Pro-Literacy: A Historical Evaluation and Presentation of Strategies That Have Influenced the Development of the Volunteer Based Adult Education Program

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Abstract: This paper will present a brief history and work of Pro-Literacy and identify the aspects that serve as a model for other volunteer organizations. Pro-Literacy is an adult literacy program that has been successful in sustaining growth and promoting literacy nationally.

Pro-Literacy is a non-profit, 501(c) (3) educational corporation. According to the Internal Revenue Service, a 501(c) (3) is a type of non-profit organization exempt from some federal taxes; religious, educational, and scientific organizations often fall under this categorization (United States Department of the Treasury, 2009). Its mission is to sponsor educational programs and services designed to "empower adults and their families by assisting them to acquire the literacy practices and skills they need to function more effectively in their daily lives and participate in the transformation of their societies" (Laubach Literacy Staff, 2003, p.11).The organization is the result of combining of previously established organizations. Literacy Volunteers of America (LVA) was founded by Ruth Colvin in 1962, and Laubach Literacy Action (LLA) was founded by Frank C. Laubach in 1955. Both of the founders continue to work with Pro-Literacy. The two merged in 2002 and represent the largest literacy program nationally, and the majority of literacy tutors are trained by affiliates of these two programs (Belzer, 2006). Prior to their unification, LVA and Laubach were the two major national adult literacy volunteer organizations. Pro-Literacy provides support for hundreds of programs in libraries, community centers, faith-based organizations, corrections facilities and adult schools.

According to Laubach Literacy Staff (2003), few U.S. adults are truly illiterate. The definition of illiteracy has changed many times over the past few decades. The National Adult Literacy Survey of 1993 defined literacy this way: "Using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goal, and to develop one's knowledge and potential" (as cited in Laubach Literacy Staff, 2003, p.13). This definition does not tie literacy to one standard ability or grade level, but recognizes that literacy is related to the needs of each individual. Pro-Literacy's concern is the number of adults with low literacy skills who are unable to find and retain employment, support their children's education, and participate in their communities (Leon-Guerrero, 2005).

The purpose of this research is to identify the aspects of Pro-Literacy that have been most successful in sustaining the volunteer based organization. The identification of positive variables that have influenced the program's substantial accomplishments will assist in providing a model for the success of other community based volunteer organizations. There are specific variables that increase an organization's likelihood for mission achievement. According to a study conducted by Experience Corps, a volunteer teaching program for seniors (as cited in Raley, 2006) volunteers' motivation, enjoyment of challenges and rewards, training, teamwork and day-to-day support were all critical to success of the organization. Mattessich (2001) presents 20 factors influencing successful collaborations. Of the 20, many factors, such as shared vision,

sufficient funds, staff, materials, and time, are present in Pro-Literacy. An examination of the history and procedures of Pro-Literacy has revealed three characteristics that allow it to continue as one of the world's largest non-profit education organizations. The key aspects that have maintained Pro-Literacy's position in the global adult literacy arena are the following: (a) training aspects, (b) size and growth, and (c) funding. These variables are essential to maintaining a successful community based volunteer organization.

Training Aspects

The use of volunteers in adult literacy programs offers many benefits; however, volunteers must be properly trained to be useful. Costs associated with training, space, and supplies are overheads to the organization. The good intentions of volunteers are not sufficient to ensure positive outcomes (Belzer, 2006). Training the volunteers is a costly and well planned process. Affiliates of the LVA program believe it is very important for volunteers to be well trained and to be provided with the tools to help them meet the needs of the individual students. They are also required to follow a pre-set course of volunteer training (Hohensee, 2000). Historically, LLA has had a sub-skills orientation to reading instruction. LLA's instructional approach, based on phonics, form a basis for the *Laubach Way to Reading* set of skills books for basic reading and the *Laubach Way to English* for ESL (English for Speakers of other Languages) instruction. The LLA educational components consist of one-on-one tutoring and some small group instruction in basic literacy skills and ESL; tutor training in-service; a certification process for trainers of literacy tutors; local council and state office support in the from of materials for readers and reference materials; and public policy advocacy (Tenebaum & Strang, 1992). The LVA method is learner centered, more holistic, and observes a constructivist approach to literacy learning.

Pro-Literacy requires its volunteer tutors to attend a pre-service training. Training varies from 10-18 hours. In compliance with the Pro-Literacy guidelines, the initial training session provides information on the mission of the organization, and introduces some technical skills, definition of literacy, a description of the average adult learner characteristics, and the Learner Experience Approach (LEA). In addition, tutors are taught traditional approaches to teaching reading, lesson planning, and maintaining student files. Although LLA and LVA have been merged for many years, their former member organizations are still conducting their own distinct tutor training based on their previous affiliations (Belzer, 2006). Pro-Literacy is still in the process of combining the two methods of training into one cohesive program.

Training is the most important part of a volunteer based organization. Most programs that utilize volunteer tutors require completion of pre-service training and many provide some in-service supports as well (Belzer, 2006). All of the methods and techniques taught in training are not always properly executed during tutoring sessions. Follow-up in-service and mentoring, such as those conducted by Pro-Literacy program directors, is valuable to the reinforcement of the trained methods. If volunteers are not properly trained, they may not have the skills necessary to supply the needs of the organization. Tutor training of volunteers for LVA-affiliated programs have positive social and economic benefits (Belzer, 2006). The training for teaching reading is based to some extent on the LVA tutor handbook, *Tutor* (Belzer, 2006). This book also serves as beginning material for the tutor and student.

Volunteering must benefit the volunteer. It is an opportunity to try something new and learn new skills necessary to succeed in business (Reynolds, 1998). The skills learned in the training for Pro-Literacy, such as record keeping, filing, organizing, goal-setting, teaching, writing, creative thinking, improvising and coaching, can be useful in most life situations. A

number of mediating factors—including educational attainment and attitudes toward school for both tutors and students, and the reading level, goals and interests of students—make drawing a straight line between tutor training and tutor practice difficult (Belzer, 2006). The flexibility of scheduling is an attractive factor for both tutors and students, who also hold full time jobs.

Reliable research on the effectiveness of specific types of volunteer tutor training in adult literacy programs is almost non-existent. The studies that have been done are not well documented and appear to be biased toward a particular published program or courseware that wishes to be shown effectual (Skinner, Gillespie, & Balkam, 1997). A well-structured pre-service training program does have a major impact on the instruction and retention of volunteers. Pro-Literacy maintains its own records of the productivity of its tutors and the service it provides to its learners, for internal and external reporting purposes. They also maintain structured training methods with their affiliates and continue development of training for their volunteers. Their method of training has an influence on maintaining Pro-Literacy's volunteer base. Well trained and well-supported volunteers are more useful and dedicated to the organization.

Size and Growth

During the 1960s, adult education and life-long learning became the focus of many library systems in America. Librarians began to design literacy programs at their individual locations nationwide, and they were all independent of each other. However, as LLA and LVA expanded, they eventually secured affiliates in most county library systems. To meet the needs of more students in the LLA and LVA, the programs had to acquire more staff. Rapid expansion brings with it the risk of losing consistency in day-to-day operations (Tenebaum & Strang, 1992). This is one of the challenges of a volunteer based organization; however, it is a good problem, because it represents increase in clients and services. As an organization increases in size, it may consider changing some volunteer positions to paid staff positions, as the LVA has done. Pro-Literacy affiliates that offer adults instruction in basic literacy, GED preparation, math, and English as a second language are now found in all 50 states, as well as the District of Columbia. The main contributing factor of growth was the combining of the two organizations. Organizations that share a common vision and serve the same population should consider joining to pool resources and lead their perspective fields of service. Over the past forty years, LLA and LVA have moved from infancy to a dominant fixture in most American city and county libraries as Pro-Literacy.

Funding

Pro-Literacy has a strong mission statement, which includes the following commitment:
We are committed to strengthening and improving our organization. We continue to search for efficiency and creativity in the delivery of our programs; to grow and expand in order to stay on the rising tide of illiteracy; to discover new ways of harnessing society's existing resources for the achievement of literacy (Cheatham, Blakenship, Ruth, & Laminack, 1993, p.156).

As a testament to the organization's intention to harness resources, Pro-Literacy has a large number of corporate and foundation partners who provide continued annual support. For example, Verizon sponsors an online adult literacy training program for the tutors and staff of Pro-Literacy. The Verizon Literacy Network provides self paced courses that are ideal for tutors to train from home or in the community. This is only one example of how Pro-Literacy uses resources of corporations in order to further their mission. There are numerous international, national and local organizations which regularly support the efforts of Pro-Literacy to eliminate illiteracy. To receive funding from many of these corporations and foundations, a spotless public

image must be maintained. Organizations must be aware of funding regulations enacted by the federal government. The National Literacy Act sets forth a framework for program accountability for all federally assisted adult education and literacy programs (Tenebaum & Strang, 1992). Detailed and transparent recordkeeping is required, because financial backers want to know that their funds are reaching the intended audience and being used in a proper fashion.

One strategy used by Pro-Literacy to acquire funds is having affiliates report information to the national headquarters on grant-making institutions in their local area. Then if the corporation is regional or national, a fund development officer from Pro-Literacy will contact the company to try to obtain a larger grant, so that the whole state, region, or national affiliates benefit. This strategy allows local affiliates to keep their local funds in their community, while also encouraging potential funds for multiple affiliates (Lytle, 2007). As a general rule, financial backers are interested in gains made by learners of diverse racial, ethnic, and/or socioeconomic backgrounds; learners with limited English speaking skills; those who have passed the GED test or enrolled in a community college; and those who have progressed through a related workplace program (Skinner et al., 1997). Community based volunteer programs must continually seek grants, funding and donations from organizations large and small. A substantial source of support for Pro-Literacy is the Ameri-Corps VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) program. All of the sites receive funds from the association, United Way. The United Way is a major partner of Pro-Literacy, and funded both LLA and LVA (Tenebaum & Strang, 1992).

The LLA and LVA operated their own publishing divisions prior to joining forces. Selling published materials is a viable source of income for a non-profit organization, especially an adult literacy organization that already has these materials to provide to their own affiliates. In 1991, 40% percent of LVA's national budget of 2.2 million was derived from the sales of LVA publications (Tenebaum& Strang, 1992). According to the LLA's 1990 national budget, 7.5 million dollars was received from the sale of its New Readers Press publications (Tenebaum & Strang, 1992). If an organization has a service or product that could be packaged and sold for profit, they should heavily consider using this as a source of income.

Although the financial strategies and corporate sponsors may make the Pro-Literacy program seem financially secure, this may not be the case for all locations. Affiliates range in size from 10 to 300 students. Over 200 accredited affiliates have different communities with different needs. The annual budgets at various sites at that time could range from under $20,000 to over half a million dollars (Tenebaum & Strang, 1992). There is a bottom line: volunteer literacy programs must do what they can with what is feasible (Skinner et al., 1997). Each program has to take their budget and make it work to fit the needs of their program. In addition to seeking national funds, local affiliates also hold fundraisers, such as bake sales, book sales, or dinners, and seek local businesses for sponsorship.

Conclusion

An understanding of one organization's strategies and success can provide a strong model for similar organizations. In the case of Pro-Literacy, they have a well established history, large presence in the adult literacy arena, and a valuable public image, all of which make it a model organization. Pro-Literacy has established hundreds of affiliates in libraries, community centers, faith-based organizations, corrections facilities and adult schools. The key aspects that have sustained Pro-Literacy are their training methods and continued development of training for their volunteers, presence in most communities, and their ability to continually receive funding from government and humanitarian organizations. It is evident that these strategies have implications

beyond Pro-Literacy, and can be applied to other volunteer organizations who wish to enact positive social change. By integrating structured volunteer training programs, a plan for growth, and actively securing funding, an adult education or any other volunteer based organization can be sure to sustain some level of increased service, participation and success.

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