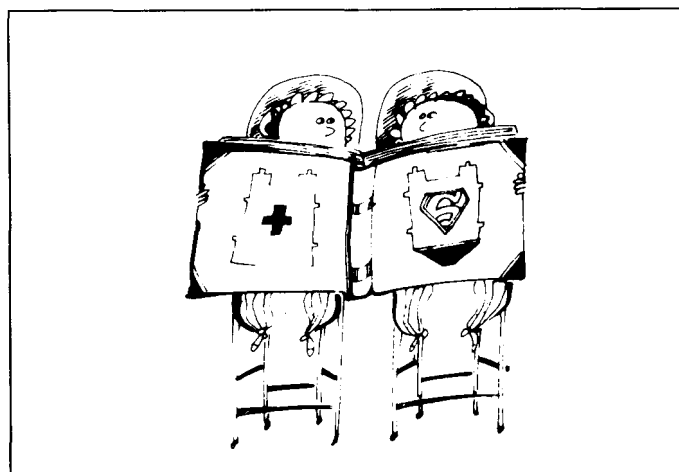


# Is It Her Voice If She Speaks Their Words?

**A** superintendent of education speaks to adult literacy practitioners about new literacy policy. He tells them they are to use a “learner-centered approach” and have as their objective the “empowerment” of learners.

Everyone appears pleased. Some think that practitioners have finally made a lasting impression on the way boards of education will think about literacy, others feel challenged to do their literacy work in a more enhanced way. But some listen and feel disheartened.

We who work in the literacy movement as feminists and political activists are among the disheartened. We believe that this superintendent’s words, although they sound progressive, do not represent the interests of literacy learners. This is because we analyze the problem of illiteracy by looking at the economic place literacy learners hold in our society. For the most part learners are undereducated and have very little socio-economic privilege. This understanding of literacy learners’ place with in society leads us to claim that learners’ interests will only be represented if literacy practice reflects a commitment to a more equitable society. This locates our literacy work in a broader



movement for social change. Although the superintendent talks about the empowerment of literacy learners, we know that his intention is different from ours. As a result we listen carefully to the meaning of his words.

We have learned from feminism that the same words can be used to describe two very different goals. For example, feminism is used to describe the goal of women climbing up the corporate ladder and it is also used to describe the goal of women creating collective working structures. While these goals were very different, the word feminism is used to mean both. For women interested in social change this has been a serious problem. One of the ways this problem has been addressed has been to refine our understanding of feminism through terms such as radical feminism, socialist feminism and liberal feminism.

Our experience as feminists helps us in refining our understanding of literacy practice. It helps us to understand that when the superintendent uses the term learner-centered he probably means literacy learners receiving individualized instruction. And that when we use the term learner-centered we mean literacy learners participating in a movement for social change. As it was

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for feminism, the disguising of this difference is problematic.

One of the ways that we can address this problem is to develop a theory of literacy which will clearly reflect the work we do. It will also help us to understand our practice and articulate our goals. When our words embody our practice they will not easily be co-opted and rendered meaningless. If our practice is to be part of our political project for social change we will need to learn how to articulate the political perspective which guides our work and generates its meaning.

A theory of literacy will assist those programs which have social change as their goal to identify the differences between the various literacy practices. This theory of literacy will articulate the range of perspectives: critical, liberal and conservative. It will enable us to identify a critical perspective from which we will develop a critical pedagogy. In the process of refining our understanding of literacy practice we will be uncovering the differences between a critical pedagogy and a good pedagogy. Good pedagogy assists adults to learn to read and write, but a critical pedagogy also works towards social change based on an understanding that "society is both exploitative and oppressive" (Weiler, 1988).

One way of beginning this process of refinement is to learn more about the theoretical assumptions which underlie our work. Even though some practitioners argue that they have no need for academic theory because it is remote from their practice, theoretical contributions *have* already influenced literacy work. However, these contributions have not always been identified. Sometimes we assume that literacy practice

comes from common wisdom. We have not yet rigorously scrutinized the theoretical assumptions which have shaped what we do. As a result we are unaware of the origins of the theories and the perspectives that they represent. In addition we do not keep up with the new contributions to these theories, and we are prevented from participating in developing them further.

For example, the language theories of Ken Goodman (1982) and Frank Smith (1978) have strongly influenced literacy practice. These theorists recommend using meaningful language when teaching reading and writing. This has meant that practitioners teach reading from units of meaning which are whole — that is to say, from sentences rather than from parts of words such as letters and syllables. Hence this theory is known as the whole language approach.

Whole language is the theoretical basis for using language experience stories. In

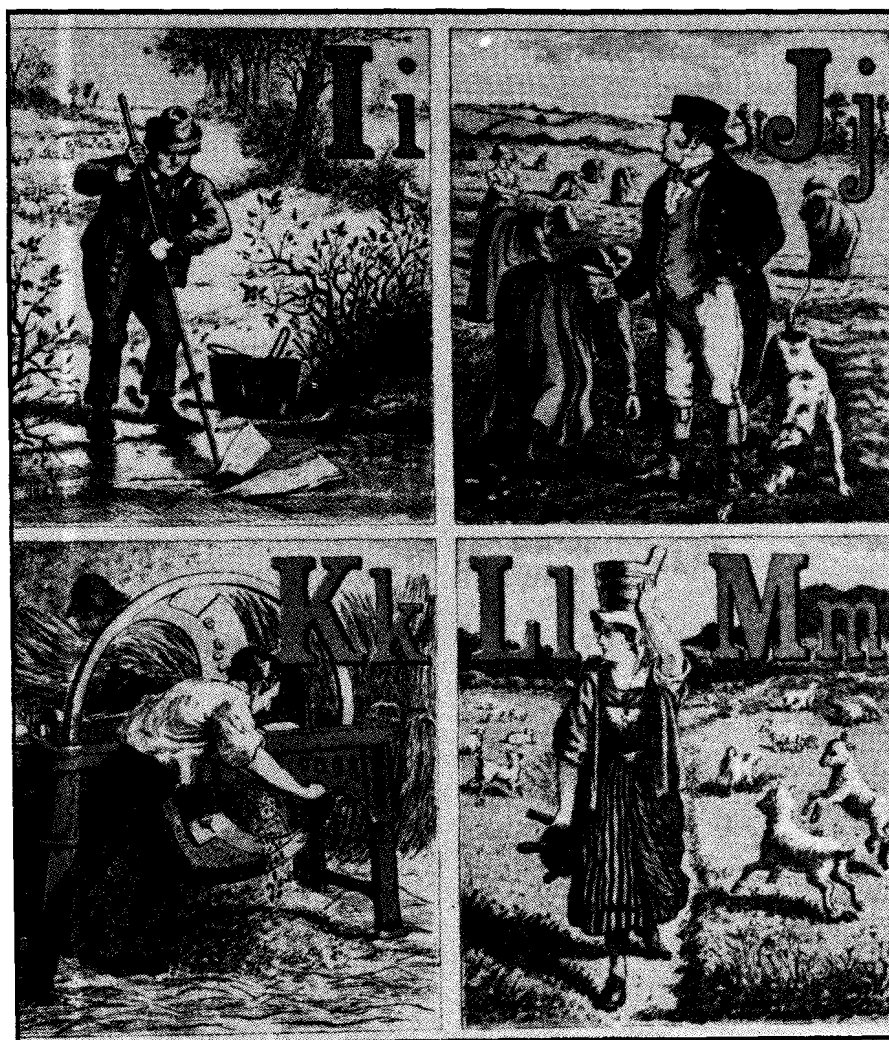
this approach learners tell stories about experiences in their lives. The tutors act as scribes writing down the learners' words and use these stories as reading material in literacy lessons. Language experience is frequently used in a wide variety of programs. Regardless of the goal of the program, this method is touted as successful.

But whole language theory has never had to withstand criticism from a critical perspective. We have not yet asked whether the whole language approach is simply good pedagogy or whether it is also the basis for critical pedagogy. Because language experience stories are used by programs with different perspectives, we will want to know the difference between how this approach will be used by practitioner using good pedagogy and a practitioner using critical pedagogy.

Another theory which has guided literacy work is found in the writings of Paulo Freire. One of Freire's contribu-

tions to our work in Canada has been to pose a concept of empowerment for literacy learners. Freire suggests that learners are empowered by entering into dialogue with their peers. Through this dialogue they learn to read and write as they name their experience and speak about their world.

Many Canadian practitioners state empowerment as a goal for their literacy work. Freire's work in critical pedagogy has led us to a community orientation for our literacy practice. The concept of empowerment provides the theoretical basis for creating learning environments which are friendly, accessible and comfortable. Literacy work often takes place in local centers in the community with practitioners, learners and volunteers working



*John Bull's Farm Alphabet* [c. 1876]. 'J's for John Bull, who this pretty farm owns; He's watching the women who pick up the stones.'

together as equals to build the community.

But when we work with Freire's ideas, we draw from societal contexts other than our own. When Freire talks about empowerment it is within a revolutionary context. However, because our context is advanced western capitalism, we have come to mean by empowerment an individual, personal empowerment and not the transformation of society. For example, we call it empowerment when literacy students fill in application forms or go to the local shopping mall by themselves for the first time. When personal empowerment is interpreted as achievement within an educational setting the transformative aspect of this theory is lost. As a result we need to work further with the concept of empowerment to find out if it can be the basis for a transformative pedagogy in the Canadian context. As it stands now, it is not yet an appropriate critical pedagogy for adult literacy work in Canada. The question is where do we go from here?

When we develop a literacy theory from a critical perspective we will benefit from feminists who argue that there is a dialectical relationship between theory and practice. This understanding will contribute to developing a literacy practice oriented to social change. Theories that are conceived by those who are not familiar with the lived experiences of literacy learners, nor with the societal context in which they live, do not provide an adequate basis for developing a literacy theory.

Both critical education theory and feminist theories of language have a lot to offer literacy practitioners. In spite of the limitations of Freire's critical education theory for literacy work in Canada, like Weiler we believe, "both critical educational theory and feminist theory share an underlying concern with the relationship between the individual subject and an oppressive social structure... both emphasize that social structures and

knowledge are socially constructed and thus are open to contestation and change" (1988, p.4). This belief that social change is possible, and that literacy learners must also participate in creating a more equitable society, are vital concepts for a critical pedagogy for literacy.

Before we had a feminist theory, we found that our experiences and our interests as women were not well represented in theories. Part of the process of beginning to create a feminist theory was a process of naming our experiences and demanding that these experiences be discussed and considered in the public realm. The practice of writing down the lived experiences of adult literacy learners, who are disempowered by society, will also be part of the process of creating a critical theory of literacy.

We believe that our practice will change when we begin to engage in critical pedagogy. Discovering the dif-

ference between the two is in itself exciting and stimulating. The language experience approach is one example of practice which could either be used to further the goal of good pedagogy or also to further the goal of critical pedagogy.

Earlier we suggested that language experience as a method is probably good pedagogy but is not necessarily critical pedagogy. We cannot be clear about what critical pedagogy is when programs which have different goals all claim that language experience should be used because "it works." If we talk about this method in terms of its success without tying it closely to a clearly articulated goal, we blur the different ways in which language experience stories can be used. It is extremely important to our work for social change to know precisely *why* we use language experience stories, because it shifts *how* it is that we use them.

When we look carefully at language, we see that language has the power to shape our experiences. Referring to Whorf's work, Dale Spender observes that "language is not neutral. It is not merely a vehicle which carries ideas. It is itself a shaper of ideas" (1980, p. 139). Like women, literacy learners need to become aware that language is not neutral. Language shapes their experiences and as a result their experiences need to be represented in the language. Part of our political project then becomes finding ways to include literacy learners in the public realm by assisting them to create language which represents their experiences. A feminist critique of language says women must become visible in the language. As Spender observes:

*Males, as the dominant group, have produced language, thought and reality. Historically it has been the structures, the categories and the meanings which have been invented by males — though not of course by all males — and they have then been validated by references to other males. In this process women have*



*Alphabet of Common Objects* [c. 1860]. 'The Lion was not drawn from life: the Milkmaid was.'

*played little or no part. It has been male subjectivity which has been the source of those meanings, including the meaning that their own subjectivity is objectivity (1980, p. 143).*

Many literacy practitioners recognize language also excludes those who are poor. The goal of a critical pedagogy will be to teach adults to read and write language, all the while being cognizant that language is subjective and has the power to shape reality. How can we justify teaching literacy learners a language from which they have been excluded.

We know that it is "crazy-making" if our experiences are misnamed or if there are no names for our experiences. Chris Weedon says that, "What an event means to an individual depends on the ways of interpreting the world, on the discourses available to her at any particular moment" (1987, p. 79). For example, what language describes the events in your life if you are a single mother on benefits who has a female partner/lover? Are you a housewife? Are you a working mother? How do you see/describe yourself compared with how others see/describe you? Where are you represented in your children's readers that depict "family" life?

This experience of going through life and not finding your experiences represented is what literacy learners experience. It is powerful when literacy learners get together in groups and name their experiences. We have learned from feminism of the power of getting together with other people who think and speak the same as you do: when your experiences are affirmed you know you are not crazy.

It is true that language experience stories told by learners to tutors are part of good pedagogy. The stories create effective learning exercises for literacy students. They may also be shared with other learners because they are good learning materials. Learners find these stories interesting when they see their own struggles reflected. Because the language of learners is used in the stories they are easy to read. Language experience stories can also provide a source of inexpensive and creative reading material where materials are direly needed.

But these stories, if they are part of critical pedagogy, will also have another dimension. This dimension will reflect

the intention to bring learners' language into the public sphere. It is within this sphere that the stories demonstrate their power and they make visible the class, race and gender bias in language.

It is a transformative act to document learners lives: to publish oral histories and to bring them into the public realm. Through this act we are challenging what is considered to be literature. In part, literature is considered "good" because it accurately reflects the experiences of its readers. Historically literature has been primarily the domain of a male white elite and what passes as good literature is what accurately reflects their experiences.

Two instances where learners' stories challenge the common conception of "literature" come from literacy programs. In one example from Britain, literacy practitioners sought government funding reserved for the "arts" to publish student writing. In doing so they asserted that the stories of working class writers are literature. This challenge to what counts as literature forced the funding body to articulate why the working-class stories were not literature. In doing so they revealed the class-based nature of that which is recognized as "literature" (Maguire et al., 1982).

Our second example is from a community-based literacy program in downtown Toronto. East End Literacy published some of their learners' stories as part of a reading series for literacy learners. A recent book launching for a story about a woman who was physically abused and sterilized was a major celebration. This public event, which hundreds of people attended, presented the learner as author, not as poor literacy learner. This challenged our notion of who creates literature in our society and allowed us to see literacy learners as story-tellers and authors of words.

East End Literacy's practice of encouraging learners to take on the rigorous work of authoring also acts as a catalyst for their learners working together in groups. They take ownership over the production process when they write and edit stories together. Teams of learners work on many of the stages of the production process. In this collective process of producing print materials about their lives learners share their experiences and find a language to speak together.

In conclusion, we no longer feel disheartened by the superintendent's words, but are challenged by them. This is because they lead us to a process of discovering how our voices can speak the meaning of our words. This article, which was inspired by numerous discussions with feminist colleagues working in literacy, begins that process. As practitioners we have a strong commitment to working for social change. As feminists we know any theory will have to reflect our experiences and articulate our goals. When we search for the meaning in what we do we build the theoretical basis for developing a critical literacy practice.

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