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*In this chapter, four longtime adult literacy practitioners recount their pathways into the field in the late 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s. Their stories highlight the creativity and openness that characterized literacy work in those years and point to what has been lost as the field has become dominated by the Workforce Investment Act and the National Reporting System.*

## The Turtle's Shell: Protecting the Life Underneath

*John Garvey, John Gordon, Peter Kleinbard, Paul Wasserman*

One thing I think we've been able to do is to create and preserve what I call protected spaces. There has been, and continues to be, a core of folks throughout New York's literacy world who are fiercely committed to the founding ideals of the field. In the face of an increasingly regressive policy environment; woefully inadequate and incoherent funding streams; and distorted, dishonest data regimes, many adult education administrators have served as a kind of buffer between these larger forces and the day-to-day work of teachers and students. It's a tricky balancing act, and it's easy to lose clarity or to give in to what often feels like insurmountable pressures to join the chorus insisting that the emperor really is wearing clothes. But to date, within the City's literacy system, there still is some precious space to do high-quality instructional work in classrooms and whole programs, work that honors, respects and supports our students—folks from the city's poor, immigrant and working class communities who come to us to further their educations, often with the deeper hope that we can help them transform their lives.

**Paul Wasserman**

On August 7, 1998, President Bill Clinton signed the Workforce Investment Act into law. The law, in its own words, create(d) an integrated, "one-stop" system of workforce investment and education activities for adults and youth. The Workforce Investment Act consolidated policies that had been developing for some time and ushered in the National Reporting System—ultimately transforming the landscape of adult literacy education.

In the years since, adult education has increasingly been defined almost solely as a means to produce workers for the U.S. economy, and that vision, shaped by a very narrow set of skills and outcomes, has come to seem almost incontrovertible.

But adult literacy work has not always been that way. This article, through the stories of four individuals active in the field for many years, reaches back to a key period in literacy work in New York City: the late 1970s through the early 1990s. Literacy programs dramatically expanded in those years, bringing into the field many practitioners with little or no background in adult education, but with a wide range of experiences in the community. Those individuals had come of age in the 1960s and early 1970s, and their worldviews had been shaped by the events of that era, most especially by the civil rights movement. They saw their literacy work within a broader social vision and brought egalitarian instincts and perspectives to their classrooms. They believed that education had a broad mission to encourage active, thoughtful civic participation. There was a ferment and spirit of exploration, enabled in part by the new funds and an openness at all levels of those involved. Teachers and administrators studied, experimented, shared ideas and practices, and engaged students in shaping teaching and learning—in the process contributing to, as well as consuming, the base of knowledge in the field.

Three of the four participants, John Garvey, John Gordon, and Paul Wasserman, worked as cab drivers in New York City during the 1970s. All were active in the Taxi Rank and File Coalition, an insurgent group within the industry formed in response to the terrible wages and working conditions and the incredible lack of democracy within the taxi workers' union.

### John Gordon

Many of us had been active in the antiwar and other movements of the 1960s, and our approach to taxi organizing was significantly shaped by that experience. In particular, we were committed to practicing a kind of participatory democracy and nonhierarchical organization. We were acutely aware of the ways that the voices of rank-and-file drivers had been silenced and ignored by both the taxi owners and the union bosses. We saw our role, in part, as creating a space for those voices to be heard.

We believed in another 1960s axiom: that the personal is political, that the way we interacted with each other—the kind of community we built—was a critical part of our political practice. All these ideas would later find resonance in my literacy work.

### John Garvey

By 1978, I was ready to stop driving. A short time earlier, I had begun working part-time as a tutor in a writing center of a City University of New York

(CUNY) college. I responded to a newspaper ad for a tutor in an adult basic education program at a city jail, sponsored by what was then New York City Community College—in part because I was attracted to the political potentials of getting to know people behind bars. Fortunately, my employment application fell upon the desk of an extraordinary educator, Fannie Eisenstein, who persuaded the college's employment office that I had exactly the right credentials for the job. Soon afterward, I entered the Brooklyn House of Detention on Atlantic Avenue.

### John Gordon

I came into literacy work in 1985 with the wave of new programs started when the mayor allocated \$35 million over 4 years to the expansion of adult literacy programs in New York City. I had no formal teaching experience before coming into literacy. I had been working for the previous 6 years as a machinist and the 7 years before that as a Yellow Cab driver.

In 1984, I was looking for a change and thinking about teaching. When a position opened up as Teacher-Coordinator of the Open Book, the newly funded literacy program of Good Shepherd Services, I applied. Somehow they hired me.

I was drawn to literacy work partially because I had a sense of its transformative possibilities. I thought that in bringing people together to study and learn, we would find opportunities to read and write about things that mattered to students and in the process develop new senses of ourselves and our possibilities.

### Peter Kleinbard

In 1984, I was asked to start a school for youth 16 to 24 years old who had dropped out—what became known as the Young Adult Learning Academy (YALA). My experience teaching in the performing arts had focused on bringing together diverse groups of youth at an integrated but racially divided school, Berkeley High School in California. At the time, I believed that racial inequities were on their way to major improvement, and that my part was to be in the schools. My specific interests were in the arts, building social capital (Coleman, 1981), and creating communities (Shils, 1975).

### Paul Wasserman

When I entered the adult literacy world in September 1991, it was still pulsating with the 1960s-flavored ideals that infused its early years but increasingly buffeted by bureaucratic and political headwinds from the institutional settings in which it was embedded.

I had decided to become a teacher 4 years earlier. After a couple of months trudging through the bureaucratic marshland of the (then) Board

of Education, and a semester of substitute teaching. I landed a job as a social studies teacher at Bronx Outreach, a "second chance" alternative high school for 17- to 21-year-olds. My time there provided a rich learning experience about teaching and classroom management; about the lives and minds of Bronx young people; about the mix of cultures, races, and ethnicities that populated the borough; and about the choking limitations on good educational practice imposed by bureaucratic structures and mind-sets.

After 3 years, I was feeling increasingly frustrated by those limitations, with little room for implementing the kind of alternative educational practices I had been exposed to, particularly the idea of theme-based instruction.

At the time, my Taxi Rank and File comrade, John Garvey, was overseeing an overhaul of CUNY's campus-based General Educational Development programs, reshaping them around a theme-based interdisciplinary model. He told me that the Institute for Literacy Studies at Lehman College, where I had taken an inspiring semester-long workshop, was looking for a part-time teacher/director to help develop and run their new General Educational Development program. This was too perfect a fit to ignore.

### John Garvey

The Brooklyn House is an 11-story building that probably housed about 700 to 800 adult men—virtually all of whom were in jail because they were not able to make bail on various felony charges. Complaints about the lawyers were numerous and many inmates spent hours in the jails' law library in an effort to help themselves. In the end, the great majority of them "copped a plea" rather than go to trial in what they saw as a realistic assessment of their chances of being set free in as little time as possible.

Teaching in a jail is not quite like teaching elsewhere, not even in a prison. First off, the inmates were endlessly coming and going—sometimes as the result of changes in their status, other times due to the quite arbitrary decision-making of the Department of Correction authorities. Stable enrollments were elusive. In addition, most of the guards were not especially sympathetic to classes for individuals who they perceived as lowlifes and losers. In light of the pervasive negative attitudes, perhaps what was most surprising was the presence of a few officers who were genuinely supportive.

I was not ready to do as well as I needed to. A couple of my first students really didn't know how to read at all. In my desperate, and quite ignorant, efforts to figure out what to do, I prepared flash cards for them to look at and call out the words—simply because I remembered using flash cards myself as a child. I wish I could do most of it over again.

I did get to join a remarkable group of people at the college who were intensely devoted to their work and their students—people who have made remarkable differences in the lives of individual students and contributed to the enrichment of a broad range of educational institutions and programs across several decades.

In some instances, the practices in the college were fairly advanced but, in other cases, they were grounded in what now appears to me to be a somewhat limited understanding of the complexities of effective literacy instruction. In general, the teachers were granted considerable independence in the classroom. In retrospect, I imagine that our primary consideration in the evaluation of teaching was the extent to which teachers seemed able to organize their lessons in a coherent manner, provide good explanations, and engage their students.

### John Gordon

I didn't know much about adult education practice at the time, but even to my unsophisticated eyes the instructional materials I could find seemed impoverished. I remember ordering materials from some of the adult education publishing houses and being struck by how poor they were—dry, boring workbooks on topics like how to get and keep a job (Don't yell at the boss!). And the reading materials were for the most part so bland that I couldn't imagine students getting excited by them. I could find no sense of the potential for literacy to open up new worlds or help students reimagine their own.

On the other hand, the field in New York City seemed wide open. The sudden expansion of adult literacy services in the city had brought in a lot of new teachers who weren't committed to conventional methods. Staff and students at programs around the city were experimenting with different approaches to teaching, finding ways to situate curriculum in students' lived experience, and rethinking the student-teacher relationship.

Staff at Literacy Volunteers, for example, was developing student-centered approaches to writing instruction. Students at Bronx Educational Services were working as assistant teachers. The Institute for Literacy Studies at Lehman College sponsored conferences that brought students and teachers together to explore collaborative approaches to teaching and learning. Adult education students formed an independent citywide student organization: Adult United Voices.

This was just a piece of what was going on in New York City. After all, there were some 50,000 students in literacy. General Educational Development (GED), and English to Speakers of Other Languages classes citywide. Still, I believe that period was characterized by a sense of excitement and engagement with questions of teaching and learning and how those things might be meaningfully connected to people's daily lives—a sharp contrast to the current situation where the National Reporting System and the focus on testing have pushed essential questions of teaching and learning, relevance, and meaning to the back burner.

### Peter Kleinbard

YALA was envisioned by Marian Schwartz, in Mayor Koch's office, as a model for youth with very poor academic skills who had dropped out. Just as they

do today, these youths represented by far the majority of dropouts. Their prospects were dim in the economy of the time, but less dim than those facing similar youth today.

In the 1980s, the major policy vehicles for young dropouts were shaped by the view that long-term and comprehensive services were a waste. "They had their chance and they blew it," was the line. Low-literacy youth were rarely served in employment programs because of the time and costs required to attain a GED or job, much the same as today.

Those designing YALA understood that for young adults to advance, they must be supported comprehensively, addressing personal, social, and academic development. The school was structured as a partnership between an educational program and eight community-based organizations. These organizations were to recruit youth in their communities and provide counseling, work preparation (including internships with stipends), and job placement.

YALA had extensive resources, but its funding agencies, structure, and scale required figuring out a lot of new challenges. Many of its shaping ideas became important in later years when New York City developed large numbers of small high schools and Multiple Pathways schools and programs (2003 forward): partnerships with CBOs and integration of work experience within an educational setting.

Initially, we focused on increasing student participation and engagement, and creating an orderly and constructive culture in which all felt secure. We sought to understand and address student needs and strengths with the rough tools we had and refined the program each cycle. At the time, few in the literacy community had much appetite for young dropouts. Leaders from the Literacy Assistance Center, CUNY, and the Mayor's Office helped improve the alignment between the different funding agencies and the goals of YALA. The Board of Education sent instructors who were not suited to YALA students, and their union affiliation made it difficult to get the level of work we needed from them. With the support of the Mayor's Office, I was empowered to hire appropriate teachers and get them licensed. Many talented and caring individuals began to form a staff. Significant numbers were people of color, something that the students and the community-based organizations cited as a strength.

The Department of Employment (DOE) required that youth be placed in jobs within several months of entering YALA. Trying to keep youth longer was in this view, to quote one of the DOE staff, "an invitation for them to get in trouble" (she meant in the old sense of girls becoming pregnant). Again, the Mayor's Office forced DOE to allow youth to remain longer.

As these changes took place, there remained much work to do on the ground. A key indicator, student attendance, showed consistent improvement. Cooperation among school and CBO staff improved, though there were outliers. There were lots of events, opportunities to eat together, recognition ceremonies, and student publications including the annual *YALA Journal*. YALA began to function as a school and a community.

### Paul Wasserman

I began my work at Lehman seeing myself primarily as a teacher, and have tried to keep that sense of my identity front and center even as the balance between my teaching and administrative roles tilted increasingly toward the administrative. Even before I started at Lehman, the program's philosophy was that administrators should also teach, and we've sustained that as a core structure and value. To me, the evolution of the adult literacy workforce into a core of reasonably well-paid program and system administrators, mostly detached from the classroom, on the one hand, and a mostly part-time and poorly paid army of teachers on the other, has been a key marker of the field's move away from the alternative and toward the institutional.

Since my days of taxi driving, I've carried a basic skepticism about all institutionalized structures, including those in the education and nonprofit worlds. So, while acknowledging the good and necessary work these institutions may be doing, I think it's also important to see them in a parallel framework as agencies of social control. Folks like us, who've found comfortable careers within these institutions, are caught in a constant tension—between being facilitators of righteous, liberatory work on the one hand, and being implementers (however reluctantly) of social control over poor and working-class people on the other hand.

### John Garvey

During my first few years of working in the jails, it was common to come across newspaper articles suggesting that much criminal activity was due to the poor literacy skills of the individuals involved or, in another version, to undetected learning disabilities. For a number of reasons, most important my everyday encounters with individuals behind bars, this explanation increasingly made little sense. It seemed to me that criminal activity was a much more complex affair. I was especially skeptical of accounts that left out any consideration of the workings of multiple racist institutions when, even then, the jails and prisons were filled with Black and Hispanic men. I began poking around for different ways of thinking about the issues. Literacy and language seemed to be key.

If we can become accustomed to using language and literacy in many different ways, we can imagine ourselves acting in many different ways in the world. Truth be told, it may happen the other way around—if we have the opportunity to act in many different ways, we may acquire many different uses of language and literacy. In any case, there's a relationship between what we do and our "ways with words" (Heath, 1983).

In jails and prisons, there's a real limit to how much individuals can change what they do (although there are any number of remarkable accounts of individuals who refused to let the routines of custody determine who they were; Malcolm X; the boxer Hurricane Carter; or even in a very different

context, the Birdman of Alcatraz, Robert Stroud. But you can change what you do with words. Becoming more versatile with the ways that words can be used can lay the basis for becoming more capable at negotiating difficult circumstances outside. Ultimately, new ways with words can lead to imagining new ways of acting—possibly even including political ways. But, and this is a really big “but,” an unchanged world will all but always limit the potential and significance of those new ways of acting.

Years later, when I was at CUNY’s Office of Academic Affairs, we published a small book titled *In Their Own Eyes: Self Portraits of Adult Students* (Division of Adult and Continuing Education, 1995), which captured the ways in which students made sense of their own often painful experiences in life and schools. Students who contributed their accounts frequently spoke about the ways in which their participation in literacy classes had affected their abilities to speak in the world—most significantly, they talked about the ways in which their participation in genuine communicative activities in classes allowed them to become more able to participate in real discussions outside of class.

### Paul Wasserman

As a teacher, my initial focus was on teaching content; on exposing students to new ideas and perspectives about the world; and on providing opportunities for them to develop their own voices and ideas while engaging them in enjoyable and meaningful reading, writing, and classroom activities—with content learning as the primary goal.

But I soon realized that the issue of skill development also needed attention. Much of my growth as a teacher has involved viewing work with students through both a content and a literacy lens, and I’ve been fortunate to work closely with some of the city’s most skilled and knowledgeable literacy practitioners. CUNY’s move toward theme-based curricula and instruction in part involved shifting instructional work away from teaching discrete, decontextualized skills toward a focus on rich content learning, with skill development embedded in and growing out of content-based instruction. In some ways, I needed to make the opposite shift—to pay careful attention to coherent skill and literacy development and to see that as equally important as content learning.

I’ve also learned an incredible amount from students, who bring a wealth of life experience, wisdom, and passion into the classroom, but who also have huge gaps in basic skills, writing facility, and background knowledge. Understanding these gaps and trying to develop strategies to address them has been a central part of our work at Lehman and in CUNY.

While literacy work in New York City was well established when I started, the process of redesigning GED work in CUNY felt fresh and exciting, with a sense that we were doing important, innovative work. For me, it serves as a powerful model of collaborative, system-wide program development.

Despite institutional and budgetary limitations, there was lots of room for creative play. John had created a foundation of structures and guiding principles but left space for experimentation at the program level and for feedback from and dialogue between teachers and administrators. At Lehman, too, we were given freedom to develop our program creatively, which we did over the course of several years, through a rich, collaborative process.

### Peter Kleinbard

As director of YALA, I saw my role as creating a setting that would encourage good things to happen. I focused on hiring and supporting instructors who could address skills and encourage active roles for young people while demonstrating that adults could have positive and creative lives.

We built a small unit structure with teams comprising CBO counselors and teachers working with small groups of youth. We encouraged a focus on individual students at regular meetings of these teams. I sought out for leadership roles staff that could complement my strengths and compensate for my lacks. The deputy director took the lead on student disciplinary issues. Several experienced instructors worked to strengthen instruction school-wide by drawing upon research and practice in literacy.

In 1994, however, after Rudy Giuliani became Mayor, essential supports were stripped away. Most important was the ability to hire suitable teachers. The YALA staff had been painstakingly assembled, had built a professional community, and had developed the skills to work well with the CBOs. These were displaced by Board of Education instructors selected because of seniority, many of them individuals who had not fared well in teaching positions previously. We fought these changes. A teacher led a sit-in at City Hall, and I reached out to leaders in the administration and union. But this was to no avail. Deeply disappointed in the undermining of YALA, and the many disturbing events that occurred as a result, I felt helpless to turn things around and moved on in 1996.

### John Gordon

The Open Book was located in Brooklyn—in a neighborhood that would go through a period of intense gentrification over the next 15 years. Many of the students were single mothers on public assistance, living in the surrounding neighborhoods and fighting to stay in their homes. They didn’t have much confidence in themselves as students, but they arrived at the Open Book with a lot of life experience and they weren’t shy. Our classroom was quickly bubbling over with the day-to-day stories of their lives. It didn’t take long for those stories to make their way into our reading and writing and for the students to make the space their own. The story of the Open Book is told in much fuller detail elsewhere (Evans, Gordon, & Ramdeholl, 2009; Gordon & Ramdeholl, 2010).

Before long, we started holding monthly meetings at the school. Students played an important role in shaping curriculum, determining the class structure and schedule, and hiring teachers. We began recording and publishing oral histories in which students explored critical issues such as domestic violence, alcohol and substance abuse, and their struggles in school. As we groped our way toward a coherent pedagogy, writing and student publishing became a central part of our curriculum.

Over time we assembled a strong staff, but we were acutely aware that we had a lot to learn and read everything we could get our hands on. We gravitated toward building curriculum around student-identified themes, partly because it fit with our notion of the Open Book as a learning community, but also because it seemed to make more sense to teach skills in context and to expose students to authentic texts and real literature, texts that would get them excited about reading and help them find real purpose in getting better at it.

I came to see the Open Book as a place that, in some small way, functioned as an alternative to the dominant culture, a place that students could shape according to values that were important to them; a culture they could participate in actively as opposed to the enforced passivity of the mainstream; and a place where they could engage in the practice of democracy, and in that process come to see themselves in new and different ways.

## Conclusion

We began this chapter with the observation that implementation of the National Reporting System and the increasing focus on preparation for work has led to a narrowing of the space available for adult educators to develop approaches that engage students as active participants in their own learning, a key to developing powerful literacy and language skills. That narrowing is, of course, a reality at all levels of education. In K–12, as well as adult education, the mantra of “college and career readiness” serves as the organizing principle of much educational “reform.” Test-based accountability models increasingly dominate K–12 education, triggering widespread concern by teachers, students, and parents about the narrowing of the curriculum, while distracting from other evidence of growth. As Koretz (2010) of Harvard University points out, the negative impact of test-based accountability goes even deeper, because it often generates “substantial distortions of practice . . . and inflation of test scores, that is, increases in scores larger than the actual improvements in the latent proficiencies the tests are intended to estimate” (p. 4).

In New York, we see this process manifest itself in the annual report cards issued to adult education programs by the New York State Education Department, with the distortions accentuated by the pressure that programs are under to massage data in order to receive high report-card grades. These are disconnected from descriptions of actual practice, thus revealing little about program quality—but perhaps more about adeptness at getting the numbers right. While more program resources and management time are devoted to

playing with data, less go to instruction and teacher support. Fewer programs offer classes for lower-level students, for whom large educational gains and outcomes such as the GED take longer to achieve. These, the very folks for whom the field of adult education was developed, are a shrinking presence in our world.

We believe that adult education would be well served if teachers and students became engaged actively in efforts to explore and understand these trends, and to reclaim the right to define the purposes of our work and to shape the learning communities in which we come together. We hope that our reflections prove helpful to that effort.

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