



Participation and the Pleasure Principle or the P's & Q's of literacy

"Nobody funds pleasure." That was the evidence I received a few years ago from a colleague after reading a grant proposal that I had written. "Move the pleasure principle down to the last paragraph."

Worldwide in industrialized and developing countries, researchers know that the rates of participation in adult literacy and basic education are dismally low. What accounts for this phenomenon, and is there anything that policy makers and providers could do to change it? Is there reason to think that reinserting pleasure and reconsidering the promises attached to literacy could make a difference? Can technology increase motivation and participation?

These questions were the focus of a Winter Institute on Literacy and Technology held in Atlanta in January 1996 hosted by Georgia Tech and The Centre for Literacy. Much of our discussion revolved around what I have dubbed the "P" words of literacy - Participation, product, play, poetry, pleasure and promise.

Participation and Non-participation

Participation is the term used for the number of learners registered in programs. The main body of research on participation and non-participation is American and dominated by a few names, including Beder, Valentine, Darkenwald, and more recently, Quigley. They have investigated the reasons why people either do or do not participate in adult education, in particular, basic education and literacy.

It is obviously much easier to find and interview participants than non-participants. At the January Institute, presenter David Kring, a colleague of Beder's, described an ERIC database search on the topic for the years 1992-95. When he used the keyword "*participation*" he drew 7306 entries; "*participation*" and "*adult*" brought up 862; "*participation*", "*adult*", and "*literacy*", 289. When he tried "*non-participation*," the

number of entries dropped to 17; "*non-participation*" and "*adult*" brought 5; and "*non-participation*," "*adult*" and "*literacy*," only 3.

Why adults do not participate.

Kring traced the development of the issue, beginning with the first national American study in 1965 which looked at participation in adult education. The researchers identified two categories of barriers - external/situational which affected younger adults and women, and internal/dispositional which affected older adults.

A study by Patricia Cross in 1981 named three categories of deterrents: situational, dispositional and institutional, the last involving discouraging practices and procedures in schools.

It was during the 1980s that studies began to look more at individuals, specifically at psychosocial factors such as negative expectations of programs and negative self-evaluation. They also addressed informational issues - that is, lack of information about available programs and the failure of many adults to seek such information.

Additional factors appeared in a scale published in 1984 by Scanlan and Darkenwald to measure deterrents to participation. These included disengagement, family or work constraints, cost, perceived lack of benefit and lack of quality programs.

A social perspective

In the late 1980s, some researchers inserted a sociological perspective, suggesting reasons for the problem other than personal and institutional ones.

These studies focused on education as a social practice organized and distributed by the middle class to maintain and reproduce the dominant culture. Seen from this frame, an individual's position in society becomes a powerful factor in non-participation.

Researchers such as Quigley suggested a resistance theory to explain it. Non-participants, he believes, are not resisting education, but the imposition of a dominant culture and values.

Negative experience of schooling

Finally, recent empirical studies carried out in Iowa with groups of participants and non-participants have reduced the number of premises.

According to Hal Beder, who has been studying this question for two decades, non-participants have a low perception of need, perceive the required effort to overcome

constraints as to great, have a dislike for school, or find themselves in a situation that gives them no free time for study. Beder suggests that school-based approaches will not work as the majority of non-participants have had a negative experience of school.

Participants, on the other hand, have been motivated by a desire to get educated or to improve themselves.

The product

What does this mean for policy and practice? The field has been poor at marketing our product. We have tended to look at clients in literacy and ABE as homogenous groups when they are divided into a number of sub-groups with different profiles and needs. we have offered mainly "one size fits all" programming.

Kring suggests that we need to borrow some practices from market research and make a better match between client and product. We have to use a marketing mix of product (Tangibly - what are we "selling?"); place (Where are we offering the product? This has both physical and symbolic significance.); price (What is the actual cost and the opportunity offered?); and promotion (Are we using advertising and publicity in a persuasive way that corresponds to the clients' perceptions?)

Promises

One of the final presenters at the institute cautioned us to think carefully about what we advertise. Dan Wagner, Director of the National Center for Adult Literacy (NCAL) in Philadelphia, talked about the unrealistic promises that have characterized literacy as a field. We have regularly promised to eradicate illiteracy within specific time frames or to provide jobs to participants who complete programs. Wagner believes we have to make fewer promises, examine the possibilities more carefully and develop quality provision in ways that have never been tried before. He invites the literacy community to practice "truth in advertising" when it sets about marketing its product(s).

Pleasure and pragmatism

I return to the starting point. So much of current practice is driven by economic issues that programs, which are our products, have come to be more pragmatic than pleasurable. I believe that a balance has to be found.

If we are to continue to reach only small percentages of the potential clients, the funding will eventually disappear.

For those who argue that pleasure has nothing to do with it, this issue of LAC offers glimpses of programs and practices that have managed to motivate learners by making learning pleasurable, for example using traditional literature - poetry - or using modern technology - television.

If most non-participants dislike school and do not perceive a need, then setting up more courses that look like school will not attract them.

**Pleasure, on the other hand, is easy to sell. we need to move it back to the first paragraph.
[L.S]**

Literacy & Technology

Information technology for learning - dyslexia in adults

The National Council for Educational Technology (NCET) in the U.K. has published a variety of outstanding research documents and reports on educational applications of technology. While their work in schools was a main focus in their earlier years, with particular emphasis on disabilities, they have more recently added adult literacy, workplace and family to the studies undertaken.

A monograph by Sally McKeown on information technology (IT) for adults with dyslexia gives an excellent overview of both the problem and some of the technology-based strategies now available. Writing with common sense and knowledge, McKeown suggests that teachers and tutors of adults with learning disabilities should stop thinking in terms of remediation for problems that will never disappear and concentrate instead on developing learning strategies. She points out the advantages and drawbacks of various technologies, provides a glossary of terms and lays down a guiding principle - to match needs to appropriate technologies and not assume that technology alone will solve problems.

Parents and children

NCET has also produced documents aimed at helping parents support their children's technological education. Demystifying IT for home use and play, these publications provide simple explanations, suggest ideas and offer evaluations of both hardware and software.

A catalogue of NCET documents is available from the address below. Many of them can be borrowed from The Centre for Literacy. Sally McKeown will participate in the 1996 Summer Institute on Literacy and Technology.

Educational technology: U.K.

The National Council for Educational Technology (NCET) is the body established by the (British) government to be the focus of expertise for technology in learning. A government funded registered charity, NCET researches and evaluates the relevance of new technologies to enhance learning and raise standards in teaching and learning. NCET also promotes and supports effective use of appropriate technologies across all sectors of education.

[source: NCET document 1996]

Software Evaluation Service becomes permanent

In February, The Centre for Literacy invited teachers and tutors to book appointments to try out a selection of 55 software products in adult literacy and basic skills. We had acquired these from producers in Canada, the US and the UK, and had expected a positive response, but were overwhelmed by the number of requests.

We were booked every day of the month from morning until closing. We knew from practitioners that many of them do not have access to these materials either because their programs are small or because of the amount of paperwork and legal liabilities involved in getting copies of software. What we did not expect was that many teachers used this as an occasion to try computers for the first time and get a feel for the technology itself.

We were also told that there are not places where teachers can spend extended time trying out resources.

Because of the response, The Centre will be offering this service on a permanent basis and expanding the selection of software.

Call Peggy Killeen at 931-8731, local 1415, or fax 931-5181 to make an appointment.