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the canadian journal for the study of adult education

la revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes

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## VOLUNTEER TUTORS: AGENTS OF CHANGE OR REPRODUCTION? AN EXAMINATION OF CONSCIOUSNESS, IDEOLOGY, AND PRAXIS

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# VOLUNTEER TUTORS: AGENTS OF CHANGE OR REPRODUCTION? AN EXAMINATION OF CONSCIOUSNESS, IDEOLOGY, AND PRAXIS

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**Abstract**

*Volunteer tutors play a significant role in delivering adult literacy programs. It is estimated that up to 60% of all instructors in adult literacy programs in the United States are volunteers (Ziegler, McCallum, & Bell, 2009). However, volunteer tutors' work or experience are rarely the subjects of research. Volunteer tutors' contributions to adult literacy are significant because they have personal relationships with learners while being expected to deliver ministry guidelines. In this paper, we examine the narratives of three volunteer tutors from a program in Ontario, Canada, to understand whether and how volunteer tutors act as agents of change or reproduction. Using a Marxist analysis, we review the consciousness, ideology, and praxis of the volunteer tutors in this study. We delve critically into the work of volunteer tutors to illustrate the potential and the limitations of volunteer tutors' role in bringing about social transformation in the field of adult literacy.*

**Résumé**

*Les tutrices et tuteurs bénévoles jouent un rôle déterminant dans la prestation des programmes d'alphabétisation des adultes. Selon les estimations, jusqu'à 60 % de la totalité des enseignantes et enseignants de programmes d'alphabétisation aux États-Unis sont des bénévoles (Ziegler, McCallum et Bell, 2009). Pourtant, le travail ou l'expérience de ces personnes fait rarement l'objet de recherches. Les bénévoles contribuent de manière significative à l'alphabétisation des adultes : elles établissent des relations personnelles avec les apprenantes et apprenants, tout en étant responsables de respecter les programmes ministériels. Dans le présent article, nous examinons les récits de trois bénévoles travaillant comme tutrice ou tuteur dans un programme d'alphabétisation en Ontario (Canada) pour mieux comprendre si et en quoi les tutrices et tuteurs bénévoles favorisent le changement ou la reproduction. En adoptant une analyse marxiste, nous examinons la conscience, l'idéologie et la*

*pratique des bénévoles participant à l'étude. Nous présentons une analyse critique du travail des tutrices et tuteurs bénévoles afin d'illustrer le potentiel et les limites du rôle des tutrices et tuteurs bénévoles pour faciliter la transformation sociale dans le domaine de l'alphabétisation des adultes.*

## Introduction

Throughout this study, we examine the experiences of volunteer tutors in an adult literacy program and draw from our personal and professional experience in the field of adult literacy. Judy Perry has been working as an instructor and a program coordinator in both a paid and volunteer capacity for over 20 years. Annie Luk has been a volunteer tutor in various adult literacy programs since 2007. In fact, Annie and Judy met for the first time when Annie applied to become a volunteer tutor in a program that Judy was coordinating at the time. We are both intrigued by our own experiences and the stories we have heard from other volunteers, and we share an interest in examining the contributions of volunteer tutors. Further, seeing that research rarely examines the work of volunteer tutors in adult literacy programs within the rigour of a theoretical framework (Ilsley, 1985), especially one from the critical perspective, we believe that this paper presents an interesting opportunity to initiate discussions among practitioners and researchers.

In this paper, we ask whether volunteer tutors are agents of change or reproduction when viewed through the lens of the Marxist theoretical framework, using Paula Allman's writings as a starting point (1999, 2001, 2007). In Marxist terms, we ask whether the praxis of volunteer tutors is uncritical/reproductive or critical/revolutionary. Asking this research question and examining consciousness, ideology, and praxis can help us understand why and how the praxis of volunteer tutors in adult literacy programs becomes one or the other.

The contributions of volunteer tutors, as shown in the literature review section of this paper, are rarely critically examined, in part because of program coordinators' reluctance to critically evaluate volunteers' underlying altruism and their often-stated intention of giving back to the community. We argue in this paper that volunteer tutors, like any other educators, must be conscious of their work and their actions and ensure that their thinking and practice are aligned to bring about true and meaningful transformation to the lives of learners. Otherwise, we risk relying on our unquestioned assumptions and could end up reproducing the injustices that we hope to eliminate. The Marxist theoretical framework model based on Paula Allman's (1999, 2001, 2007) writings offers an opportunity to examine the dynamics among consciousness, ideology, and praxis in the context of volunteer tutors in adult literacy. This framework supports an in-depth analysis of change versus transformation in terms of critical/revolutionary praxis and the traps that lead to uncritical/reproductive praxis.

We investigate the volunteer tutors' lived experiences in a dialectical manner (Harvey, 2010) to examine their consciousness, ideology, and praxis as collected through narrative interviews. Following Dorothy Smith's (2011) writing, "the emphasis is on activities, practices; on what people do. Society and history have no other form of existence. Investigation can thus begin with 'real premises' and not with abstractions" (p. 24). A dialectical approach allows us to delve into the social relationship of adult literacy tutors and the learners they work with, because

> dialectics is a way of thinking about social life as relationships in which social phenomenon are not abstract, separate, or fragmented from one another. To say that something is understood '**dialectically**' is to see it through the lens of its historical emergence, to see the way in which it appears in daily life, and to seek out an explanation of why it appears the way in which it does in order to understand the essence of the contradictions that form social phenomena. (Carpenter & Mojab, 2013, p. 161)

As such, we begin with the lived experiences of the volunteer tutors and move dialectically between essence and appearance—between the hidden social relationships and the visible social relationships. We do this from the tutors' side of the relationship to examine their praxis and to determine if it is critical/revolutionary (as many literacy practitioners hope) or if it is, in fact, uncritical and reproductive.

## Literature Review

The use of volunteers in adult literacy programs is atypical; few other educational sectors rely on volunteers to deliver instruction to the same degree (Belzer, 2006; Ilsley, 1985; Ziegler, McCallum, & Bell, 2009). About 60% of adult literacy educators in the United States are volunteers (Ziegler, McCallum, & Bell, 2007). Unfortunately, in Ontario, up-to-date statistics on volunteers for adult literacy programs are not available because the provincial government no longer keeps track of volunteer information in the programs (W. Weston, personal communication, June 29, 2015). The most recent publicly available statistics are from 2003–4. According to Community Literacy of Ontario (2005), 4,854 volunteers in Ontario contributed a total of 314,476 hours to adult literacy programs, which is equivalent to 161 full-time staff. The majority of these hours were provided by volunteer tutors in one-on-one adult literacy programs. Community Literacy of Ontario estimated that, on average, literacy organizations had 3.4 paid staff and 57 volunteers. Although data are not available to calculate the exact ratio of volunteer tutors to paid instructors in Ontario, these rough statistics on volunteers suggest a similarly high number of volunteer tutors used in Ontario as seen in the Ziegler, McCallum, & Bell (2007) survey for the United States.

Existing research into volunteer tutors in adult literacy programs is typically focused on the practical management of volunteers, such as training, communications, and coordination between program staff and volunteers (Belzer, 2006; Lynch, 2013; Sandman-Hurley, 2008; Ziegler, McCallum, & Bell, 2009). For example, Alisa Belzer (2006) and Kelli Sandman-Hurley (2008) both conducted case studies of tutor-learner pairs in adult literacy. Both studies focused on what volunteer tutors and adult literacy learners would do together and on the changes within the learners' reading and writing skills. Both found that the volunteers needed to adjust their approaches to fit what they felt the learners required, in part because the volunteer tutors recognized that the situations they actually encountered were dissimilar to the training they had received. While Belzer argued that the potential of volunteers could be significant if only the programs could manage them better through training and ongoing support, Sandman-Hurley also included the importance of the personal relationships that tutors built with learners to enhance the sense of success with learners. Sandman-Hurley found that the interpersonal skills required for establishing

and maintaining the relationships, although not taught to the tutors during training, were integral to the tutoring sessions.

Overall, few studies have investigated adult literacy educators themselves (paid or volunteer), their experiences, and their approaches to developing their practices. Patricia Cranton and Brenda Wright (2008) interviewed eight adult literacy educators (all of whom were in paid positions) to understand how transformative learning could be fostered by creating a safe environment, building trust, overcoming the learners' fears, identifying possibilities, promoting self-discovery, and acknowledging learners as whole persons. Although this study was not specifically on volunteer instructors or tutors, it offered insights on how instructors themselves could be transformed by the experience and how their practices would be shaped as a result. The findings from Cranton and Wright extended beyond the technical aspects of reading and writing and touched on how the educators actually became more than "just teachers" (p. 46). They also acknowledged that both learners and educators could be transformed through the experiences, especially when a safe and trusting relationship could be developed.

A common theme from studies on adult literacy volunteer tutors is the recognition of the value and positive impacts of volunteers beyond their obvious virtue of being free of charge (Belzer, 2006; Lynch, 2013). Belzer (2006), Lynch (2013), and Sandman-Hurley (2008) specifically attributed the positive impacts to the personal relationships between volunteers and learners, although none delved into how such personal relationships could be developed and what these relationships would look like. Cranton and Wright (2008) highlighted the factors that contributed to a positive learning environment and relationships, but did not provide detail on the thinking underlying the adult literacy educators' actions. Jacqueline Lynch (2013) offered a conceptual framework to start thinking about the tutor-learner relationship. She suggested that literacy learning is "a social practice" (p. 304), in that literacy education is based on the "social relationships" (p. 304) developed between volunteers and learners, and these relationships shape and provide meaning to the learning experience. She further recommended that the positive relationships between volunteers and learners could be extended with more "personal sharing activities" (p. 322) for the participants to learn about each other as "whole person[s]" (p. 322). The building and maintenance of personal relationships, Lynch argued, is key to the tutoring process and therefore should be part of volunteer training. None of the studies reviewed for this paper provided a critical review of whether volunteer tutors or instructors in general are advancing positive changes and transformation in the lives of the learners they work with or in the broader community.

A further research gap we identified in the literature is that existing research is typically focused on the practical aspects of tutoring and does not always have any explicit theoretical underpinning. This observation, however, is not new. In 1985, Paul Ilsley prepared a report for the National Institute of Education in Washington, DC, on the "growing field of literacy voluntarism" (Ilsley, 1985, p. 1). Ilsley found that much of the research up to then was based on conventional wisdom and experiential insights, with little emphasis on examining philosophical underpinnings. He specifically urged further research to be based on theoretical and philosophical frameworks (although he did not specify which frameworks). His rationale was that the support of theory and philosophy would strengthen understanding of what was needed to reduce illiteracy, the role of volunteers in the process, and the possibility of "social unrest" (p. 40) that rising illiteracy might lead to. Despite the passage of over 30 years, our literature research found a similar gap.

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**Research Design**

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*Participants and the Participating Adult Literacy Program*

We recruited three volunteer tutors from an adult literacy program to participate in this study. We selected them because all three already had considerable experience as volunteer tutors—i.e., all three had been volunteering for approximately two years at the time of the study. The staff of the program where these tutors were volunteering also knew them as tutors who had done work beyond reading and writing with the learners. All three participants were long-term residents of the city where the program was located, and all were university graduates. Two participants were female and one was male. Two were working in full-time jobs, while one was recently retired. None had ever worked as a teacher or taught in any formal capacity. Participants' ages ranged from the early 50s to the late 60s. Their motivation to volunteer was initially to give back to the community when they found themselves with more free time. The participants would typically meet with the learners once a week for one and a half to two hours. All participants had little understanding or awareness of adult literacy prior to becoming volunteer tutors. They became connected with the program where they were volunteering through personal referral or after seeing advertisements seeking volunteers.

The adult literacy program in which the participants volunteered was located in a mid-sized city in Ontario approximately 100 kilometres from Toronto. The program offered both one-on-one tutoring with volunteer tutors and group sessions with paid instructors. It was a community-based organization that started in the 1980s, and it had no formal affiliation with any public institution such as a school board, public library, college, or university. The program had over 100 volunteers on its roster at the time of the study. Similar to many other adult literacy programs in Ontario, this program was funded in part through Employment Ontario and in part through donations. Since it received funding from the province, the program was subject to various provincial policies and procedures for program delivery, learning goals, and statistical reporting.

*Data Collection*

For this study, we chose to use narrative interviews as the data collection method in order to identify themes emerging from the participants' experiences and stories and help us understand the work of volunteer tutors (Atkinson, 2007; Chase, 2003; Craig & Huber, 2007; Creswell, 2015; Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007; Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Our choice of narrative interviews reflects our belief that interviews are social practices in which people engage in conversations to produce knowledge and create meaning together (Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The narrative approach provided the participants the opportunity to steer the discussions and select the details to construct their stories (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). Our focus was to present a space to the participants to share and explore their personal stories, experiences, and feelings, especially those that had given meaning to their work as volunteer tutors (Atkinson, 2007).

One of the authors conducted three rounds of narrative interviews with each of the three participants over two months in the summer of 2015. We used one person as the interviewer because it would be easier for the same person to build a relationship with

each participant. The one-on-one format was also more akin to conversations than formal interviews. Each interview lasted approximately one hour.

During the first round of interviews, the interviewer explained the overall objective of the research project and asked the participants to talk about what had motivated them to sign up as volunteer tutors. We also talked about what the participants had expected of the volunteer experience. Whenever appropriate, the interviewer also shared her own experiences with the participants. Before wrapping up the first round of interviews, the interviewer asked the participants to think back over their volunteer experiences in the last two years to find stories that would highlight their experiences as volunteer tutors. These stories would become the focus of the second round of interviews.

During the second round, participants each told their own stories and examined why these stories were significant to them. We also talked about how these stories had led the participants to re-examine some of the assumptions about education and social privileges that they had not previously questioned or even been aware of. Again, whenever appropriate, the interviewer shared her own experiences and stories with the participants. The interviewer also asked questions to clarify and probe regarding why and how we would carry some of these assumptions with us.

During the final, third round of interviews, the interviewer presented to the participants the themes that had emerged from all three participants' stories. We discussed whether these themes were consistent and reflective of the participants' experiences. All participants expressed appreciation for the opportunity to tell their own stories and to reflect on and examine their own practices as volunteer tutors.

All the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed after each round of interviews. The interviewer sent the transcripts to the participants for review; two of the participants provided feedback, comments, and corrections during this review process. The interviewer also invited all the participants to email any additional feedback and comments after the final round of interviews. Only one participant sent further thoughts to the interviewer after the last round.

## *Data Analysis*

We analyzed the transcripts (with changes suggested by the participants) as well as the email communications between the participants and the interviewer. We used NVivo to assist in the data analysis to identify themes emerging from the data. From the themes, we aggregated the experiences of the three participants into four composite stories: (1) before and after volunteering; (2) what happens during the tutoring sessions; (3) relationships between tutors and learners; and (4) a study in contrast. We chose to use composite stories to preserve the narrative nature of the lived experiences of the participants. The composite stories are also anonymous and thus protect participants' personal details. These composite stories are presented in the findings section.

## Findings

The multiple discussions with the participants in this study provided the opportunity for the volunteers to share and reflect on their experiences, emotions, and musings about what it meant for them to be a volunteer tutor in an adult literacy program. The participants' openness offered a window to understand the rewards of volunteering and the struggles

and frustrations they had encountered. Participants' perspectives, stories, and expectations about working with learners underpinned how they had developed their practices and how they had changed their views and deepened their understanding of adult literacy. The composite stories highlight the themes emerging from the participants' individual experiences. Although the composite stories are presented here as separate stories, the underlying themes also cross over into different stories, bringing a more nuanced overall picture than what the stories taken individually would suggest.

### Composite Story #1: Before and after Volunteering

When talking about their experiences as volunteer tutors at the adult literacy program, the participants shared their initial expectations of what they would be doing as tutors and the various unexpected experiences they had had as volunteers. Before starting their volunteering, the participants thought that their work as tutors would be focused mainly on improving the learners' reading, spelling, writing, math, and perhaps computer skills. The participants also expressed concerns about their lack of teaching qualifications and experience, since none of them had worked as professional teachers in the past. However, this concern was quickly dispelled. As one of the participants said, "It was actually a shock to me to come in and sit with them and see…all my education and all that I've got. I've got [multiple] degrees. You don't even need a tenth of a degree. You just basically need sort of to be…to have a sympathetic attitude." The participants also talked about not knowing who the learners would be and why they would have problems with literacy. After working with the learners, the participants' understanding of why someone would struggle with literacy appeared to deepen. "There are many reasons why there's poor literacy," one participant said. One participant suggested that the educational system may not work for everyone: "I think there are a lot of people who get lost by the wayside in school." Another participant echoed this, saying, "These are people who have been failed somehow."

 The participants also talked about unexpected emotional experiences that resulted from seeing how the learners struggled with limited financial resources and the challenges they faced as a result. The participants admitted that they did not know anyone with struggles similar to those facing the learners. One participant said, "I think I've sort of always had, through different jobs, different experiences, that I've had some understanding of the complexity of social issues. But it's different to read about it and to actually work with a person who's living it…It's been a very humbling experience. Certainly I go home very thankful for what I have." The emotional impact was especially poignant for one of the participants who shared considerable demographic similarities with the learner: "When people are in the exact cohort, you have a sense of what their life could have been like. If it's not in space, it's the same time. It's mind-boggling."

### Composite Story #2: What Happens during the Tutoring Sessions

The participants generally allowed the learners to determine what should happen during any given tutoring session. The participants talked about a number of factors that influenced what would happen at the tutoring sessions. The most important was the immediate and pressing tasks that the learners needed to complete for day-to-day living or work. This consideration, according to the participants, would take priority over whatever the government-mandated learning goals were supposed to be for the learners. Another factor was the mental state

of the learners at the start of the tutoring session. If the learners appeared to be distressed, the participants would try to talk through the issues that might be bothering them. The participants spoke about how they decided on the learning activities with the learners based on what the learners said they would like to work on and the participants' own assessment of how to best support them.

Since all three participants firmly believed in centring the tutoring sessions on the learners' needs, they also talked about doing a wide range of activities that would not strictly be defined as literacy education, including helping a learner get her driver's licence back, keeping track of a learner's job applications, completing work training modules, writing work reports, setting up computers and tablets, reading novels, and creating meal plans. When discussing how the activities during their tutoring sessions expanded beyond reading and writing, the participants talked about the importance of focusing on the needs of the learners and a pragmatic approach to helping the learners get things done. None of the participants thought that a broad range of learning activities was anything extraordinary. One put it succinctly; she saw herself as a resource for the learner "to get [things] done." Although our discussions were focused on the learners' literacy needs, the participants also connected literacy to other aspects of the learners' lives. They made a point that literacy is only one part of someone's life. Literacy may be important, but by itself would not address all the challenges facing the learners. Another participant pointed out that "literacy is secondary to" other aspects of life, such as building up the learner's confidence and self-assurance so the learner could use the literacy skills. Another participant echoed this sentiment.

The discussions about government-mandated learning goals led to discussions about the purposes of literacy and education. The participants acknowledged the accountability aspect for government-funded programs and the need to report outcomes. While they firmly believed in the value of the tutoring sessions to the learners, they were at a loss to find measurable, observable accountability metrics to fit the tutoring sessions and their value. The participants talked about difficulties in reconciling their understanding of accountability measures and their experiences and recognition of the importance of assisting the learners in less measurable ways, such as talking about how to handle cash, sharing life stories, lightening learners' spirits, and helping a learner get confident enough to do a Bible reading at church. As one participant said:

> We do live in a structured society. And I understand that. I'd be like any taxpayer screaming for accountability too. So I get that. I don't know how to translate the certainty that I have that this [program] is helpful. And the rewards that I have when we go from someone who's full of self-doubt and saying I can't do that to someone who's laughing and smiling. I don't know how to translate that for someone else. I know it because I've been experiencing it.

### Composite Story #3: Relationships between Learners and Tutors

As Sandman-Hurley (2008) found (and many adult literacy program staff would agree), the relationship between a volunteer tutor and the learner is a significant factor in whether the pairing is successful. As any matchmaker is likely to say, matching people up to see if they fit is more art than science. There is no formula, and volunteer coordinators often rely on

experience and intuition. One participant said that the discussions during this study about the relationship with the learner were the most difficult, because the relationship was not like any other relationship she had outside tutoring. She could not quite describe what the relationship was, so she compared the relationships in other aspects of life to the tutoring relationship to highlight what the relationship with the learner was not. These discussions shed light on how nuanced the relationship between tutors and learners could be.

This participant said that the role for the tutor was not necessarily similar to that of a teacher. The focus for tutoring is more about supporting learners instead of working through a specific curriculum or lesson plans. The activities beyond literacy education were also examples of how the relationship between tutors and learners was not comparable to that between teachers and students.

The tutoring relationship was not professional or work-like given that the tutor was not paid and was not bound by conventional employment constraints such as performance reviews. The participant understood that the tutoring was performed on a best-effort basis and that continuing involvement in the program was not contingent on learners' progress.

The tutoring relationship was not friendship, the participant said, because it was clear that she and the learner were not friends and could not exactly be friends with each other. Further, all three participants said that they had actually never run into the learners within their normal circle, recognizing that they moved in different circles despite living in the same small city.

Finally, the participant emphasized that the relationship with the learner was definitely not like a parent-child relationship. Although she was prepared and willing to help and support the learner beyond the reading and writing expected within literacy, she pointed out that she could not be fully responsible for all aspects of the learner's life like a parent with her child.

### Composite Story #4: A Study in Contrast

The volunteer tutors interviewed for this study talked extensively about their experiences working with learners in the adult literacy program in terms of contrasts and differences. One source of difference was participants' expectations about tutoring, which changed after meeting and working with the learners. A source of contrasts was tutors' increasing comprehension of the differences between their life experiences and the life experiences of the learners they were working with.

All three participants commented on how much they had previously taken their own educational and life path for granted. They had assumed that everyone would go through school the same way they had. Although they knew intellectually that not everyone would go through all levels of education and build a career, this felt like a revelation when they actually met the learners. One participant said that the encounter with the learner left her with questions about what we as a community and as a society would need to do for those who do not end up on the "expected" path. The contrasts between the participants and the learners not only shed light on the participants' understanding of the difficult challenges facing the learners, but also allowed the participants to see how they had enjoyed various privileges and advantages—something they would not have otherwise recognized.

The participants also placed literacy in the context of the learners' socio-economic background, and mentioned their awareness of the differences in socio-economic

backgrounds between themselves and the learners. The participants commented that, despite living in a small city, they had never run into the learners in their usual social circles. One participant further said that it was surprising how divided the city was along socio-economic lines, considering that the city was not large by any measure:

> You realize pretty quickly, although we live in the same city and it's not that big a city, somehow we move in different circles. I've never bumped into [the learner I work with] on the street. We move in different paths. And you know, [this city] is not big enough to be really segregated to be like rich and poor areas. Neighbourhoods are really mixed, but it's really driven home to me that, you know for myself and my friends, we just don't see a lot of this.

## Discussions

The volunteer tutors in the study talked about stories of contrasts and differences, so the question is whether these stories tell of change or transformation and, more importantly, whether their stories point to a critical/revolutionary praxis. We answer this question by looking at the tutors' experiences and stories dialectically through the theoretical framework of consciousness, ideology, and praxis. Many literacy practitioners think or at least hope that their work is revolutionary—that as learners and tutors engage in a learning partnership, they develop a critical consciousness and thus achieve conscientization. Although the narrative interviews in this study show that this did not necessarily happen, we further examine the findings on the tutor-learner relationship to better understand how this relationship appears in daily life and to understand the essence of the contradictions in this relationship.

Does this relationship between volunteer tutors and learners reinforce capitalist practices? Or, as Allman (2001) put it, does it "capitulate to capitalism and the continuing dehumanization of millions of human beings?" (p. 162) If it is the latter, do we then "resign ourselves either to training people to cope as best they can with the dire consequences of capitalism or, at best, to educating them to employ their critical faculties on those areas of extant knowledge that are unrelated to social transformation or the type of social, economic and political critique capable of challenging the system" (Allman, 2001, p. 162)? The study participants' stories suggest that they were, for the most part, only helping the learners to cope as best they could with where they found themselves.

We feel that these tutors did not develop a critical consciousness, although they became aware of the gulf that separated them from their learners in terms of education, opportunity, and life choices. They recognized that the learners may have had low literacy due to no fault of their own and that the fault might lie somewhere in the education system or society at large. However, they could not yet identify where or how. They talked about the contrasts between themselves and the learners, but did not go further into how to overcome the differences together or even if that would be a valid idea.

The participants' consciousness can be examined as the dialectic of internally related opposites: thought and practice—consciousness as comprising thoughts that resulted from their own sensuous activity and thoughts that arose outside of their own experience (Allman, 2001, p. 165). Allman (2001) wrote, "Our consciousness develops from our

active engagement with other people, nature and the objects or processes we produce. In other words, it develops from the sensuous experiencing of reality from within the social relationships in which we exist (Marx and Engels, 1846)" (p. 165). The volunteer tutors' understanding of literacy, education, and people who struggle with literacy changed once they started working with learners. This suggests that their consciousness developed as they engaged with the learners. At the beginning of the tutoring process, the tutors did not yet have a critical consciousness about the work they were about to undertake. As Dorothy Smith (2011) wrote, "Consciousness as social—that is, as it exists among people through the materiality of language—embodies ideas, principles, law, and moral and religious beliefs, all of which are created in the context of actual social existence as it is lived" (p. 23). It appears that the tutors started showing signs of the initial development of a critical consciousness about literacy through this social relationship. After volunteering for some time, the participants gained a different perspective on adult literacy and particularly the people who struggle with literacy. However, since the participants still struggled with understanding the systemic causes of the challenges facing the learners, they did not yet achieve complete critical consciousness or conscientization.

Like consciousness, the volunteer tutors' ideology also showed signs of moving in a more critical direction. Although participants shared their disagreement with the neo-liberal ideology that primarily drives policy discourses for adult literacy, they struggled with the alternatives, suggesting that the differences in ideology are still at the stage of change instead of transformation. The tutors' initial idea of what they would do in tutoring (i.e., teaching someone to read or write better than they had) is similar to how children would learn in leaps and bounds to a point when all of a sudden everything becomes clear. The tutors realized that there is more to adult literacy work than just reading and writing skills; in other words, the learners they had committed to working with had more pressing needs than learning how to fill out some arbitrary form or read a simplified version of *Frankenstein*. The tutors saw the learners as people who wanted to improve their lives through education. The study participants understood how difficult the learners' lives were as a result of their low literacy skills: they were stuck in poverty, lived with constant worry, and saw their problems as insurmountable.

At the beginning of their tutoring experiences, the participants saw a simple problem of not being able to read and write—something that they initially considered as unconnected to other areas of life. Because they could read with ease, the tutors did not see how difficulty with literacy could impact all areas of a person's life, specifically how alienation from this knowledge would remove the learners from so many other areas of life. As the participants moved along in their relationships with the learners, they gained awareness and understanding of the myriad challenges facing the learners (or the many ways learners were alienated/made marginal). As a result, the participants shifted the focus of the tutoring sessions to confront these difficulties before tackling the seemingly more mundane reading and writing tasks.

The tutors interviewed in this study entered relationships with learners with the idea that "everyone is basically the same." Through a direct relationship with those who had not had access to the same opportunities and privileges, the tutors realized that their initial ideology was not only incorrect, but also did not acknowledge the way that financial capitalism has continued to alienate many people who do not fit the "expected" path.

In examining the praxis of the tutors in this study, we look to Allman's (2001) definition of praxis: "Marx's theory of consciousness—or more precisely, praxis—is a theory of the dialectical unity—the internal relation—between thought and action. In other words, we do not stop thinking when we act, and thinking itself is a form of action" (p. 167). The tutors in this study found themselves doing more than they had thought they would. Their praxis developed as they learned more about the learners' lived experience. As they saw what poverty looked like close up, the tutors began to understand how low literacy skills could translate to low self-esteem, which would further translate to feelings of helplessness when facing numerous insurmountable obstacles. The tutors' increasing consciousness of how different their lives had been—particularly in terms of the privileges of class and education—meant that they found themselves with a different, personal understanding of the learners' situations after becoming tutors.

The combination of the changes in consciousness, ideology, and praxis seen in the tutors in this study reflects how their practice of tutoring was changing the way these tutors (who for the most part are middle-class adults) understand the world. To the tutors in this study, the changes they could witness in the learners' circumstances may have felt extraordinary and revolutionary. They also experienced changes in their own worldviews and the way they worked with the learners. This experience, however, is actually not revolutionary in the larger economic or social sense.

The relationship, at its core, is about the tutor's and the learner's relationship with the means of knowledge production. The tutors, for the most part, felt that they were actively engaged with knowledge production because reading and writing were part of their lives and they used these skills with ease on a daily basis. The learners, for the most part, as the participants could observe, saw themselves as outside of and thus alienated from this type of production.

Was this alienation overcome through the social relationship between the tutors and the learners? The answer remains unclear at the moment. What is clear, however, is that, from the perspective of the tutors in this study, the social relationship with the learners is more significant than other considerations. Learners would willingly engage in the process of learning by initially wanting to improve reading and writing skills, then often find themselves working on day-to-day problems with their tutors. Tutors would initially engage with learners thinking that tutoring would be all about the learners' relationship to the printed text, then would find themselves building and learning from their relationship.

## Conclusions

From the stories in this study as well as our personal and professional experiences, we see that literacy tutors are often people who want to make a difference in their community by making time to volunteer in a literacy program. The tutors' desire to make a difference in their community, as seen in the stories shared by the participants in this study, is primarily to improve the lives of the learners within the context of the existing systems. The participants, however, started to see the struggles of the learners beyond individual faults and personal circumstances. The participants began to recognize their own privileges and how that affected their experience of the world. However, as Allman (2001) said, "we need much more than good intention" (p. 162). The study participants' stories point to changes rather than transformation. While the praxis of the tutors may have become less

uncritical/reproductive than before their volunteer experience, it is, in our view, not yet critical/revolutionary.

The next question, then, is what lies ahead for volunteer tutors in adult literacy programs? The theoretical framework points to two ways we can interpret the changes that the participants experienced. At the pessimistic end, we could say that the hegemonic nature of ideology is so deep-seated that it is extremely difficult to overcome. Even when consciousness begins to show signs of moving in a critical direction, the negative nature of ideology coupled with the strong connection between ideology and praxis make it impossible to experience revolutionary transformation. At the optimistic end, we could see these changes as positive signs of potential transformation (conscientization) yet to come for the tutors. The engagement between tutors and learners provides the material experience for the consciousness of the tutors to develop critically (Allman, 2001). The stories of the tutors in this paper show that the learners' alienation from the production of ideas could start to thaw through the changing relationship to learning. The ongoing dynamic nature of the relationship between tutors and learners presents an opening through which revolutionary social transformation could emerge. We find the optimistic view much more appealing for many reasons, one of which is succinctly summed up by Allman (2001) and is perhaps our own rationale for examining volunteer tutors' work: "I begin from the premise that a socially and economically just and an authentically democratic alternative to capitalism is possible" (p. 2).

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