

Appendix

People Reading: A Proposal for the '80s

This is a community project to organize people who can read and write to help others learn to read and write. It involves but is not limited to schools. Those teaching and those learning are of all ages and work together in mixture at whatever times and sites turn out to be feasible for a given community. Professional educators help set up the methods and the collaboration between schools and other community agencies for pooling of resources, but paraprofessionals actually do the teaching—housewives, older students, senior citizens, and other volunteers.

Goals

1. To give literacy free to anyone in the community who wants it.
2. To demonstrate that becoming literate requires only will and a cheap, simple methodology not dependent on professional teachers, esoteric techniques, further research, or special, costly materials.
3. To develop a model of public schooling based on the incorporation of school sites and educators into a community-wide network for sharing all locally available human and material resources.
4. To rekindle through serving and being served a feeling of community and unity.

Methods

The learning methods are essentially two—one aimed especially at reading and the other aimed especially at writing. Both make use of a literate person to provide a temporary bridge for the learner between the vocal medium of speech and the new visual medium of print.

The aide either reads to the learner while the learner follows the text with the eyes, or the aide writes down what the learner has to say while the learner watches. We may call the first the “lap method,” to indicate that parents have done it in the tradition of the bedtime story, or the “read-along method” if we wish to indicate a recorded rather than live voice, especially as applied to adolescents or adults.

Taking dictation from a learner while he or she looks on is known in many quarters as the "language-experience approach," meaning that the learner supplies the audio himself by putting his own experience into language. An important part of that method is for learner and aide to read back the dictation together and for the learner to trace over the writing with a transparent-ink pen and try rereading on his own, perhaps to a third person.

Neither of these methods has been employed enough in schools to prove itself or, usually, even to get included in experimental research, whereas a premise of this project is that some combination of the two will suffice to launch literacy.

At an appropriate pace the learner takes over the aide's role by trying to sound out print and spell out his thoughts for himself with the help of the aide when needed. During this transition from aides to independence, novices learn to make use of other human and material resources, chief among them partners and tape recorders. Partners pool their growing knowledge and understanding of how to unlock and spell words by collectively reading aloud to each other (in unison or in turn) and transcribing their own taped speech, collectively also. They can also play certain card, board, and lettered dice games that entail their sounding aloud what they see. For the learner soloing, a tape recorder can gradually replace the aide: the learner listens to a recording of a text that he follows with his eyes, and he talks to a recorder and later transcribes his own speech.

Materials

Since the reading is individualized, virtually any reading matter in any form and of any content can be of use to some learner or another. The organizers of the project solicit from the community the lending or donation of books, magazines, newspapers, brochures, posters, manuals, and so forth. Some of this matter may be left at the sites, and some may be brought temporarily with the volunteer. Effort is made to obtain a great range of subject matter, kind of discourse, format, and difficulty level.

The more tape recorders that can be acquired, the better, although live transcription can always be used if machines are unavailable for all. For "read-along," recordings of texts are important, but these can be made within the community by adults or students with some coaching. Making well-rehearsed recordings by proficient readers for novice readers would, in fact, be a major part of the whole process.

If carefully screened by educators, some game and manipulative materials can serve well if players are asked to sound or listen to what they see and to combine spellings, words, and phrases into whole sentences and stories. Similarly, only those sound films and phonovisual gear would

be proper that show and sound simultaneously and that synthesize smaller language units into larger.

Organization

This has to be worked out locally, but the idea is to combine the regular mission of schools to initiate literacy with “adult education” while also bringing more resources of the whole community to bear on this bigger mission. The organizers will utilize whatever are the best channels for soliciting massive volunteering of service and materials and for arranging times and sites where aides and learners can come together. Educators cast and post the basic directions for the methods so that any volunteer can start anytime, and consult with working parties, helping to decide which learners would benefit from certain human and material resources. It may be that initial and “remedial” learners needn’t be segregated by time and site, since any activity or material could be available for mixed groups, which will not be taught as classes but merely share the same area and resources and each other.

Rationale

Generally, schools are having a very hard time teaching literacy, to the point that an unconscionable and unnecessary amount of time and energy go into it. At the same time, the public keeps telling schools to perform better for less money. This project can show an effective way to dispatch literacy so that schools can get on to higher kinds of learning, and it does this by creating a closer collaboration between school and community that will begin to redefine schooling in the direction it must take in the future.

Specifically, to become literate is merely to associate a second medium, print, with one already well learned before school, speech, which already bears meaning. What teaches literacy is to *see and hear language at once*, in a motivated and meaningful context, so that the sights and sounds of the language become specifically associated. The two main methods will accomplish this if done continually and copiously, and they have the virtue, moreover, that they are ends as well as means, not mere drills alleged to pay off later. Being read to and dictating—while watching—are early forms of reading and writing that allow the learner to assimilate the external, social action of the aide into his own inner functioning. This combines imitation and internalization. People learn to read and write by successive approximations that more and more nearly become the target solo activities. Thus, the learner at first associates speech with print in gross blocs and imprecisely but progressively refines it to particular associations between sounds and spellings that enable him to unlock or spell words he has not seen before.

Purpose of this Proposal

I make this proposal first to other educators for response and suggestions. Then, in perhaps revised form, it can go to likely school districts, professional journals, and funding sources—if the educators enlisted to support it agree that next steps might be to identify pilot districts (communities), publish it as a public proposal for other places to consider, and seek federal or foundation monies. And this *is* a public proposal, not a personal project. Could such projects be mounted without outside funding? I would be willing to consult free on a project in my own locality. Are others willing to do the same? Perhaps a chain reaction of projects could get going and amount to a significant national movement such as the Bay Area Writing Project has set off. How should we best proceed to generate successful models?

Address replies to me at first, until we know the next organizational step:

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