discussion sessions.

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Because of the unpredictability of student attendance and my desire to complete a collection of student essays leading to a book, I encouraged tutors to labor diligently with students to finish writing assignments within single sessions. Otherwise, much of the efforts would dissipate. I respect the openness of the writing process and recognize that much of the efforts are not meant necessarily to come to completion in a finalized publishable format (Cheatham, Colvin, and Laminack, 1993, p. 97). Yet I also realized the critical *organizational* role of closure that key projects played in our new experimental setting. Unless something tangible emerged like a book of student writings, the legitimacy of promoting writing as a significant instructional goal could have easily waned among students, tutors, and LVGH staff. Much of the writing that came out of this environment were early draft efforts, yet many pieces did express a richness and complexity of thought that represented, to use a Deweyan term, a "consummation" of experience transformed into art. Consider the following piece titled, *Proud to be a Nurse's Aide*:

The other day a friend asked me what I did for a living. I said I am a male nurse's aide in the hospital and nursing home. The person made a face and said, "Oh Lord, I would not do that for all the money in the world."

A lot of people think it is an awful job. Well, believe it or not, there is something special about this job. People depend on me. I not only care for them, I care about them. You see I like what I do.

My work is the kind that many sons and daughters can't or won't do. Somebody has to take care of the sick and old.

It takes a special person to do the work I do, and we are special people. I am proud of my work and proud that I care (Smith, 1991, p. 75).

The artistry of this essay enabled the author to examine his experience in a new light. Thus in writing, at least temporarily, this student re-invented himself toward a more positive self-image about the value of his work. That resembles what Dewey refers to as a "consummation" or an apotheosis of experience. The essay also had a visible impact on groups of students and with tutors whenever I drew on it to exemplify the depth of expression that adult literacy students often evoke through their "simple" prose.

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While adult literacy writing does not always reach such a "consummatory" climax, wherein on Dewey's reading, experience is transformed into art (McDermott, 1981, pp. 525-540), many times it does. When such a phenomenon is experienced, the writer however seemingly novice, experiences an aesthetic transformation that often plays a significant role in the enhancement of self-perception. A profoundly collaborative learning climate, a substantial body of work, a growing confidence among students and tutors about the feasibility of writing, and a model of instruction that fostered reading, discussion, and writing ensued from these early efforts.

This may not seem particularly noteworthy for someone looking at our program from afar given the profusion of learner generated texts that have been created at least at certain literacy programs. Yet in the "inner life" of the Bob Steele Reading Center this emphasis propelled a creative transformation of the program that not only legitimized writing as an on-going instructional practice, but also provided enhanced visibility and support for the Center among major affiliate stakeholders. Many students and tutors caught on to the enthusiasm that was sparking the program and sensed that something important was taking place. I consciously nurtured these organizational dynamics as part of a broader strategy to bring the program toward its "ultimate" destination as I was beginning to envision it toward the model of a regional adult literacy laboratory/research center as a logical progression of its "consummatory" energies. Student writing became a critical vehicle in its pursuit as well as an important value in its own right.

In 1990, LVGH received a grant from the Connecticut Department of Education to publish a book of student writings. Notwithstanding the growing body of work and the institutionalization of the Writing Clinic, the production of such a text remained a daunting task. At the time, the affiliate was not computerized. Moreover, we lacked an editor to take our many essays stuffed into folders to transform them into an attractive monograph. Affiliate resources proved scarce for this seemingly routine process, but the grant forced us to resolve these issues and to turn what seemed like an endless process into a finished product.

Fortunately for the program, Sharon W. Smith discovered the Reading Center. Sharon taught courses in literature at Saint Joseph College in West Hartford and recently came back from an academically oriented conference on literacy bursting with ideas that perhaps could be implemented within an adult literacy context. I agreed that the issues she had been addressing were similar to the ones we faced and looked forward to her participation in the program. She plunged into the area of writing and soon became the general editor of our student collection of essays. Thus, another critical moment came to pass at the Bob Steele Reading Center that opened up new space in the life of the program, a moment for which Sharon and I were clearly waiting.

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As a result of Sharon's editorial leadership, **Welcome To Our World: A Book of Writings By And For Students And Their Tutors** was completed in 1991. Many people among the LVGH community read this text which also provided a stimulus for additional student writing. It served as the focal point of many creative tutoring hours. It is an artifact of the program's cultural history. It also speaks volumes about the poignancy of the life experiences of adult learners, in their courageous trek toward literacy. If the long effort in writing preceding and leading up to its publication had not been undertaken, *despite* the difficulty of the task, this canonical text would not have been created and the Reading Center vision could very well have "stabilized" with small group tutoring.

Whether such stabilization would have proven better for the program than the trajectory of projects unleashed following **Welcome To Our World** is difficult to say. For better and worse, I gradually began to focus more on projects than on the group tutoring program. Over time this created a schism at least in my mind between various cutting edge projects discussed below that consumed my psychic energy and an increasing "normalization" of the small group tutoring program that began to operate on "its own" from which I gradually, although far from completely, distanced myself.

Notwithstanding this paradox, the writing that did ensue at the Bob Steele Reading Center spoke to a profoundness of experience and artistry that without the effort to produce the text, would have been lost to the program. I will conclude this discussion of **Welcome To Our World** with the following passage which is a tribute not only to the author, but also to her tutor who provided access to doors of knowledge that otherwise would have remained closed:

Just Life

My name is Laverne. This is my story. I want to sit down and think about this story I'm going to tell you. Playing in the streets was a game but it was life for me. Some people wouldn't understand that. But first, I would like to ask you, "Do you know how it feels to live in the streets?" I'm trying to tell you something about myself, but I have not learned how to do that. But, I'm a thinker.

I want to tell you about a man I knew. His name was Joe. He was my first teacher. But don't forget, I'm a thinker. Joe didn't teach me about the books. He was teaching me about life. He told me that I had to learn to read if I wanted something in life. I know that you can understand that.

In writing this, I don't want to sell you a dream, but I want you to know how good it feels to read a book and to understand it. It's like a first love (Smith, 1991, p. 56).

Laverne's essay is indicative of the power of poetic expression that pervades the pages of **Welcome To Our World**.

Notwithstanding the production of **Welcome To Our World**, the facilitation of student writing had never proven easy. It requires sustained attention among students, tutors, and staff and easily got subordinated to other important tasks. It remained subsidiary to the work of the vast majority of students who were motivated more by the dynamic flow of continuous reading that provided a sense of moving forward and completion. Still, the writing at LVGH flourished and is canonized in the publication of two more recent texts,

Voices From Around the World: Essays and Reflections By Hartford's Newest Residents (Demetrian and Lestz, 1995) and a second volume of **Welcome To Our World** (Demetrian, 1995). A critical mass of sorts was achieved where writing was viewed as a legitimate and at times, highly desirable activity among students and tutors. Thus, the struggle to promote writing continued throughout the time frame covered in this study. Even for those who chose not to write, LVGH's student generated texts provided a literature rich base to explore literacy as a meaning making phenomenon grounded in a range of life experiences to which adult new readers resonated with a high degree of empathy. Establishing such a learning climate was an important component of the Reading Center model, enabling the metaphor of literacy to resonate throughout its created products.

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The Oral History Project

Arguably, the creation of oral history texts in collaboration with Trinity College of Hartford was the most important single project during the first decade of the Bob Steele Reading Center. These prodigious texts consist of two types of books. The first was a one volume abridged collection of ten life histories for the intermediate literacy student (Smith, Ball, Demetron, and Michelson, 1993). The second was and a two-volume set consisting of thirteen unabridged oral histories for the general reader including advanced literacy student (Lestz, Demetron, and Smith, 1994). They cover broad life themes spanning the life cycle of LVGH Basic Literacy students culminating in the decision to enter the program. A stimulating introduction and conclusion by a professional historian frame the advanced text while the abridged text's introduction, written by a Ph.D. student in Reading, Writing, and Literacy focuses on pedagogy. In this essay, I emphasize the *evolution* of the project in order to disclose something of the force field that enabled it to emerge, although by way of passing it will not be possible to avoid mention of its content.

In its broad contours this project followed similar evolutionary trajectories of the organization development of the Center, the small group-tutoring program, and the program's various writing projects. That is, an idea was nurtured within the context of what seemed plausible until time and circumstances enabled it to come to fruition.

In this case, the process began with a call to our office from the Executive Director of the Hartford Consortium of Higher Education. The Consortium had been struggling with the thorny issue of poverty in Hartford and came to the conclusion that area colleges could make their most significant impact by concentrating on adult urban education. I was invited to speak to the Consortium Council. Largely through the initiatives of Professor Michael Lestz from Trinity College, Eddie Perez, a former Hartford community organizer, also at Trinity as a student outreach coordinator, and myself, a series of meetings were held that consisted of broad discussions between the two constituencies.

Several projects came out of these meetings, but the collection of oral history narratives between LVGH and Trinity College proved the most durable of them. The project had its immediate origins with a suggestion by Michael at one of the planning meetings between literacy providers and representatives of the Consortium, but at a deeper level flowed from the relationship he and I had established with each other. I was motivated by a powerful imagery of what the college community might represent in a potential crystallization of the Reading Center's long range vision.

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I was aware of the many roadblocks that could impede a sustained relationship between adult literacy providers and the Consortium as neither adult literacy nor adult education was part of the established curriculum of the city's private colleges, which made up the Consortium. In the stated Consortium interest in literacy I felt I had a tiger by the tail and held on tight for the ride wherever it might lead, doing everything I could to extract a sizable good from the relationship.

Fully aware of my precarious status, representing at best a marginal literacy program counting for little in the political culture of higher education among Hartford's private colleges, I "settled" for something within the span of my control. The oral history project in collaboration with Michael contained a compelling path breaking potential. These texts serve as an inestimable resource for literacy programs for instruction, tutor training, and broader agency-wide consciousness raising. They also provide the genesis for a penetrating cultural history of adult literacy in an urban context. While electrifying, the project proved daunting and complex.

Mike began working on an oral history composition with Derrick Matthews, a student highly committed to the long range vision of the Reading Center. Their evolving text served as a framework for other histories under construction. These initial taped interviews conducted by volunteers required considerable time from inception to completion of a finished transcription. A danger at this early stage was that the process required so much time that it very well could have become aborted, considering the many other compelling issues agency stakeholders faced. Beyond its inherent substantial value, I envisioned the project as a critical link in the long-range vision that I had constructed and very much an embodiment of its "consummatory" aesthetics. I had no intention, therefore, of allowing the project to falter.

Fortunately, Abul ("Artie") Rahman desired very much to contribute a large amount of time to the project and as a result of his efforts, three substantial interviews were completed. His work, combined with the other interviews underway, enabled us to turn an idea into a viable project that yet required sustained effort to bring it to fruition. The force field of potentiality intrinsic to the Reading Center's organizational and learning culture provided sufficient scaffolding during this early period to enable the project to move to its next stages of stabilization.

Within a year into the project, LVGH obtained a small grant from the Connecticut Humanities Council (CHC). The grant provided financial resources to enable Sharon Smith and Michael Lestz to more formally participate in the project as managing editor and oral historian specialist respectively. It also legitimized my role as project manager.

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The CHC grant required us to refine the project and to develop effective strategies of implementation. This resulted in two simultaneous tracks of development. Throughout the 1992-1993 academic year, Sharon oversaw the development of **Life Stories By and For New Readers**. Two volunteer tutors, Evelyn Ball, Gail Michelson, and I assisted Sharon in transforming raw transcripts into polished continuous narratives. What made this process particularly complex is that we created an abridged text that required considerable selectivity of content. We met numerous times, field tested various drafts, and shifted our editorial focus, partly in response to feedback from students and tutors who suggested a more standardized, "readable" prose.

We initially intended to keep the language as intact as possible with little or no editorial "intrusion" that might "sanitize" the texts. Since our major goal, however, was to create a *readable* text for new readers while maintaining the authenticity of the original interviews, we made certain, relatively minor adjustments in syntax and occasionally reconstructed the order of taped interviews to develop coherent, continuous narratives. This entailed an unavoidable fictive element. As we acknowledged in the introduction:

[O]ral narratives cannot simply and directly be transposed into written form. Rather, they need to be "translated" which inevitably calls for a certain degree of interpretation. Try as they might, interviewers and editors who collaborate with learners to create texts like these can never be invisible or anonymous (Smith, Ball, Demetron, and Michelson, 1993, p. v).

Notwithstanding this inevitable need to "translate," we believe, created an "authentic" narrative text that was accessible to intermediate level adult literacy students. We worked with the narrators as much as possible in the various editorial revisions, although most "trusted" our judgment and were more interested in the final product.

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Professor Lestz took the lead in the development of the full-scale narrative project through a seminar course at Trinity College on oral history methodology. Lestz prepared his students well with a reading list that included Theodore Rosengaten's **All God's Dangers** (1989), Studs Terkel's **Working** (1972), and several other widely read oral histories. Lestz also assigned literature on adult literacy and held one seminar session at the Reading Center. A real effort was made in this project to foster an interdisciplinary climate among the fields of history, composition theory, and adult literacy.

Six advanced undergraduates and graduate students took the course and each completed an oral history from initial transcript to finished narrative with a student from LVGH. Their work makes up a major portion of "**Reading the World: Life Narratives By Adult New Readers**", two volumes (Lestz, Demetron, and Smith, 1994). This text is an edited version of the complete transcriptions of thirteen students.

Lestz's course played a major role in the expansion of the project and in the stimulation of the interactive educative environment that made it possible to successfully complete. Two of the narrators, Derrick Matthews and Douglas Taylor, and I, gave talks at the seminar which provided Lestz's students with a "felt" reality based sense of what the project was all about. This felt sense was later characterized in the headnotes to the narratives written by one of the seminar's history students. After wondering about the relationship between "traditional historical methodologies" and the subjective experiences of the narrator, the college student had discovered, "An awakening had occurred the moment that Clarence began to speak that we are all participants in the flow of what we call history. It is inescapable since, in the final analysis, history is synonymous with the totality of human experience" (Lestz, Demetron, and Smith, 1994, p. 98, Volume II). Pushing this observation further, one might speculate on how such an interdisciplinary project could lay some ground work for the expansion of what is considered canonical in such a traditional academic discipline as history, which, in turn, could enrich literacy studies as well. This is gist for further development that I cannot expand on here. The full import of this project has yet to be extracted.

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The seminar students carried out their assignments with consummate skill and sensitivity. In all cases, the Trinity group and the participating LVGH students "connected." Along with the narratives they composed with their dialogue partners, the Trinity group took the lead in constructing highly illuminating headnotes, suggested above, that integrated key personal experiences of the narrators within the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which their lives have been embedded. Consider the blending of the personal and socio-historical described by S.P. Browning in his introduction to one of the narratives:

Walter...was repeatedly pulled out of school during the first and second grades until he left school for good. While his mother ordered him out, it is likely that she did so on the orders of the landowner. [Nicholas] Lemann [1991, p. 18] writes about the Mississippi delta, "the planter could and did shut down the schools whenever there was work to be done in the fields." His lack of schooling may account for Walter's often twisted sentence structure which, when combined with a Southern accent, makes his words particularly difficult to understand (Lestz, Demetron, and Smith, 1994, p. 56, Volume II).

"**Reading the World**" has been drawn upon extensively by advanced literacy learners at LVGH and enabled all of us connected to the affiliate to obtain a richer appreciation of the life experiences, intelligence, and at times heart-wrenching struggles that many adult new readers have endured. Many examples that illuminate the poignancy of the text could be drawn upon, but this time consider Walter's own account of his harrowing upbringing:

You see, my momma married again. He [Walter's step-father] didn't want me to come to his house. I must have been eighteen to nineteen years old [when I left]. So I left there and moved and didn't go back. I slipped back there [occasionally]. I was about eighteen years old as far as I can remember. And, uh, then I stayed in this woods, found a big old log. I cleaned the log out to make sure there was nothing in it. After I got through cleaning out the big log, I built me a big old campfire..., then I turned around and got me a blanket. I slipped it off from my house. Took the blanket and wrapped myself up in the blanket...and slid down the log..... I stayed in there long until, uh, about daylight.... Then I went down to see what they have...to find, to get me something hot to drink. It didn't make no difference at that time: brew, home brew, wine, I didn't care. All I wanted was the feeling out of me (Lestz, Demetron, and Smith, 1994, p. 59, Volume II).

While it remains all too easy for those of us who work with adult literacy learners to slip into our perception of them as "simply students," this anthology offers another vision. Their struggles when reflected against ours (those who teach them how to read and write), speak both to our common humanity and to the vast injustices that characterize the social, economic, educational and racial experiences between this culture's middle and underclass. That this anthology serves as text for adult literacy learners, represents an effort, small though it is, to establish at least certain chords of empathy between groups of people who often know little about each other's social worlds. However pervasive student generated texts may be at least within progressive literacy programs, it is doubtful that there are more than a few texts of such poignancy and depth as **Life Stories** and "**Reading the World.**" These texts not only emerged out of the organizational and learning climate of the Bob Steele Reading Center, but also contributed significantly to its cultural depth. Just as importantly they point toward a potential that seems always a bit beyond the current horizon in the continual probing of the meanings of literacy among *all* the stakeholders who are absorbed by the phenomenon of adult literacy education.

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The Program and its Projects

As is evident by this description, I had exerted a strong project focus at the Reading Center since 1993 with the stabilization of the small group-tutoring program. I have done so in no small measure in order to pursue the trajectory of my own "growth", as I have perceived it. Yet I believe this is more than solipsistic longing, although I cannot deny the compelling pull that such an impulse had on me. However "narcissistic" this impetus (Lasch, 1978; Leinberger and Tucker, 1991), I believe I have built upon certain creative energies unleashed via the "literacy myth" through project expansion to draw out critical aspects of the Reading Center's intellectual and cultural life that without such effort would not have come forth. In pursuing the multiplicity of projects that I have, my objective was as much to mirror a prototype of what a literacy program could become as to contribute to the concrete life of the Bob Steele Reading Center. Such a prototype remained latent in the sense that anything like the "full" implications of such a model proved beyond our purview, notwithstanding the prodigious work we did accomplish. Moreover, a profound ambiguity accompanied much of this project focus since what may be of value to the "field" may or may not serve the best interests of the program.

In this, I acknowledge the tension-laden value of the projects for the program, particularly in an era of limited psychic, staff, and fiscal resources. Certain individuals connected with the program argued that my intense project focus interfered with the more desirable good of program stabilization upon which I should have concentrated more than I did, such as student-tutor matching, tutor support, and testing. It is not that I ignored these, far from it, but they did not galvanize my most consuming interests in the latter years. Moreover, at times I felt inadequate in attempting to manage the more routinized responsibilities of the program. At least *in part*, therefore, the intense project focus served as a compensatory mechanism for my own self-perceived limitations. In this tension, the Niebuhrian epigraph at the beginning of this essay seemed to speak compellingly to my existential situation, particularly the following:

The ambition of man to be something is always partly prompted by the fear of meaninglessness which threatens him by reason of the contingent character of his existence. His creativity is therefore always corrupted by some effort to overcome contingency by raising precisely what is contingent to absolute and unlimited dimensions. This effort, though universal, cannot be regarded as normative. It is always destructive. Yet obviously the destructive aspect of anxiety is so intimately involved in the creative aspects that there is no possibility of making a simple separation between them. The two are inextricably bound together by reason of man being anxious both to realize his unlimited possibilities and to overcome and to hide the dependent and contingent character of his existence (Niebuhr, cited in Rasmussen, 1991, pp. 140-141).

Throughout my attempt to embrace the "literacy myth" via the Deweyan vision of "growth" I was always aware of this Niebuhrian anxiety rooted in my own understanding of twentieth century-Christian theology. Yet through the formation of the small-group tutoring program, I was able to *subordinate* this tension by focusing on the Center's profoundly collaborative learning environment. Once the group tutoring program stabilized, the social energy which fostered and sustained it did not transfer over, at least to anything like the same degree, into project work where my psychic and creative energies were moving. This very well may have been due to the limitations of my own pedagogical acumen as to anything *inherent* within the program itself. In any event, with

the Center's stability established through the small group tutoring program and more visible activity throughout LVGH emerging in the family literacy program, the cutting edge distinction of the Center's vision seemed in danger of becoming diffused. My pursuit of projects, then, was partially motivated to keeping the Center's distinctive pedagogical environment at the center of the affiliate's collective consciousness and also to make inroads in the "field" which I hoped would strike a responsive chord "back home."

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Discussion beyond my personal "obsessions" also bears merit. We have examined the Center's work in student writing and in the creation of oral history narratives. Various volunteers also contributed to other projects in the areas of program evaluation, portfolio construction, the development of an experiential counseling and referral program, and in the creation of a book of learning interviews of students at the Reading Center (Demetrian, 1996). College interns accomplished this work which enabled the program to extend its focus toward some of the more cutting edge innovations in the field even as certain projects did not achieve overwhelming success. All of this activity helped to move at least certain aspects of the program toward the "consummation," on my reading, of its vision as a regional and national laboratory/research center through the Deweyan imagery of "growth." However, that "end-in-view" remained far from realized and highly problematical, grounded as it was all too much in the meandering of my solipsistic imagination.

Yet what is important is not so much a realized end, but the processes unleashed in its pursuit leading toward a viable learning environment for students and tutors. This program had struggled valiantly, although not always successfully in the areas of portfolio construction, qualitative assessment, the linkage of educational with social services, and teacher research. It achieved more success in the creation of its various in-house manuscripts that provided a tangible, consumable product which students and tutors could incorporate into their lessons. Consider the following representative statement by one student on the value of student-generated narratives:

It motivates you, you know? It makes you want to keep going and you feel that some way you're going to learn something for yourself. Sometimes you don't think you can learn until you see other people do it. So that motivates you a little bit. Well, a lot, I might say, a lot (Demetrian and Gruner, 1995, p. 60).

This evolving vision of the Reading Center as an adult literacy laboratory/research center was valuable both in stimulating practice *and* research. On the latter, such sites as the Reading Center can provide not only case-study material for academic theorists, although that remains important itself and largely untapped. An in-depth exploration of sites like the Center by *practitioners* could also contribute toward a reconstruction of theory wherein site-based experience becomes the interpretive vehicle of new ideas rather than merely an exemplification of existing concepts canonized by the academy (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1993). By 1996 such a potential was a far cry from any such realization although our prototypical efforts have left a roadmap for others to build upon (Lestz, Demetrian, and Smith, 1994; Demetrian, 1994; Demetrian and Gruner, 1995).

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The challenge for any laboratory/research center enmeshed in daily programming is to simultaneously engage in sustained intellectual activity while also paying close attention to the dynamics of the daily learning environment for the purpose of improving practice. This is a tall order, to say the least, yet theoretically possible as our prototype suggested, notwithstanding the ambiguities that we had not been able to untangle. Such work requires a comparable level of concentration and commitment to both practice and theory in a setting where the distance between them often appears unfathomable. What is required are some intricate relationships between praxeology (how theory and practice interact), traditional academic interdisciplinary theory, and teacher research ("systematic and intentional inquiry carried out by teachers" (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1993, p. 7). A confluence of such critical thought and reflective action might have enabled, for example, those of us connected to the Center, with our own diverse agendas, to have worked through some of these conflicting tensions, while coming to terms as well with how obdurate they are. Given the ineradicable-like nature of such tensions, it would be as inappropriate to give short shrift to theoretical work for the sake of some immediate gains in practice as it would be to shun the daily work at the Center for the sake of constructing, perhaps, some grand theoretical design. Both theorists and practitioners need to pursue the logical trajectories of their reasoning even as they search for common ground to build new praxeological space.

These issues which during my tenure, remained very much "in process," achieved a certain symbolic visibility in the relationship between the on-going tutoring program and its special projects. There was a complex relationship between them that seemed both synergistic and conflicting. All of the student generated material for the Center's projects emerged directly from its learning climate, whether through the instructional program or in interview sessions with students and tutors. Much of it, in turn, particularly the various anthologies, was integrated back into the program, which stimulated many literacy lessons. Thus, on a certain reading, there appeared a dynamic relationship between the core program and the Center's projects, simulative of the imagery of the laboratory/research center model.

Yet this was not quite the case even though there was more than a grain of truth in it. For there remained considerable tension, along with a certain creativity between on the one hand, the very desirable goal of program stability, and on the other hand, the innovative work of project stimulation. It is easy to overstate this since in fact new stimuli continued to invigorate the core program. Still, projects, at least during their construction stages at the Reading Center, only involved small numbers of students which often failed to impact the more pressing concerns of on-going instruction. During their constructive phases only the direct participants experienced their creativity, and only for brief periods of time. Yet they still required a great deal of commitment and psychic energy which sometimes drained concentration from the on-going work of the program.

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Notwithstanding this dilemma, personally witnessing twenty students simultaneously at work with LVGH's then latest book of writings, for example, demonstrated the potency of certain projects to stimulate the entire program. Given the initial project focus of the small group tutoring program, moreover, which then became more routinized over time, the relationship between the Center's staple programs and various projects proved anything but straightforward.

Still, in analyzing our history between 1990-1996 a sort of tension between the quest for program stabilization and project innovation seemed pervasive, notwithstanding certain moments of fusion experienced most directly in tutoring and in-service training sessions. This tension corresponded symbolically to the practical/theoretical dichotomy mentioned above, although the relationship between practice and theory and the staple programs and its projects need not remain sharply polarized.

Further advancement toward the laboratory/research concept if pursued will require a resolution of some of these tensions as the Bob Steele Reading Center is launched into its second decade. Such resolution would require extraordinary vigilance in a laboratory/research setting that reconciles both the needs of practice and research. To deny its possibility is to assume that reality is closed. To assume that it can be easily accomplished is to fly in the face of history.

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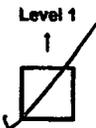
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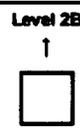
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