

Participation and Literacy:

Reflections on *Teaching Reading to Adults, A Balanced Approach*

by **Suzanne Hale**

I am a literacy practitioner with eight years experience in community development. My formal education is in theatre and mime and I hold an instructor's diploma earned in Fort Nelson, BC. I am bilingual in French, studied in Paris, and now live in Ottawa with my mother. Writing this makes me laugh. Not everyone lives with their mother.

I love literacy work because it requires the presence of my entire self. It is a synthesis of all my skills. If I had to say instinctively what I see at the centre of literacy education, what brings it all together, I would say – my choice as a practitioner, the choices of individual students and the choices of a community.

To my mind, the nature of literacy, right down to the acts of reading and writing, is based on the assumption of participation. To write something – anything – is to assume and anticipate the participation of a reader. Yet ironically, when we assume participation, we come very close to killing it. And so goes the riddle of literacy teaching.

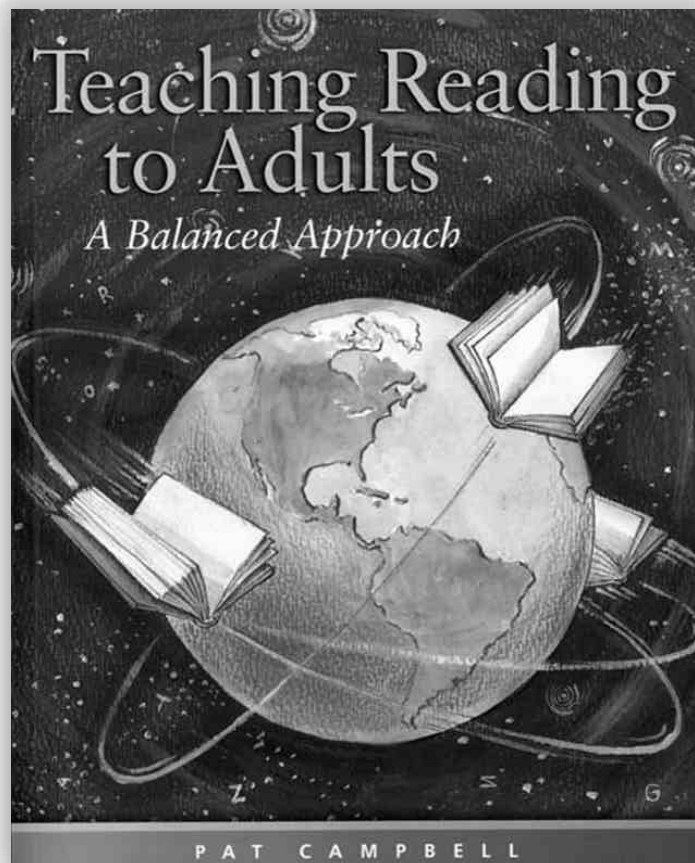
Literacy learning is so tied to the choice to participate that if we try to separate them they split and splatter like silvery balls of mercury. For example, a literacy program based on rigid outcomes may well die from lack of participation, whereas a program that reinvents itself daily may not satisfy the learning goals of its students, teachers or funders. How do we come to balance?

Beyond the need to build participation, beyond intuition and empathy and beyond the belief that all students and teachers can learn, how can we create literacy programs that are shaped by participation, contain meaningful and measurable goals and are responsive to community culture and identity? How do we do the dance, and who's got the beat?

Pat Campbell's newest book, *Teaching Reading to Adults – a balanced approach* provides some answers to this question. The book (accompanied by two videos) promotes the concept of balance in teaching and provides the substance of literacy related theories, definitions and practical techniques. It describes reading theories, the assumptions they are based on, how they are

assessed, and the problems inherent in each theory. Various reading assessments, what they were developed to measure and, most importantly, how their results can inform reading instruction, are also discussed.

One of the qualities of balance is that it maintains its form. The union of equal but opposing forces can be expressed in all directions. In this light, I found the information Campbell provides about identifying reading miscues and analyzing the student's reading pattern to be really interesting. She recommends that reading instruction be based on miscue analysis, working in contrast to the reading pattern a student already uses. By working in counterbalance to the student's habit, we can achieve a balanced approach.



It was refreshing to see that as much as we must engender and create participation in collaboration with students, as a literacy practitioner I also need to know when to work in contrast to what the students already know. I need to know how to complement their practice by contrasting it, as well when to allow student practice to inform and contrast my own techniques and understanding.

The naming of reading patterns was new to me. This is one of the first in-depth opportunities I have taken to learn about the mechanics of reading. Previously I responded to what I saw the students doing and I offered assistance, but I was unaware of the concepts of print-based, meaning-based, integrative and non-integrative reading patterns. Throughout the book, Campbell offers a good variety of teaching strategies that may assist students in developing a balanced approach in their reading practice.

At various points, the reader is invited to situate their own teaching philosophy within a spectrum of definitions and practice. As it turns out, my teaching preference supports the interactive theory of reading.

The interactive theory of reading rests upon two assumptions about language, thinking and learners. The first assumption is that reading is an active process of constructing meaning that occurs as the reader interacts with the text in a particular context or situation... The second assumption is that readers use three language cueing systems – graphophonic, syntactic, semantic – as they construct meaning. (Campbell)

There is little mention of social context, culture or identity in this theory, but I think that's okay. I don't expect one theory to contain everything that is good and true. From my perspective, the usefulness of theories to provide clear lines and classification needs to be balanced by the fact that teaching is a fluid, responsive process where theoretical boundaries can be crossed and enhanced.

Bringing together the divergent elements of literacy education, like the necessity of phonics instruction or the naming of specific outcomes demonstrated by an authentic assessment, serves to remind us that in creating a balance of practice we may draw from many schools.

Throughout the book, Campbell's preference and passion for participatory education emerges. She defines participatory education as "a collective effort in which the participants are committed to building

Competency-based assessment (outcomes-based education)

is based on the assumption that literacy can be fragmented into a hierarchy of skills that must be mastered so the individual can be functionally literate in today's society...The underlying assumption is the Level One students need to develop "lower level" skills before they can develop "higher level" skills. This assumption is contrary to research that indicates that Level One students are capable of making inferences in narrative and expository text.

Authentic Assessment (learner-centred assessment)

focuses on literacy as a process, whereas standardized tests view literacy as a product. By understanding the literacy processes a student uses to construct meaning an educator can gain a better understanding of how to instruct the student. For example, following authentic assessment, academic content is integrated with issues meaningful to students and learning is anchored in real-life situations and problems.

from Teaching Reading to Adults, p. 46

a just society through individual and socio-economic transformation and ending domination through changing power relations" (Campbell, p. 128) Although this definition is later qualified as a vision for what participatory education can offer, I can't help wondering if it might not become a bit of a burden imposed upon students and programs.

I don't mean to tip this beautiful ship. I do believe in participatory education, but I wonder if there isn't another way to share its definition and to promote its power, that speaks more to the stages of process, the choices of the students, and the potential they have to direct their own participation.

How often do students arrive at a literacy program with the intention of changing society or ending domination through challenging power relations? Perhaps, at times students arrive with these notions – most likely, students who are experienced and who have a history of participation with a particular group or centre. But what if the students, or the learning

centre, or the teacher are new?

What would a definition of participatory education which recognized participation as an unfolding process, directed by the experience and goals of a classroom-community look like?

Because participation in literacy programs is a pivotal and sensitive issue, given that only 10 per cent of people with literacy needs join programs, the way participatory education is defined is really important. In my opinion we need a definition that allows for the greatest amount of possibility, without imposing goals upon a program or its students.

One of the most unique and fragile elements of participatory education is that it is dependent on the timing, context and culture of a particular group of people. At the time in history when Paulo Freire was teaching in Brazil, there was a pronounced need to challenge the status quo. Perhaps other communities or groups of students today have other pronounced needs, like understanding the status quo, participating in the status quo or celebrating their own history and identity. Challenging the status quo is part of what is possible, but it is one of several possibilities. Perhaps there is a cycle of development within participatory programs.

Can we look beyond Freire to create a contemporary vision for what participatory education looks like and what it can achieve? I am thinking about the gifted teachers, students and thinkers who are working now, and who have success in their practice, with their own theories of literacy and community participation. How can we learn from these people and their practice in the field? What is their definition of participatory education?

In addition to the nebulous 'unfold as you go' side of building participation, there are some basic elements that can be demystified. For example, what are the 'in-class' dynamics that allow for successful participatory education? What is required of the teacher? What is required of the students? What are the stages of evolution of a participatory program? What is required of the administration? What is required of the funders and partners?

When do students become teachers through the process of participatory education? Is there a way to develop an 'outcomes based' evaluation of a participatory education project? Can curriculum developed for one participatory project be shared with another group or community? What are the values that inform participatory practice? How can literacy practitioners be trained and supported to run their programs on a participatory basis? How can funders

be educated to understand that the best practices regard literacy as a process, guided by student participation, not a product that grows in isolation?

There is so much to learn to be able to participate. If, as teachers, the worst thing we can bring is the pre-determined assumption about what that participation will look like, then what is the best thing we can bring? What encourages people to choose to participate and what sustains us as participants?

I expect I'll continue thinking about this for a long time, and I appreciate Pat Campbell for reminding me that questions of participation are central to literacy work. ■

All learning is a quest
for greater participation.

Bront de Avila, p. 221

SOURCES:

Bront de Avila, Elena et al "Learning Democracy/Democratizing Learning: Participatory Graduate Education". *Participatory Practices in Adult Education*. Pat Campbell & Barbara Burnaby (eds) (2001). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Campbell, Patty (2003). *Teaching Reading to Adults, A Balanced Approach*. Edmonton: Grass Roots Press.

Principles for teaching adult beginning readers

Reading instruction is integrated and balanced.

Instruction is linked to assessment.

Students are expected to take responsibility and ownership of their learning, and educators to provide opportunities for them to do so.

The instructional program responds to the needs of each individual student.

Instruction includes discussion about the students' conceptual understanding of reading.

Instruction builds upon the [adult] students' expectations and intentions.

Instruction emphasizes the student's knowledge.

When needed, phonics instruction is integrated into lessons.

Reading material is relevant and authentic.

Opportunities are provided for interactive learning.

from *Teaching Reading to Adults*, p. 25