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### Students And Service Staff Learning And Researching Together On A College Campus

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## Students and Service Staff Learning and Researching Together on a College Campus

Diane Downer Anderson  
Swarthmore College

*This paper describes the preliminary study of a service-learning program on a college campus that paired students and college service staff in learning partnerships and as researchers of the program. One-on-one informal learning, mutual and reciprocal participation, and community change are discussed as characteristics unique to this program. Three primary questions are answered: How does service within a college campus count as service-learning? How was the program community-shaping as well as personally enriching for students and staff? What place does participatory research have in service-learning projects?*

When I first witnessed this institution I kept seeing the steeple and I said, "I would like to go there one day."...Once I got here I said, "This is the number one college, this is great to be here!...I need to be learning something here myself."

This statement comes from an Environmental Services technician who once traveled on the train past Swarthmore College on his way to another job. He recognizes college as a place of "learning something" and he wants to "go" to this college. Although he has come here to take a job as an Environmental Services technician (formerly called housekeeping and custodial work), he says, "I need to be learning something here myself." He is coming here to place himself among others in a learning community, the local capital or "fund of knowledge" (Moll, 1992), not just to clean buildings.

This paper is about a program on a college campus in which students and staff members, mostly from Environmental and Dining Services, work together weekly in learning partnerships. The program, called *Learning for Life (LAL)*, challenges the assumption that a college community consists of students, staff, and faculty who are equally positioned in the community, while it draws on their unequal and different positions as resources for learning. *LAL* assumes that service within a college community is a legitimate form of community service.

Community service from the perspective of a college community is usually thought of as service outside the immediate community, often in a disadvantaged community nearby. Community service from a broader perspective is usually thought of in terms of what a citizen does *within* the community, such as serving on the school board, coaching an

athletic team, helping in the local schools, or running for office. In accepting quite a different definition of community service, Swarthmore College students, administration, and staff have recognized that although we are all members of this community, some members are more privileged or legitimate than others. Further, Swarthmore community members are positioned differently in terms of the knowledge capital that is the business of the college. Many staff members (Environmental Service technicians, Dining Services staff, Facilities staff) come from the low-income urban communities that students often serve through external community service projects. By conceiving of service as that which only serves those *outside* the immediate college community, we risk failing to recognize the needs of those who work among us. Many service staff members are among the "working poor," often holding two jobs, and some have been historically, educationally, and socioeconomically disadvantaged through racism and classism.

The cultural capital of a liberal arts college, as a selective academic institution, is learning. But in institutions of higher learning it tends to be the faculty and students within the community who get to learn and teach, or to identify as a learner and/or teacher. Yet staff can also participate in that fund of learning. *LAL* challenges the often-restricted access to that learning. It also disrupts the positions of who teaches, who learns, and who stands where among whom.

Learning as social practice informs this study's interpretation of the *LAL* student-staff partnership program. Socially-situated learning, defined as experiences in locally-situated social participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1999; Sfard, 1998;

Street, 1993; Yagelski, 2000), as opposed to learning as transmission or construction of knowledge, has allowed *LAL* researchers to understand the ways in which language and identity are implicated in *LAL*.

The study revealed the impacts, expected and unexpected, of the one-on-one informal student-staff learning partnerships, student-staff leadership, and collaborative research, on transforming individuals and in shaping the larger college community. *LAL* facilitated evolving mutual participation in learning in the community, as well as fuller participation within the learning institution. Student and staff participants draw one another more closely to the center of being college community members, i.e., learners and teachers. This paper describes *LAL*, the course in which it serves as a service-learning component, their underlying ideologies, and what has been learned from our collaborative inquiry.

### About Learning for Life

In Fall 1998 a transfer student, staff directors, the Community Services director, the Human Resources director, and I entered into discussions about developing a literacy/lifelong learning program for non-professional staff at Swarthmore College. At the time, I was developing an elective course in the Department of Educational Studies called *Literacies and Social Identities*.

In the beginning we considered that “illiteracy” is implied by “literacy” programs and hence ideologically problematic. We also considered that learning is as “sacred” to persons as it is instrumental to their work or academics in its quality (Senge, 1994). We did not want staff to have to self-identify within the community as “illiterate” or less than literate, terms that we find offensive. We wished to provide opportunities for the broad range of interests and needs of staff members, from literacy support to Graduation Equivalency Diploma (GED) preparation, to writing support for staff who may want to attend college or further their education. We initiated a program in which students and staff might be paired together for up to three hours a week, during staff work hours, to study any subject the staff members’ chose. With a new book in hand, *Literacy for Life: Adult learners, new practices* (Fingeret & Drennon, 1997), we named the program *Learning for Life (LAL)* and launched it with a student coordinator during Spring 1999.<sup>1</sup> We originally intended that learning in the partnership be focused on the staff members’ desires; as it turned out, staff and students, to varying degrees, worked to informally satisfy the learning desires of both partners.

The culture of Swarthmore, with its Quaker beginnings, fosters student participation in social change through service activities and numerous funded projects. While there are as many as 12 community service projects and programs in which students can become involved, none is connected with a course and truly qualifies as service-learning, except for *LAL*. Additionally, while some programs take place on campus, such as the Upward Bound Program, *LAL* is the only program that directly serves members within the college community itself.

Despite the small number of partnerships the first semester, 16 students signed up for the *Literacies and Social Identities* class during the second semester, for which the *LAL* partnership would fulfill the course’s service component. The course seems to have jump started the program. After its introduction in Fall 1999, the program expanded from 16 partnerships to 23, then doubled to approximately 45 for each successive semester.

### About the *Literacies and Social Identities* Course

The *Literacies and Social Identities* course is taught every third semester as an elective in the Department of Educational Studies. Students who intend to teach English as second language, secondary English or history, or who will study literacy or policy in graduate school are encouraged to take the course. However, like many courses in the popular Department of Educational Studies, students from a variety of majors with a broad range of interests take the class, often to fulfill a divisional requirement in the social sciences.

The course uses readings from anthropology, sociology, education, social psychology, linguistics, and literary theory. Fieldwork consists of a partnership in the *LAL* program. Content includes literacy research, history, research methods and policies. The course explores the intersections and meanings of literacy practices and social identities constituted in socio-cultural contexts, including but not limited to schools, and across life-spans. Students are expected to read, write, teach, and learn with one another and in their *LAL* partnerships. They are expected to work to understand the ways in which literacy practices constitute various social identities and the ways in which contexts (local, social, religious, academic, etc.) and identities (race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religious, etc.) shape and circumscribe literacy practices. Literacies of competence, practice, and sacredness are examined, as well as representations of literacy in local settings and popular media.

Students write two short papers: a chapter of their literacy autobiography and an analysis of a scene of literacy. The scene of literacy may be a literacy event observed in the real world, literature, music, a joke, or the popular media. Students keep a reflective journal of their experiences in their learning partnership. For their final paper students may write a more lengthy analysis of a scene of literacy, a literature review of a literacy topic, an evaluation of a literacy program or curriculum, a proposal for a literacy program or curriculum, or a proposal for a research project that addresses a literacy problem. The semester ends with a luncheon celebration with other *LAL* partnerships.

### Research Methods

The student, staff, and faculty advisor (me) of *LAL* initially asked questions intended to understand the program's popularity, and to evaluate for improvement purposes. What happens when college students and Environmental and Dining services staff join together to learn based on the staff members' agendas? How does a link to academic coursework support or enhance *LAL* and/or partnerships? Who is served by, and who serves in, such a program? What learning is advanced and how is it advanced through such partnerships? Could participatory program coordination and evaluation improve *LAL*? Additionally, students in class had indicated a need for issues of race, class, and position on campus and in *LAL* partnerships to be more directly addressed.

Participatory program evaluation is understood in this context as research done collaboratively with staff and students on a program in which they are the major stakeholders. Often called "collaborative research," and "action research," this approach has a history in anthropology and education, where questions about the epistemology of knowledge and its use predominate. Is knowledge unitary or multiple? Is it evidenced in experience or research? Who owns it? Who knows it? Who shares it with whom? Participatory program evaluation is often used for school and community programs and problems.

Action or advocacy research stems from the recognition that anthropology as a discipline has focused on cultural identities (tribes, nation-states, communities, ethnic groups) that have been socially or politically marginal or marginated... collaborative research extends this approach by facilitating the creation of networks of community organizations to use research as a means through which a community problem can be addressed. (Schensul & Schensul, 1992, pp. 166-167)

Participatory research in the interpretive mode is often seen as intrinsically more democratic (Hymes, 1982) than traditional forms of outsider, seemingly more objective, evaluation. The recent trend in social science is to recognize multiple realities and perspectives and to understand truth as contingent and conditional.

People in different locations in the social system construe knowledge, truth, and relevance in markedly different ways, each of them legitimate and worthy. Evaluation should not privilege one set of beliefs over others. It should not take seriously only the questions and concerns of study sponsors rather than those of staff and clients whose lives may be even more affected by their experiences in the program. (Weiss, 1998, pp. 100-101)

In true participatory research, equality of power among the researchers and researched are addressed through involvement of stakeholders in identifying research questions; sources, collection, and analysis of data; and reporting of findings. In this study, some staff and students participated in all aspects of the study, including dissemination of findings at the annual conference of the Student Coalition for Action in Literacy Education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Erickson (1986) and Hymes (1982) claim that interpretive research does not require special abilities beyond observation, compare/contrast analysis, and reflection skills that all people can do. With these skills, a common interest in the *LAL* program, and a willingness to learn from and with each other, we proceeded to systematically collect and analyze data.

Preliminary data consisted of student evaluations from the first *Literacies and Social Identities* class (16 students: 4 black, 1 Asian, 11 white) and five focus group interviews of staff (17 staff members: 16 black, 1 Asian) in groups of 3-5 that were audiotaped and transcribed. A student and I organized and led the focus group interviews with staff. We collected and organized documents internal to *LAL*, such as records of partnerships and other organizational papers, and gathered articles from the student newspaper and the staff newsletter.

The new questions that emerged when the students and staff became involved in the preliminary data included: How do participants describe the learner-centered/partnership aspects of *LAL*? How do their descriptions mirror, or not, actual *LAL* sessions? Are there tensions between *LAL*'s claims to be both learner-centered and partnership-centered? How do participants understand, value, and evaluate their *LAL* experiences and accomplishments?

How does *LAL* transform relationships on campus, including relationships of race, gender, age, position, class, and education, at personal and institutional levels? How is access to resources implicated in these relationships and transformations? How does *LAL* create space for participants to think about their own learning styles, strategies, competencies, and histories?

These new questions were used in analyzing the data (audiotaped staff interviews, end-of-course student evaluations, new *LAL* student surveys) with self-selected staff in Fall 2000. The sociolinguistic lenses taught in the course *Literacies and Social Identities* informed our analysis. They included Tannen's views (1993) of the ways in which people's assumptions can be seen in their discourse, Ochs's ideas (1993) of how verbal acts and stances are indicative of social identities, and Davies and Harre's ideas (1990) of how positioning is evidenced through discourse. The students involved in the analysis knew the sociolinguistic approaches to analysis and we shared them with the staff members.

We sorted the data by reading through it and individually locating student and staff statements or sections of the transcripts that spoke to something important, that resonated with our original and evolving research queries. Then we literally cut out those statements and sections and worked in student-staff pairs to arrange them in categories and assign them thematic meaning. This allowed us to create some tentative categories that could then be discussed at length. In these discussions we added layers of meaning, rather than trying to let one person's interpretation triumph over another's. Our discussions and findings were additive, rather than reductive.

We were deeply moved by the depth of feelings toward *LAL* expressed by staff members. We also enjoyed the honesty and openness with which staff described crossing boundaries of race, gender, class, privilege, and position, as well as their willingness to relate *LAL* to their schooling experiences. It became clear that there was an investment among participant staff members in continuing *LAL* and being involved in its development. One outcome was that two staff members volunteered to coordinate the program with the two students.

We also considered the problems inherent in simply doing participant data analysis because it made those of us in power "feel good" about our egalitarianism. Although I readily admit that all of us, including staff, felt "good" about our work together, we worked to be clear about our motives and to make sure that contributions to data analysis were both genuine and more than self-serving. We recognized that not all *LAL* students and staff

chose, or were able, to participate in the data analysis. Therefore, only some subjects were empowered and treated as subjects, rather than objects, of research. We wondered if students and staff could also be empowered by their peers' participation in this research venture. Or, when some are selected or choose to take a more powerful position in regards to research, are others left behind?

Participatory research approaches do not lay claims to the objectivity reserved for positivist studies. This interpretive study was concerned with what Erickson calls internal validity where "the basic validity criterion...[is] the immediate and local meanings of actions, as defined from the actors' point of view" (1986, p. 119). We wanted our findings to represent, in a "trustworthy" way (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the veracity of the data. According to Erickson, trustworthiness is ensured when there is an adequate relationship between the researchers and researched, an adequate amount of good quality data has been collected through a variety of methods, analysis is adequate regarding patterns of action and meaning, and there is a rigorous search for disconfirming evidence (pp. 119-161). We worked to have the findings grounded in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In social research, fulfillment of criteria such as these parallel the truth and validity claims of scientific research.

In being concerned about power in our researcher/researched relationships, especially with regard to staff participants, we drew on approaches to participatory evaluation. Wolf (1995) claims that "unequal hierarchies or levels of control" (p. 2) are often part of ongoing research. Therefore, we wanted to involve staff centrally in data analysis, as well as to disclose our goals and to discuss what was at stake for each of us. Because we were co-researching among community members we explicitly shared the idea that "persons are not objects and should not be treated as subjects; subjects have their own agendas and researchers should try to address them; and if knowledge is worth having it is worth sharing" (Cameron, Frazer, Harvey, Rampton, & Richardson, 1992). We enjoyed disturbing the usual power relationships between researchers and researched, as well as the power implied by whom usually gets to analyze data at an undergraduate educational institution. As one of the student researchers said,

Including subjects in the data analysis actually enhanced our understanding of what we observed. Staff and students selected a focus for our joint work and it was clear that asking questions and introducing topics [was] not the sole prerogative of the researcher. In fact, the three staff members explicitly had just as much

power to influence the direction of analysis.

Participatory research approaches also risk solipsism and bias in the creation of categories. As a complex social system, a college campus and its activities are interpreted constantly and from many perspectives. Ongoing interpretations by persons in positions of power evolve into articles in campus periodicals, course offerings, and academic and workplace policies. Participatory research that has program improvement as its goal can evolve into action and advocacy for those not in positions of power. As one set of perspectives on “truth”—i. e., one set of informed, documented, rigorously attained findings—this type of research has the potential to complement other “truths” on a college campus. Further, it can contribute to the overall civic responsibility of the community and the civil discourse of informed community members.

Although the data from this study might be interpreted differently by someone standing in another position, the positions of faculty researcher, students, and staff represented by the research team captured a broader range of possible interpretations than most non-participatory research. Additionally, it ensured that the findings would be based on “the immediate and local meanings of actions, as defined from the actors’ point of view” (Erickson, 1986, p. 119). The agreement on the findings by representatives from faculty researcher, students, and staff enhances the trustworthiness of this study. We continue to look for disconfirming data, collect good quality data, and will continue to develop and refine categories as new data become available.

### Findings

The following findings are tentative interpretations that may change over time as we *learn* more about the phenomenon of *LAL* and *discern* more about what it means to participate in the *LAL* program in the local context. Although we have paid much more attention to staff thus far in this ongoing research, we continue to be interested in students, especially those who do not join the *Literacies and Social Identities* class but participate in *LAL*. However, we do believe that students stand in a higher position of privilege on this campus than do staff members. We also recognize that the social progressivism of Swarthmore College attracts many students who are already committed to service as either charity or social change (Kahne & Westheimer, 1996). We believe the college works harder to enrich and enhance student perspectives on service than to change them. At this time we are less interested in research findings about students than about staff.

The findings are divided into three overlapping conceptual categories for discussion purposes. One is the very personal, relational level of one-on-one and other informal learning events and relationships that characterize *LAL*. Informal learning has emerged as a powerful characteristic of the program for both staff and students. The second is a theoretical speculation upon the ways in which students and staff, when joined together as learners and teachers, draw on one another’s respective capital to come closer to being legitimate, intimate members of the college community. The condition of mutual participation in informal and reciprocal learning relationships brings both students and staff closer to the center of having a learning/teaching identity within the college. The third is the ways in which the program has worked at the community level to shape and influence the community, including access to resources, improved campus relationships, and involvement by students and staff in social justice. These findings are social justice arguments for service-learning to include working within one’s own college community as well as outside of that community.

#### *One-on-One, Informal Learning Relationships*

The informal learning relationships in *LAL*, especially the one-on-one aspect of the semester-long partnerships, made the biggest impression on staff. Personal impacts and community inequities across boundaries of race, age, gender, class, and positions of privilege were made more visible for students and staff. *LAL* partnerships and staff interviews provided a venue for staff to reflect both meta-cognitively (reflecting on their own learning goals, strategies, and experiences) and critically (noting their place in a world that is organized hierarchically by gender, class, race, socio-economics, and language). Personal impacts and community inequities were also articulated by both students and staff in the learning partnerships and in ongoing data collection and analysis. *LAL* staff participants were acutely aware of how their own schooling did not qualify them as successful learners. In *LAL* staff members could work non-publicly and at their own pace. One claimed that, “one-on-one gave you access and you could just talk to that person and you didn’t have to worry about what you didn’t know.” Another felt the difference as, “she [the student partner] would help me... and it wasn’t so much all these people in the room and you feel like a dumb person.”

One staff member claimed, “I’m a slow learner in that type of thing (regular school). I’m faster with my hands. I’m good at doing things.” Another expressed,

I think it makes a difference when you have a one-on-one tutor. Lots of times, you're in class with people and maybe some are ahead of you and sometimes you feel like you are slower than that person...[in *LAL*] it is easier to learn and things are more fun...you're more comfortable.

Large group settings such as classes can be frustrating and even hurtful to staff, no matter how well-intended the classes might be. One staff member said, "You might think [when] a question [is asked in school], 'oh, I ain't gonna say that because it sounds stupid.'" Experiences such as this leave staff "feeling hurt a little bit inside...it, like, knocked down my self-esteem a little bit." Staff at the *LAL* focus groups expressed regret at the loss of educational opportunity in school. "For instance being hard-headed in class all your life. You pay for that in the long run." Another staff member, who had tried taking computer classes at the college, said that he "had a couple classes here for computers. I didn't really learn too much. I didn't learn as fast as others do and sometimes it might have to be explained to me."

Staff reflected on earlier classroom-based experiences and how frustrating and humiliating they could feel. But there was no entry-level knowledge required in *LAL* or the competition that tends to characterize classrooms. As one staff member noted, "You don't feel like somebody is learning more than you." In positioning themselves as "slow," "dumb," "stupid," and "knocked down," staff are expressing their previous descendent positions as well as their new, higher positions in the more intimate partnerships of *LAL*.

The relational aspect of one-on-one partnerships was important to both staff members and students. During the pursuit of learning goals, partners talked of family, personal experiences, and personal history, and grew to know and value one another. Often those conversations were about family history and personal experiences. One student asserted: "I learned a lot about her [staff partner] experiences as an immigrant from Viet Nam...about language barriers and how much effect they can have on functioning in the United States." In talking about this experience, one staff member said:

You might talk a little bit about your families, your different backgrounds, she'll tell you about her background and it is so different and you're from different cultures, different races, different places in life but you come together and there's so much friendship and harmony.

Staff and students felt that there was a real give and take on both sides in their learning partner-

ships, as indicated by the staff member comment, "You learn more about that person. You know, that person, each time you come to class, they're taking a little bit of you and you're taking a little bit of them."

In relationships over time, staff and students found common bonds beyond their differences. One staff member said, "They learn the humanness of us as working together and finding out we even have faults." Some students agreed, as expressed by the comment, "It also made her [staff partner] realize that students here are caring people." Many female staff and students commented on their bonds as women, such as, "It's like bonding with women. We may not all go through it at the same time but we still women at whatever stages and that's a bond," and, "I think that she's a younger woman than myself, she's still a woman and she's going through the transition like I am...I think I can help her." Age was also recognized as a potential barrier, but one that did not limit relationships across students (ages 18-22) and staff (ages mid-20s to 65). One staff member expressed, "The kids are nice. They don't seem like their age difference makes that much difference."

Staff participants in *LAL* have been mostly black, while student participants have been a mix of black, white, and Asian students. Staff saw the crossing of racial boundaries through partnerships as evidence that

people are people. We can get along and a person of another race can help you...you don't have to be judgmental 'cause sometimes you look at them (the students) the way they look, or act maybe, they don't want to be bothered with us. It's not always the case... Some good can come out of it.

The boundary crossing extended to families of staff and students. One staff member and her grandchildren spent a day in Philadelphia with her student partner, another student's parents visited and met the staff member for lunch. Another student partner has spent Sunday mornings attending church with a staff member.

Staff members are also aware that their relationships with students are open to public scrutiny and misunderstanding, based on the crossing of age, race, and gender boundaries. One staff member expressed:

Me and [female student partner], we go and have lunch together. At first, it was kind of scary. Here I am, a black male, older, and I'm going... to lunch with [a white younger female student]. I'm hoping that no one thinks that something's going on here. These thoughts are

because something new is happening...it's just like a sister and brother relationship. I learned about her little sister and her mother and father...We just open up and it's not just a male/male thing it's a male/female thing.

Another staff member said, "You can come close to people, regardless of what race they are." But there was still recognition that "a lot of people misinterpret things 'cause they view that something is going on... they don't know the real reason why y'all together."

One staff member noted that she learned by teaching. "Sometimes you learn things from other people in the process of trying to teach someone else. It would be good for everybody." Additionally, in taking on the position of teacher in the partnership, the staff member has re-positioned herself regarding the roles of the institution.

Simple talk in the partnerships helped some staff to learn the *language* of using computers. One staff member found that talking helped him to experience computer language effectively. "Just the terminology speeded me up on the computer!" He additionally felt that *LAL* opened doors to other resources on campus:

I use [Web page design jobs] as another learning experience. Each person asks for something a little different and I tell them 'Sure, I can do that' (even if I can't). Now I know how to get help from *LAL*... I'm on the server, put my password in and actually use their FTP to go and grab something for me.

At a personal level, *LAL* and the focus group interviews have facilitated rich and rewarding relationships across boundaries of college position, age, race, gender, and class, and provided a venue for staff to reflect upon their educational histories.

### *Mutual Participation*

Learning through the *LAL* program means learning and teaching in community. A mutuality of learning and teaching has brought students and staff closer to what it means to be "liberally" educated and educating. As one student said about her participation in *LAL*: "It brought me away from being stratified hierarchically by knowledge and more like you share your type of knowledge and I'll share mine, since we all know there are many types of intelligences." A staff member expressed, "[with *LAL*] I visualize myself being in a classroom [although] I work in the biology department [as an Environmental Services worker]." Another staff member expressed how *LAL* has enhanced her life, saying, "[*LAL*] makes me feel like I'm getting bigger, I'm growing, I'm doing something that I want

to do and somebody is there helping me, pushing me."

The boundaries between home and work practices, in terms of space, time, and technologies, makes *LAL* staff look more like students than "blue-collar" workers who work in shifts and leave their work behind when they go home. Staff, too, are living a "life of the mind," a lifestyle that our society tends to claim for its scholars. One staff member said, "When I go home now I can't stay off the computer." Staff now say, "I feel so good when I stay up all night learning a new program or something," and,

when I learn new things over Christmas break I would e-mail her [student partner] and tell her 'Oh, I'm so excited! Guess what I did today?' and then she would be like, "Oh, I can't wait 'til I get back so you can show me!" It makes them [the students] feel good.

*LAL* enables a mutual, shared joy of learning and discovery. This is, perhaps, the noblest and most lofty of liberal arts college goals. These mutual moments of joyful learning in *LAL* can be heard in,

She [student partner] found out what that part meant and I found out what that part meant and we put them together and see what it looks like on a web page! So that works! It was a back and forth thing...

and, "It just shows how open they [the students] were to learn and how they were anxious or whatever to help us and it was just rewarding for both of us." Staff knew how important they were to student learning. One said, "They're learning from us and we're learning from them." Another said, "At times, we wasn't there together, and some things I learned I would be teaching her [student], not realizing I learned it but I be showing her and vice-versa, she'd come to show me. So we were learning from each other."

I propose that we might think of learning and literacy in *LAL* as practice in the community in two ways. On the one hand, participation has changed the community in ways that impact the social membership of both students and staff. Students and staff are immersed in self-chosen activities of learning, drawing upon both their personal discourse as well as diverse life experiences. Those lives include personal experiences, local histories, positions, contexts, and relationships. Activities include bi-directional teaching from student to staff member, and from staff member to student. Activities include "critical framing" (New London Group, 1996) through staff and student involvement in ongoing data collection and analysis, and



critical perspectives supplied through the class *Literacies and Social Identities*. Students and staff have stepped back and viewed their experiences and learning/literacy in the context of the liberal arts college, and the inequities and disparities inherent in their own positions within the institution. Learning in partnership, with the intimacy and sharing implied in the fullest sense of mutual participation, confers power that neither students nor staff alone possess, although students are more highly positioned than are most staff. It allows a degree of transformed practice that is concrete and palpable for individuals, the *LAL* program, and the greater college community. The participants have transformed daily living and working on campus for themselves. They are members of the community in ways unforeseen before this program brought them together to engage in the business and pleasure of mutual learning. They stand together as learners and teachers, as well as apart as students and workers, elders and youth, male and female, persons of color, and whatever else categorizes and separates people.

Another way of understanding how mutual learning works in *LAL* is to shift from traditional metaphors of learning as either transmissionist or constructivist, to a view of learning as participation in communities of practice (Sfard, 1998). The social and cultural aspects of literacies are both political and personal, for groups and individuals. "Learning is viewed [here] as an aspect of all activity" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 38), not simply something that occurs in dyadic relationships between teachers and learners, most often in classrooms. It is not only that staff and students in *LAL* partnerships are reciprocal in their relationships, but that the "practice itself is in motion" (p. 116), with participants giving and getting learning while building a culture of learning practice for all community members. Literacy and workplace practices constitute various social identities and positions, and imply social identities that shape, circumscribe, and challenge roles and literacy practices. While people develop *competencies* as learners and literate persons, they also practice learning and literacies in their daily work and personal lives. That culture of mutual learning for all community members becomes capital that all members can draw upon in their daily work and relationships.

Lave and Wenger (1991) write of the ways in which persons exist on spatial planes of peripheral-ity in relation to being at the center of various social memberships, i.e., on the margins of membership. If we can think of a liberal arts college with learning/teaching as its central identity as well as its cultural capital, we can imagine that faculty,

students, and staff are positioned somewhere in relationship to that central identity. Quite simplistically, faculty possesses knowledge and their job is to teach it to students who come to college to get it. Students are more peripheral than faculty when they begin as first year students and grow closer to the center over the four or so years they take to complete their degrees. Staff members have traditionally been peripheral; they clean the buildings, feed the students, fix what breaks, and otherwise maintain the institution.

However, staff members do not necessarily leave after four years. In this sense they are less peripheral to the institution than students who are passing through, picking up some capital on the way. Staff members carry time and institutional memory; they possess institutional knowledge that is rarely explicit and more rarely honored. As anyone who has worked in an institution knows, there are individuals who know where to find something, who to go to, and how to get something done that only someone with institutional knowledge acquired over time can have.

Students and staff members who join together in *LAL* draw upon one another's separate positions and knowledge to more fully participate in the Swarthmore College community and what it means to be liberally educated. Like the Environmental Services technician who said, "I need to be learning something here myself," participants in this program take learning and teaching with and among one another seriously, and move to a level of fuller participation with evolving identities as reciprocating teachers and learners. As Lave and Wenger (1991) theorize, "engagement in practice, rather than being its object, may well be a *condition* for the effectiveness of learning [emphasis in original]" (p. 93). They propose that it is activity and interaction that fosters learning, not just being in the presence of others who are learning (p. 75). "Learning is a way of being in the social world, not a way of coming to know about it" (p. 24), and this in turn entails and shapes identity.

Many students on campus do not participate in *LAL*, although we believe that they, in general, feel legitimate as central Swarthmore College participants. Yet the enthusiasm engendered by staff for this program makes us wonder about staff who choose not to participate. We wonder if one unintended outcome is a division of staff into *Learning for Lifers* and *non-Learning for Lifers*. The phenomenon of non-participation and recruitment of staff by staff to *LAL* may reflect the way in which *LAL* staff participants now feel authorized to draw others into mutual learning at Swarthmore College.

### *Changing the Community*

Relationships between students and staff are palpably different since *LAL* began. Although there have always been warm relations between particular students and staff, or faculty and staff, generally staff members have felt like second-class citizens on campus. Distinctly unconnected to the learning/teaching fund of the college, staff members have been traditionally distanced from the students, peripheral to the college's main purpose, and tacitly unwelcome in its buildings and resources, except to do their jobs. Yet, especially among long-term employees, staff members have maintained a deep commitment to the institution and its students while sometimes feeling marginalized and invisible. *LAL* and the follow-up research and data analysis have evoked both those feelings and the ways in which *LAL* has worked to counter a culture of hegemony and social distance among students, staff, and faculty. One student said, "The program made us realize that we have to reach out and be social and helpful to everyone on campus, not just the other students," while another expressed, "I walk around campus now and I see so many more of us talking with various staff members that we otherwise wouldn't have known...it's a beautiful thing." Another stated, "After participating in the program I became hyper-aware of the value of getting to know (or at least greatly appreciating) staff members."

Staff felt more recognized by students as whole people, not just persons fulfilling cleaning and maintenance roles. One said, "[Students are] not focusing on us just as housekeepers." Another stated, "I speak with [students] everyday and sometimes we just talk and chat...I'm starting to know a lot of other students [through *LAL*]." One spoke of the change he sees, saying, "I think they look at us differently now. I mean some students, people that you never really even spoke to...I think they see us differently." The effect of staff and students knowing one another has ripple effects as indicated by this staff member comment, "[Students] look at us differently now... the ones that we know introduce us to other people they know... whereas really, they wouldn't have said anything to us [before] except hello and goodbye."

Many staff members have used *LAL* to advance their instrumental lives, working to move on and up in their ability to earn a living. One woman uses an online tax reporting program to do tax returns in her community, charging a nominal fee. Another operates his own computer consulting service. Other staff members have moved into GED programs, community college, and other vocational pursuits. These are the "effects" that have been traditionally used to judge the efficacy of a workplace

literacy/learning program. Our student/staff research team has been more interested and impressed with how *LAL* has changed the community at Swarthmore College. Staff is now more likely to be present in places that were previously frequented primarily by students and faculty, such as in McCabe Library, at public area computers, and in recreational facilities.

Our experience in *LAL* has made us more aware of the disparities that exist among members of the community and staff's difficulty in negotiating and using campus resources. Access to many resources of the college (computers, libraries, athletic spaces, scholarly talks, gossip, and information shared over e-mail) were tacitly off-limits for staff. For example, few Dining, Facilities, and Environmental Services staff were on e-mail, depending instead for relevant information to be e-mailed to supervisors and directors with notes to "please post for employees without e-mail." When students, new faculty, and clerical staff were hired at the college they were automatically given an e-mail account and taught how to use it if they did not already know. Dining, Facilities, and Environmental Services staff generally received no such offer. Most *LAL* staff participants wanted to "get on e-mail, get on the Web, use computers" during the second semester of the *LAL* program and this trend has continued with increased help from the Computing Center.

Staff members who had no previous experiences with computers proclaimed their experience in *LAL* to be a success.

I never been on a computer, first of all, so it was kind of exciting for the very first time and my tutor was very good. And though I didn't even know how to turn on the computer, for real, at the very beginning, but it just came to me and then I enjoyed it.

But as staff became more adept at using their e-mail and checking their emerging Web sites, they questioned the placement of computers on campus and access to equipment in public spaces. When asked about using public-space computers, staff responded that they, "saw the computers but didn't know who they were for... and began to wonder." One staff member questioned security in the Student Writing Center. "Where I work at, it's a computer room full of computers. What's the sense of being locked? I could see if they're trying to keep out, but who you trying to keep out?" Another felt that computers should be placed more conveniently around campus, not clumped together in big spaces, "It would be a lot more convenient if everyone had a computer in the building where they worked so they would have

access.”

One staff member has emerged as a computing leader and used his first *LAL* experience to learn HTML with his student partner. They proceeded to build a Web page for *LAL*<sup>2</sup> and to make themselves available to other *LAL* partners who wanted to build family and personal Web pages. They used the resources of the computing center and library, which included hardware, software, and research experts, which have continued to support staff in every way imaginable, from friendly advice to hands-on consultations. Students and staff in *LAL* have since successfully lobbied administration for: increased and widespread placement of computers on campus, provision of all new staff with e-mail access, staff inclusion in the college directory, and a Summer of Learning Program. In Summer of Learning, organized by a student and staff members, staff is explicitly exposed to experiences with local cultural institutions, campus athletic facilities, and off-duty professors who love to share their interests and passions.

Staff and students have also recognized the ways in which language is implicated in where we stand in relation to one another on campus and in the world, and to the technologies that we use for our work, pleasure, and self-improvement. For example, students learned that teaching computers to someone who had not had access to computers became not just a simple teaching issue but also a socio-linguistic issue. One student said,

Mostly, I worked on using language in new ways...How do you explain concepts in a way that someone new to computers can understand? How do I explain my ideas in ways which might be culturally mismatched? It was a challenge but one which made me think.

One staff member spoke of the way that she and her student partner recognized language as the key to their learning together, and that she knew things on the computer that her student partner did not know. She shared,

With [her student partner], I mentioned the ‘word process’ on the computer and she said she hadn’t thought of that and we put the two together (word + process = word processing) and we learned that together. I figured it out before and then I realized that evidently she didn’t know that, she didn’t know how it works (as a processor for words to make a typed document)!

Staff who used *LAL* to advance their learning and support their lives outside the campus recognized the power of language to position themselves beyond the college campus. One staff member

articulated,

The computer company made my vocabulary change. I didn’t know terminology. Somehow I just started learning PC (language). And then my whole terminology changed .... Therefore, every time I go over to a customer’s house, I seem like I know what I’m talking about. I think I want to get into some public-speaking, learn the English language better.

He continued to work on speaking like a computer consultant, using *LAL* to meet with the Writing Center Director. He reports that his computing business is thriving due to *LAL*.

Staff members protect the program from their work, making sure that their work gets done so that supervisors will not cite uncompleted work as a reason to deny their participation in the *LAL* program. They pitch in to help one another on heavy workdays. One said, “I do the most work the first part of the week because I know I was going to *LAL* [later in the week].”

Staff issues are at the heart of social justice movements on many campuses and have taken the form of a Living Wage Campaign (LWC) and a recent Compensation Review Committee (CRC) on this campus. There is an overlap of staff and students involved in *LAL* and the LWC and CRC. We believe there are loose linkages between *LAL* and local fair compensation movements. We also wonder about the ways in which three years of *LAL* have worked to connect and empower student and staff participants (examples including a staff art exhibit, participation in writing a poem for democracy with Poet June Jordan, and staff speaking on a campus radio show). *LAL* has increased staff participation, while simultaneously revealing disparities in access, working conditions, and compensations. The CRC has recently recommended a \$9 per hour minimum wage and changes in retirement and medical benefits. And, although staff members have demonstrated enthusiasm for *LAL*, an anonymous, sarcastic newsletter was circulated on campus that seems a venue for staff disgruntlement. Relations among staff, students, administration, and faculty are complex and sometimes strained, mirroring what it means to be a full member of a liberal arts community, which inquires, researches, theorizes, and argues about many issues, including means to social justice.

## Conclusion

An Environmental Services Technician with 18 years experience at Swarthmore College who participated in data analysis and has put four children through college recently told me, “When I walk

across the campus now I feel like part of the campus instead of just a uniformed person cleaning. I am freer to go to lectures, I participate in activities, I go to events, I am involved.” As a *LAL* coordinator who has traveled to local and national conferences to disseminate information about the program, has, at the age of 65, become a public speaker. She is extremely proud of this as it has enhanced her self-respect and served her well on campus and in her church community.

Another staff coordinator of *LAL* continues to expand his involvement on the campus, and shared with me that he was not liked by his co-workers when he first came here, but is now seen as a leader and has been promoted to a supervisory position. His tireless work for *LAL* and for partnerships in need of computer consultation is well known. In fact, *LAL* partners are more likely to consult him than the Computing Center.

A recent student in *Literacies and Social Identities* and her *LAL* partner were very involved in the LWC on campus, but the student is now devoting more time to coordinating *LAL*. Conversely, other students involved in *LAL* have begun to devote more attention to the LWC and its social justice issues.

There is also overlap among staff in *LAL* and the LWC, although many staff members devote time exclusively to one or the other. A former *LAL* student coordinator and *Literacies and Social Identities* student researched the Highlander Folk School and the citizenship schools of the South for her senior history thesis, drawing parallels between those movements and the ways in which *LAL* and the LWC might be seen as an extensions of civil rights efforts.

While workplace learning and literacy programs have been criticized as too institutionally self-serving, inept, ignorant of knowledge of diverse learners, and program-centered (Fingeret & Drennon, 1997; Gowen, 1992; Hull, 1997; Sticht, 1997), we believe that *LAL* avoids these criticisms. It is both learner and community-centered, as well as student and staff coordinated. *LAL* functions in such a way as to allow for personal choice on the part of both students and staff members, recognizing implicitly that both instrumental and sacred ways of knowing are worthy (Senge, 1994), and drawing members closer to the center of community membership. Movement toward the full participation is contingent upon the one-on-one, informal and reciprocal learning partnerships. Just as persons are shaped by their experiences, developing fuller identities, so too are institutions and communities shaped by their members' experiences.

While we believe that our participatory research

model has served staff and student participants in *LAL* by empowering them as co-researchers, we also believe it has served the community at large by identifying aspects of community service and social change that would have remained in the shadows. Access to campus resources, the confluence of learning and community identities, and of community change mechanisms are now known and have become part of the campus discourse. They have become sites for action, and changes have been brought about through the participation of an even wider range of people than *LAL* participants, including staff, supervisors, and administration.

Disparities and inequities in the workplace and greater society are still present among community members who stand at various places relative to full participation as learners and teachers. However, *LAL* participants have begun to identify and understand those disparities and inequities more clearly. They are local and personal, as well as institutional, and are complicated by issues of racism, sexism, intellectual class-ism, and institutional history. *LAL* has complicated the disparities and inequities through the goodwill and generosity of students and staff members who are collectively committed to their own and their partners' mutual learning and teaching.

In 2001 the CRC cited *LAL* as one of the “benefits” of working on staff. *LAL* partners, as well as students who take the *Literacies and Social Identities* course, will continue to collect and analyze data, refine our findings, and encourage all community members to participate, including faculty. While we know that we, as students, staff, and faculty, are not positioned equally and equitably in the college community, we more fully understand that “identity, knowing, and social membership entail one another...learning and a sense of identity are inseparable; they are aspects of one another” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 52).

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> We have become aware that the Boy Scouts of America have a program with the same name and wish to clarify that our program bears no resemblance or connection to their program.

<sup>2</sup> [www.swarthmore.edu/admin/learningforlife](http://www.swarthmore.edu/admin/learningforlife)

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