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## Participatory community literacy in Peace Corps training

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**Participatory Community Literacy**  
**in**  
**Peace Corps Training**

**By**

**Natalie Ulrica Gray**

**California State University, Monterey Bay**

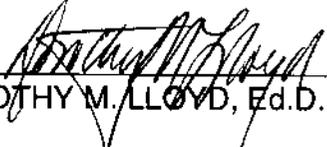
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Participatory Community Literacy in Peace Corps Training

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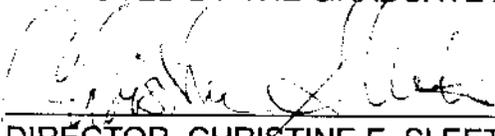
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## **Abstract**

### **Participatory Community Literacy in Peace Corps Training**

**by**

**Natalie Ulrica Gray**

California State University, Monterey Bay, December 2000

This exploratory research project compared the goals and components of Participatory Community Literacy (PCL) and Peace Corps Training to determine whether it would be appropriate to integrate a PCL project into Peace Corps training. Literature on both Participatory Community Literacy and Peace Corps Training was reviewed, and then comparisons were drawn between the two subjects to find commonalities. Because the competencies for Peace Corps training had commonalities with elements of Participatory Community Literacy, a model of integration of a PCL project into Peace Corps training was designed. This model consisted of an integrated thematic curriculum, based on PCL objectives integrated with Peace Corps competencies. It was recommended that a PCL project be implemented for intermediate and advanced language learner trainees. It was further recommended that a Participatory Community Literacy project be studied in two training centers to determine whether the implementation of a PCL project would improve the relevance of learning and a feeling of empowerment in trainees through the process of doing PCL designed interviews.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

#### Introduction

This thesis will discuss Peace Corps training methodology and the relevance of integrating a Participatory Community Literacy project approach into Peace Corps training. I became interested in this topic during a class in Bilingual Literacy Methods, where I first learned about literacy projects that use Participatory Action Research. While we were studying biliteracy, several projects were discussed. Laughlin (2000) described a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project in transformative community literacy. She wrote about a group of teachers who interviewed community members of a small town in Mexico. The information gained from these interviews was used to develop curriculum for the town school.

These and other literacy projects that I researched address community and family literacy using elements of Participatory Action Research (PAR). There is no single name for these projects. Some are described as Family Literacy Projects, others as Transformative Literacy Projects, and still others as Community Literacy Projects. I use the name Participatory Community Literacy (PCL), as an umbrella term to encompass Family, Transformative, and Community Literacy projects that incorporate aspects of PAR.

One often used element of PCL is to conduct interviews. A researcher or interviewer develops a dialogue with a family or community member about a certain topic or theme. The information gained is used to develop curriculum that is both relevant to the learner and community, and empowering to him or her because he or she has had an opportunity to voice his or her own life knowledge.

A PCL project approach could have helped me when I was in training to be a Peace Corps Volunteer in 1995, because both my training and Participatory Community Literacy projects involved going out into the community and conducting interviews with different community members in the language of the community. A Participatory Community Literacy project would have given me clear questions and a defined objective during these interviews.

Current Peace Corps training practices place the volunteer in interviewing situations, where the volunteer trainees fulfill certain competencies by asking questions that may be related to family, work, health, and the day to day basics of living, (shopping, greetings, etc...). For a beginning language learner, these competencies are appropriate, although the language skills can be so rudimentary that these competencies are difficult to achieve. On the other hand, once the competencies are mastered, the volunteer has little impetus to carry on an actual dialogue. A Participatory Community Literacy interview process

would carry the dialogue further by having a topic that could be developed for language acquisition. It would also address the needs of those volunteers who come into Peace Corps training with some language experience and need challenges to develop their language skills. For Peace Corps training, these interviews facilitate language acquisition, and are an opportunity to practice the host country language in a more realistic setting than the classroom. They are also conducive to learning about the culture of the community, enabling the volunteer to better understand and appreciate cultural similarities and differences.

A Participatory Community Literacy project also involves going out in the community and conducting interviews, in the native language, with the hopes of broadening cultural understanding. In addition, the information gathered is used to drive the development of curriculum for the school, integrating family created expertise into projects and books. Therefore this is a secondary benefit, as the school can create more of a partnership with the community of parents and learners. In addition, the created books can be a foundation or addition to a school library.

When I first heard of the Participatory Community Literacy project approach, I felt it was a natural extension of what Peace Corps was already doing in the training of their volunteers. I also felt that a Participatory Community Literacy project would have the benefit of creating a substantial contribution to the

welfare of the community schools in the towns where Peace Corps training occurs, by allowing participants to become actively involved in curricular issues. The design of a Participatory Community Literacy project has the advantage of having a specific set of questions, so the interviewer has more direction in his or her conversation. These questions have an objective, which is to collect community knowledge to be incorporated into the curriculum. This makes the learning more valid to the interviewer, and thus, more meaningful. A volunteer trained in Participatory Community Literacy project techniques would therefore get important language and cross-cultural experience. Furthermore, because the dialogues are more meaningful, and meant to be developed into something for the community, the volunteer might also have greater retention of the knowledge gained through this technique.

### Statement of the Problem

As I mentioned, during Peace Corps training volunteers are expected to go out in the community and interview people. This activity is to give volunteers the opportunity to practice the local language and learn more about the culture of the host community. In my particular training, we brainstormed questions and then went to people's homes in the surrounding area. We were to introduce ourselves to people and then ask them our list of questions, and record their answers to be shared back at the training center.

My experience showed me that there were two problems with this approach. We didn't have a specific purpose for interviewing the people so our questions tended to be very broad and didn't lead to detailed answers or just led to yes and no answers. The other problem was our inability to communicate effectively in the language. If we got an answer with some detail, most of us were unable to seize that opportunity and develop it into a rich discussion. Thus, most of us felt that the exercise had little value in teaching us about the culture or language of the community. It also felt as if we were imposing on the community, taking up their time asking non-relevant questions. The outcomes were not clearly defined for us as beginning learners. The advanced learner group was not challenged by this and did not have an opportunity to improve their already developed language skills. In addition, it was not a good integration of the three dimensions of Peace Corps training; language, technical skills, and cross-cultural skills.

This interviewing methodology was a problem in that it did not fulfill the learning outcomes for which it was designed, due to the language limitations of the trainees and the irrelevance of the questions to the culture. The interviews did not feel relevant and were difficult for the beginning learners. The advanced learners were not challenged and did not progress in their acquisition of vocabulary or discourse skills. These interviews also seemed like an imposition to the community, instead of a beneficial exercise. Beginning learners could

barely formulate trite questions about work or family, and advanced learners were practicing language they already knew.

While there was a significant opportunity for the interviews to be useful to both the trainees and the host community, my experience was that this exercise was largely ineffective. Therefore, this study will examine these problems by addressing the following questions.

1. What are the goals of Peace Corps training for language and cross-cultural skill acquisition?
2. What could be done to improve the community interview component of Peace Corps training?
3. What are the elements of an effective Participatory Community Literacy project?
4. What are the benefits of a Participatory Community Literacy project approach to Peace Corps training?
5. How has Participatory Action Research been incorporated into cross-cultural language learning programs through a Participatory Community Literacy project?
- 6) Would a Participatory Community Literacy project approach be appropriate for a Peace Corps Volunteer and does the PCV trainee have the language skills to engage in this process?

## Procedure of the Study

I studied Peace Corps goals for language training and cross-cultural skills acquisition, and the process and activities in training that are used to achieve these goals. While technical skills are also emphasized in Peace Corps training, I did not address them as much because they varied from assignment to assignment. For example, a health volunteer would need to learn very different technical skills than an environmental education volunteer. The one technical skill that does cross over is the ability to make presentations to the community, and this skill is integrated into any lesson where the trainee has to make a presentation, for example, writing and modeling curricula.

I examined various Participatory Community Literacy projects and the methods these projects used to generate questions, conduct interviews, and compile the gathered information. The ways in which Participatory Community Literacy projects use this information was also addressed. This information was compared and analyzed to determine whether a Participatory Community Literacy project approach would better integrate the Peace Corps language and cross-cultural skill acquisition goals in the training program. I also developed an example of an integrated thematic curriculum based on interviews informed by Participatory Community Literacy.

## Background to the Study

As Ada (1993) says:

To fully engage in a critical, transformative education means recognizing that Participatory Action Research is the essence of the educational process. This is a fundamental shift towards recognizing all students, even the very youngest, are capable of their own research, not only those who have reached the doctoral level. Furthermore, we recognize students as protagonists of their own lives and see that the research is essential to them (p. 38).

A Peace Corps volunteer is putting him or herself into a living situation of two years that will change their lives. Letting them have some input into the learning that they receive during training would empower them and make the learning more relevant to their situation. This is one of the guiding principles of Peace Corps training: " Language practice should be meaningful. Practice should be communicative and situationally based. 'Real' language should be emphasized " (Peace Corps Language Training, 1993, p. 8). Another principle further states:

Not everything has to be or should be fixed. The curriculum was designed to ensure maximum flexibility. Teachers who feel their students can handle more complex structures or more difficult vocabulary items should introduce them. Teachers must constantly assess their students' ability to go beyond the minimum (p. 9).

A Participatory Community Literacy approach would enable trainees to go beyond the minimum and to engage in research that is relevant and essential to them.

### Objective

Through this exploratory study of Peace Corps Training and Participatory Community Literacy projects, I examined if a Participatory Community Literacy project would successfully integrate the development of language and cross-cultural skills required in Peace Corps training. I predicted that the use of a Participatory Community Literacy project would be more relevant and beneficial to the Peace Corps volunteer and the host community. A Participatory Community Literacy project would be a tool for volunteers to employ to become an intricately involved member of their host community. Finally, a project of this type is empowering to the community and this is a fundamental goal of both the Peace Corps and Participatory Community Literacy.

### Rationale

Peace Corps Training and Participatory Community Literacy projects have three things in common. Both use interviews as a way to learn about and value the culture of the community. Both conduct the interviews in the language of the community. Most important, both have a goal of empowering the community. Some Peace Corps training interviews are unfocused and have no determinable outcome, as the information gathered is discussed briefly and then discarded. A Participatory Community Literacy project approach uses the information gathered to benefit the local community. For example, it could be

used as a tool to develop curriculum in the schools. Families are also encouraged to use the information generated to create easily readable text in books, that can be enjoyed by them and also shared in activities at the school. This development of curriculum is one of the technical skills components for Volunteers working in educational programs, but it is applicable to many other programs as well, as most volunteers teach in some manner during their Peace Corps assignments. Thus Participatory Community Literacy not only integrates language, cross-cultural and some technical skill components of Peace Corps training, but also has the potential to develop curriculum that is beneficial to the community.

A Peace Corps volunteer with training and experience in doing a Participatory Community Literacy project would have an identifiable and easily explainable goal in their community. A volunteer could introduce themselves to members of the community through the creation of a Participatory Community Literacy project. This would enable a new volunteer to learn about the community, and explain his or her role in local social and economic development. While this might be a bit presumptuous on a volunteer's initial arrival, since the volunteer would not know the culture of the community well, the Participatory Community Literacy project would be a good method to learn about the town and to learn from members of the community who could help guide the volunteer on areas of interest in the region. A Participatory Community Literacy project based on a volunteers development job would be an ideal way to learn how the community

does things, and why. This would help a volunteer to incorporate the communities' own knowledge and resources and current, positive practices, with the technical skills he or she is supposed to teach. A volunteer could also do a Participatory Community Literacy project later on in their service as a way to broaden their acquaintances in the community by meeting people outside their specific area of work. Many volunteers have a "down" time during their two year commitment in their site. Schools may be out on vacation for education volunteers, or agricultural volunteers might be waiting for planting season. A Participatory Community Literacy project would enable a volunteer to contribute to the community in a meaningful way during this "down" time, and the volunteer would have the opportunity to meet members of the community not involved in the volunteer's primary development role.

Because of my own experiences as a volunteer in training and then as a new member of a community, I feel that a Participatory Community Literacy project would have helped me to expand my role in the community and gain access to more of its members, furthering my development goals as a Peace Corps Volunteer.

### Definition of Terms

**PCV**-Peace Corps Volunteer-working on development programs.

**PCL**-Participatory Community Literacy project approach-An interview process in which interviewers or community members select a topic of importance to the community, and interview members of the community on their knowledge of the topic. The information gathered is used to develop curricula in the school and can also be used to create easily accessible text in books, which are shared by the authors in a community setting (Also known as transformative and family literacy projects). Elements are based on Participatory Action Research. The ultimate goal is of empowerment for the community and the valuation of community knowledge.

**PAR**- Participatory Action Research- research based on the idea of community action through active participation in the process by community members. Many times PAR involves interviews and dialogues with the community, empowerment of participants, and an outcome of change in the social order.

**Integrated Curriculum**-A teaching method in which all academic content areas revolve around one topic.

## **Limitations**

Limitations of this study may be the accessibility or lack of literature on Peace Corps training, as it is only available in one library, which is owned by the Peace Corps. One of the resources that has been helpful to this study is the Language Coordinator's Training Handbook, which has been most useful in confirming the universal use of interviews in Peace Corps Training.

Another limitation is the difference between Peace Corps training programs in different countries. Some follow a training center module, where the volunteer trainees all live in the same community. Others follow a more experiential model, in which small groups of volunteers live in scattered communities, only coming together for occasional training of technical skills. A Participatory Community Literacy project would be feasible in both situations but the logistics might prove difficult, if the project were to be done as a group. This could affect a study of PCL because of the logistics of assembling the volunteers in order to write curriculum.

The language abilities of volunteers can also be seen as a limitation. Some volunteers like myself come in with very little experience with the language, and must master basic language skills to survive. Other volunteers enter training being proficient in the language and need more challenging activities to further

their language development. In the case of these intermediate and advanced volunteers, a PCL project would actually delimit their learning.

Finally, Participatory Community Literacy is, at its heart, used to develop curriculum relevant to the community of learners. Not all development programs have a teaching component per se, so the application might be limited to volunteers working in the education sector. But, I would contend that every Peace Corps volunteer is in essence a teacher, because of the nature of the development process.

### Overview of Thesis

As stated, this thesis will discuss the relevance of integrating a Participatory Community Literacy project approach into Peace Corps training methodology. The language learning goals of Peace Corps training with a special emphasis on the interview activity will be addressed, and the benefits to the volunteer and the community of using a Participatory Community Literacy project approach will be identified.

The following chapters will develop these ideas further. The second chapter will be a review of relevant literature about Peace Corps Training, Participatory Community Literacy projects, and integrated curriculum. In the third chapter I will discuss the methods used in researching the question, and developing an

example of a Participatory Community Literacy project in the creation of an integrated thematic curriculum. The fourth chapter will discuss the results of this exploratory study and present the model curriculum. The final chapter will summarize the findings and make recommendations for PeaceCorps training and further studies.

## Chapter II

### Literature Review

The literature that I read for this thesis centered around three different topics, Participatory Community Literacy, Peace Corps training, and integrated curriculum. I will first describe the many different articles and books I explored on Participatory Action Research in Participatory Community Literacy projects. Then I will describe the objectives and competencies of Peace Corps training. Finally I will describe methods I used to develop an example of an integrated thematic curriculum based on Participatory Community Literacy.

#### Participatory Community Literacy Introduction

I am doing an exploratory research project, which according to Light and Pillemer (1984), may have a goal "to tackle an area of research to see what is known"(p.16). Light and Pillemer go on to recommend that "a productive reviewing strategy is to cast as wide a net as possible when searching for studies to include" (p. 16). I initially started researching Participatory Action Research, and I found that in reviewing the literature on PAR, that this strategy was valid because the term is used loosely in many different programs. Some family literacy projects use components of PAR in the creation of books written by family members. PAR was also used in adult biliteracy education programs. There were studies based on Participatory Action Research done in work place

situations to improve conditions. All these programs did have some common components of Participatory Action Research. I chose to develop the term Participatory Community Literacy (PCL) to encompass all these programs because while they incorporated elements of PAR, they changed some of the elements to fit their literacy goals. These changes were minor in most cases, for example, having the researchers think of the questions, instead of having the questions generated by the community. Nevertheless, the changes were enough to subtly change the projects from Participatory Action Research to Community Literacy projects that incorporated principles of PAR, thus the term Participatory Community Literacy (PCL).

The common components of Participatory Community Literacy projects are that interviews take place in a community setting, and empower both the interviewer and the interviewees to deconstruct old ways of knowing through the validation of community and cultural knowledge using interviews and dialogue in the language of the community. The community was variously described as being in a school setting, an adult education setting, or a work setting, depending on the project, but all had these common components.

### Participatory Action Research

Participatory Action Research, whether used as just a research model, or developed into a model or project for change as in Participatory Community

Literacy, is inspired by the work of Paulo Friere, an innovative educator from Brazil who developed the concept of "critical pedagogy". According to Friere (1985),

The more we live critically (this is what I would call a radical pedagogy in Giroux's sense), the more we internalize a radical and critical practice of education and the more we discover the impossibility of separating teaching and learning. The very practice of teaching involves learning on the part of those we are teaching, as well as learning, or relearning, on the part of those who teach (p.177).

Friere believed that the illiterate learners had a lot to teach the teachers, and that they should be the authors of their own education, informing the curriculum through their lives and experiences. This knowledge that the learner brings empowers him or her to take ownership not only of their own education, but of important issues that affect his or her life. This belief forms the backbone of Participatory Action Research and Participatory Community Literacy, and in almost every book and article that I read, Friere is mentioned for his ideas.

Fals-Borda and Rahman (1991) discuss Participatory Action Research and emphasize this idea of empowerment.

Two elements of empowerment that are considered by PAR to be the most important are autonomous, democratic people's organizations and the restoration of the status of popular knowledge and promoting popular knowledge (p. 16).

They stress that the knowledge must come from the community in order for social action to take place. This emphasis on social action and change is one of the foundations of Participatory Action Research. The idea is to change the social hierarchy and domination of the lower social and economic classes through valuation of knowledge. They make the point that knowledge is given value, and is controlled by the predominant social class. Usually this dominant class tends to be repressive, denying the lower social and economic classes of rights and by implication, dignity. PAR was developed as a way to change this, by using the knowledge of the people to promote social change. Fals-Borda and Rahman go on and mention the problems inherent in this.

It may be suggested that the situational difficulty of the working class initiating its own liberation on a macro scale (because they are so busy making a living) creates a vacuum in leadership which gets filled in by intellectual-activists trained in the schools rather than in life. It is a tragedy of the first order that these very intellectuals in their great wisdom not only fail to recognize the limitations of their knowledge and understanding. They also do not recognize the alienation between themselves and the people, overlooking or denying the new dialectics they introduce in the social scene by assuming revolutionary leadership even if this were fully well intentioned (p. 20).

To some degree I found this true in a lot of the research I read. Participatory Action Research has evolved in some ways from a radical method to promote social change through dialogue between community members, to a type of research that empowers the community but with a lot of the input and direction coming from the researcher, especially in PCL projects. Still, the initial goals of authentic dialogue and empowerment of the community remain a constant.

Ada and Beutel (1993) state,

More than a methodology, Participatory Action Research is a committed dialogue for service and action among researchers and their communities. Researchers and participants come together in a mutual and rigorous exploration of their lives, deeply respecting each other's ability to truly know and believing that through the act of knowing we can transform our reality (p. 7).

They point out that, "The researcher and her participants create a living dialogue and a historical text of their work together" (p. 9).

Ada and Beutel describe different PAR projects done by university students, all of which involve intensive dialogue and interviews with participants. Most of the projects were done in a workplace setting, with an employee/student researcher generating a question to be answered through dialogues with colleagues. Ada and Beutel describe the dialogues.

The questions to guide the dialogue are not questions that need to be repeated verbatim to each person. This is not a formula interview. You are engaging people in a critical, reflective dialogue, which is a very different process than a formal interview. There is a dynamic in the dialogue that may generate further questions or reflections on the research. Even though you may bring a formal set of questions to your participants, you are not restricted to asking questions in a given order or verbatim (p. 72).

In Participatory Action Research, the questions to be researched are, "the open, general questions that you and your participants anticipate answering through the research, (Ada and Beutel, 1993). They go on to say:

The major research questions will arise from narrowing the topic and from your initial observations and conversations held with the people in the community. The second set of questions are posed by the researcher, the community, and the participants to help guide their dialogues together. These questions for the dialogue are intended to help in building knowledge together and to provide the space for critical reflection and analysis about the issues that concern the participants (p. 70).

### Participatory Community Literacy

One issue that is of deep concern to many community members involved in Participatory Action Research is community literacy, both for adults and children. Many of the books and articles that I describe in the following paragraphs use Participatory Action Research as a way to have a dialogue with the community through interviews about literacy. Researchers wanted to find out what literacy meant to family and community members. They also wanted to develop community responsive literacy programs. Most of these literacy programs were based in immigrant communities in the United States. They can all be described as Participatory Community Literacy projects, as they used components of Participatory Action Research to address issues of illiteracy.

Sissal (1996), uses components of Participatory Action Research to describe collective learning and the group process. This project took place in an adult education work program where the adults had the goal of improving their reading and writing skills in order to pass the GED (High School Equivalent) exam. They were also taught job skills, and PCL was used as a way to

empower the group and to teach cooperative work skills through a collective group model as opposed to learning as individuals.

In the collective model, however, the knowledge and experience of the entire group can be used. Moreover, through a division of labor in which individuals and teams amass and then share knowledge about a specific issue, the total amount of useful knowledge available for problem solving is greatly increased (p.37).

Literacy was thought to be enhanced by using the group's knowledge because everyone had a chance to participate through interviews and thus realize that they had something to contribute. This led to increased confidence and participation. Various literacy programs PAR as a basis for driving the curriculum either as an empowerment tool, or as a determiner of the topic or social cause to be studied. This is a core component of PCL projects.

Ada (1993), incorporates the critical pedagogy of Freire to foster connections between the home and school. She uses elements of Participatory Action Research, including dialogue, interviews and community knowledge, to describe a PCL curriculum that addresses the needs of the adult and child learners and as a way to value the cultural and linguistic richness of an immigrant community.

When there is an authentic effort to include parents in the education of their children, administrators, teachers, students and parents themselves can come to realize that the parents or primary caretakers have a lifetime of learning. This knowledge includes values and traditions; it includes an extensive oral literature composed of legends, folktales, songs, poems, games and stories. It also includes practical every-day experiences and an awareness of the processes by which people interact and learn (p. 6).

Ada continues to talk about the value of honoring community and family knowledge. "The purpose, then is to conceive of projects in which the knowledge that the parents already have or can generate and reflect upon will be valued by the class and will become an integral part of the curriculum" (p. 13). She advocates using children as the interviewers in this study but does say:

Teachers can best encourage this activity by modeling it themselves. Sharing one's personal stories involves a certain amount of risk. If children and their families see the teacher take that risk first, writing a book about his or her own life, family, or children, and sending the book home with the students so that they can share it with their families, the students and their parents are more likely to open up and share their personal stories as well (p.18).

Ada seems to be saying that this type of risk by the teacher or interviewer can lead to greater communication, and understanding of cultural and linguistic differences. It also opens up dialogue between the teacher or interviewer and the community participant creating a more equal social situation. This principle of equality is fundamental to PAR, as the participants need to feel that what they say matters and is equally as important as what the researcher might say. This validation leads to a feeling of empowerment by the participant.

In a school in the Pajaro Valley, a PCL project was conducted by Ada (1989). The participants were immigrant children and their families, and the goal was to create an interest in reading and writing in a supportive environment. The parents wanted to know how to motivate and support their children in the literacy process. A literacy circle was started, where Ada shared children's books and modeled a critical way to read and react to them. This developed into involved and enriching discussions, and eventually into a desire by both parents and students to write their own stories. Eventually the stories were shared with the group and many community and social issues were discussed. Finally, the stories were made into books, and this led to the formation of a more culturally and community responsive library. While there were no interviews per se, the knowledge of the community was used in an empowering way for families, and honored their cultural and linguistic diversity as well. In this way, the project incorporates PAR principles.

A powerful resource for understanding the use of Participatory Action Research in literacy projects in the community and in the classroom is Building Communities of Learners. A Collaboration among Teachers, Students, Families, and Community, (McCaleb, 1994). One way that PCL is used is through cooperative learning. "As students learn to work cooperatively to solve problems and to generate new forms of knowledge, they are also creating bonds across culture and languages" ( p. 45). These bonds again lead to a

feeling of equality, validation, and empowerment for the researcher and participants. In the Participatory Community Literacy projects discussed, PAR is described as a basis for research and projects.

McCaleb (1994) describes PAR by saying,

Participatory Action Research differs from traditional research in its fundamental approach. By attempting to break down the established power roles between researcher and participants, both agents become co-participants in a dialogue. The researcher, who in this case is the teacher, the students, or both, is inviting the participant to speak or write about and critically reflect on her thoughts (p.57-58).

McCaleb herself conducted dialogues with parents of her students and explains how she did it. " I conducted the dialogues in the homes of the families" (p. 62). She mentions that this is done not only to increase participation, but also to add to the sense of empowerment by approaching interview subjects on their own terms and on their own turf. The interviews or dialogues are key in all the mentioned projects, whether done in a school or in a home.

The English Family Literacy Project at El Centro Del Cardenal in Boston is an example of a program that used Participatory Community Literacy to inform curricula. McGrail (1995) said:

The participatory approach is a process of curriculum development that involves students in determining the content, processes, and outcomes of the curriculum as it emerges. In this context, curriculum development is a negotiation process where teachers and students participate as co-learners or co-investigators to determine which social or cultural issues to turn

into the focus of literacy activities. The curriculum emerges as the result of this ongoing collaborative investigation of critical themes (p. 77).

This is an example of a learner focused program where the first thing that happens is:

Staff and learners collaborate to implement activities such as individual interviews and focus groups to identify themes that the learners consider important (for example, the family, the community, or the school) and that become the basis for the curriculum content (p.15).

In this program, the ideals of PAR were closely maintained because the learners determined what was to be studied. They chose issues that were relevant to their lives and about which they already had some knowledge, like loss of culture and unemployment. They developed a social action plan in the sense that they determined the issues and then developed curriculum to address those same issues. For example, loss of culture was developed into a celebration of culture, culminating in the creation of student books about their individual culture, but based on a group idea and format developed out of interviews and dialogues.

Project FIEL, the Family Initiative for English Literacy, also used a Participatory Community Literacy approach.

The FIEL curriculum consisted of a series of lessons written by the staff with input from the participating parents and children. The choice of curriculum lessons was unique to each site. The themes for the lessons were selected through an initial program meeting

and ongoing discussions with the participating families, in which they indicated their interests in particular themes offered to them and suggested the development of additional themes that they had a need for or interest in. Thus, the themes were learner-centered in the following ways:

- They had value for the participants.
- They used the participants' cultural and linguistic backgrounds as a point of departure.
- They were interesting to both parents and young children.
- They provided information for discussions in class and at home of issues significant to participants' lives (p. 92).

While many Participatory Community Literacy projects address adult literacy or child to adult literacy, such as Ada's (1989) and McGrail, (1995), another method was described in Laughlin's (2000) work. Here, teachers were participating in a program in a small town in Mexico. American teachers came to the town to learn and do research, with a research goal that "attempted to address the concerns of the middle class Euro American educator who is attempting to become more multiculturally literate, and relevant in today's classrooms" (p. 6). The teachers were the interviewers, and through the information gained, wrote curriculum that was derived from the community. The curriculum was intimately related to the concerns of the community, and was developed in a thematic manner.

During the summer session of 1997, teacher participants worked in teams with local teachers and community members to identify worthwhile investigations of community knowledge. From these investigations, they created original texts, either as picture books or other narratives. The books were presented to the community and donated to the local public library (Laughlin, 2000).

The goals of this teacher exchange were:

1) to learn from the traditions and practices in a small Zapotec community as potential funds of knowledge for the development of curriculum in the classroom in the United States, and 2) to document the transformation of attitudes, beliefs and practices of the participant/educators from the U.S. who are involved in collaborative, cross cultural experiences (p. 8).

Laughlin goes on to describe the project.

The texts and projects that were produced over the two weeks in the village and presented on the last day of our stay in Oaxaca were the codifications of common cultural capital manifested in the community, and around which people built their lives. The products of their efforts became the literacy framework around which further lessons were developed for instruction in the classroom setting.

Susana and Ruby, a bilingual second grade teacher and a bilingual resource teacher, together wrote and illustrated a picture book entitled, "Zhub: el maiz". (Zhub is the Zapotec word for corn). The process of creating this book involved close collaboration with their family, observation and participation in several family operations using corn, and a study of the "science" of the many uses of corn as an essential sustenance and source of tradition in the community. Some of its illustrations were drawn by their host mother of the family, who also helped to provide the explanations and indigenous names for products made with the corn (p. 12).

This project is not perfectly in line with the PAR ideals in that the teachers did the writing and illustrating instead of the participants. There is no call to social action either. However, these lower socio-economic family members got to be the teachers and authorities on a topic of great importance to them. The close

collaboration and dialogues with the family created a book with relevance to the community and validated the knowledge of the family and community thus creating a feeling of empowerment. This feeling of empowerment is an integral part of Participatory Community Literacy.

Another great example of this collaboration is described by Laughlin (2000).

“El Alfabeto del Tejer” (The ABC Book of Weaving), written by Holly and Tina, two first grade bilingual teachers. They participated in similar activities with their family, and were able to find a Spanish or Zapotec word that related to the knowledge, values and experiences of the community for every letter in the Spanish alphabet. The selected alphabet words were associated with weaving, the main economic enterprise of the community, but more importantly were reflective of the cultural capital of the community. Each page described and illustrated a word, such as: “hilo” (thread), “guich” (wool), “idolo” (idol, used as symbols in the rugs woven), “jarabe” (a regional dance), “respeto” (respect), and “Xaguia” (Zapotec name for their village). The book represents the literacies of the community using words in their own language, and embedded with the realities of their world. The significance of this work cannot be underestimated when considering the need to make the process of reading relevant to the learner (p. 12).

### Summary

This repeated emphasis on making the learning relevant to the learner is at the heart of Participatory Community Literacy programs. Most of the projects that I researched were primarily focused on literacy as an attainable goal for participants. While literacy is not a social action per se (as opposed to challenging established political parties, or forming a union for better working conditions for example), literate people can assert their rights as individuals and

as members of an oppressed group much more than illiterate people who may not have access to information relevant to their social situation. By validating the knowledge that learners brought to literacy programs, the PCL projects were validating the participants, and their rights to have a voice in the curriculum and, further than that, in society. The PCL projects also taught the participants how to access and develop their own knowledge as a basis of attaining further knowledge. This is one of the true basis of empowerment, giving people the tools to help themselves.

### Peace Corps Training

Peace Corps works with social and economic development projects in each of the countries where it is located. These projects might include teaching small business techniques in emerging Eastern Bloc countries, creating fisheries in rice fields in Asia, teaching soil erosion and sustainable agriculture techniques in place of slash and burn farming in South America, or creating and modeling environmental education in Central America. The volunteer helps to develop projects with the goal that the project will eventually be sustained by the host country nationals. For this purpose, Peace Corps training integrates language training, cross-cultural training, and technical skills training (specific to the volunteer's job assignment). I will focus on descriptions of language training, as it is the primary focus of training, and incorporates many cross-cultural language experiences into lessons and activities.

Peace Corps training usually takes place during an intensive three month training period, and Peace Corps trainees attend classes eight hours a day, five to six days a week. The majority of class time is spent learning the language of the country, and trainees are divided into groups based on a primary language assessment. There are beginning, intermediate, and advanced groups, with some of these being subdivided into beginning-intermediate, intermediate-advanced, etc...depending on the language ability of the participants. As an example, a trainee who had a year of the language in college for example, would probably be in a beginning-intermediate class, while someone with little or no language exposure would be in the beginning group.

In addition to the language practice in class, volunteers are expected to interact and practice new language skills with their host family. This is a family of native language speakers in the community who agree to have the volunteer live with them during training. The family helps the volunteer with their language skills and exposes them to the native culture through day to day activities. The volunteer often becomes a temporary member of their host family and participates in family activities. The volunteer might have a homework assignment of watching and reviewing a TV show, or making a meal, or attending church with a family member. This gives the volunteer experience in real life situations.

Most of the trainees are just out of college and between the ages of 22 and 30. Of course there are older volunteers, and even married couples, but the average volunteer is young, college-educated, and without a lot of professional job experience. All volunteers seem to share an enthusiasm for adventure and the desire to make a difference in the world. Many have a little language experience from taking a class in the United States once they knew to which country they were assigned.

Peace Corps training is meant to teach a volunteer enough of the language to function at an intermediate level. The volunteer is taught survival language skills with the expectation that their language acquisition will continue during their time of service.

The Peace Corps language training curriculum is competency-based; that is, it describes what students will be able to do with the language. Competency-based curricula help students learn language that is relevant to their lives in a new country. Students study the language actually used by native speakers to express themselves in a variety of situations ("Peace Corps Language," 1993, p.5).

These topics and competencies are further described: "The curriculum is divided into topic areas based on the immediate needs of Peace Corps Volunteers from their arrival in the host country and initial meetings with host country nationals to settling into housing, shopping in local markets, working in a school and dealing with emergency situations" (p. 5). Topics include learning how to identify oneself, how to talk in social situations with the host family, and

immediate necessities like food, money, housing, health, and transportation. Volunteers learn to describe themselves and their families in the states, to explain why they are in the country, and to discuss their employment history. They learn where to go and what to say in a medical emergency, and how to communicate within the country (telephone usage, post office usage, etc...).

The topics are broken down into specific competencies and the volunteers then do activities to practice these. For example, a volunteer might have to practice role-playing going to the post office, and then actually go to the town post office to mail a letter. While a lot of the curriculum addresses basic survival language skills, trainers are permitted latitude.

The topics and competencies chosen are relevant to the majority of Peace Corps countries; however, there are some that do not apply in every country. Language teachers should decide which to include based on the language and culture they are teaching (p. 5).

In addition, the training is further clarified according to Functions, Language Samples, Curriculum Emphasis, Speaking/Listening, Literacy, Grammar, Culture, Format, and Activities. I will show excerpts from some of these, and summarize others. Probably the most relevant aspects to this thesis are the descriptions of Functions and the curriculum emphasis on Speaking/Listening, and Culture.

Functions detail what the trainee should be able to do within each topic area. In each assignment, a volunteer should be have the opportunity to practice and then perform the following:

Functions: Although topics and their competencies are the driving force of the curriculum, the scope and sequence also includes sample functions that are covered in each of the topic areas. These are drawn from Van Ek's *Threshold Level English* and include the following categories: 1. Imparting and seeking factual information; 2. Expressing and finding out intellectual attitudes; 3. Expressing and finding out emotional attitudes; 4. Expressing and finding out moral attitudes; 5. Getting things done; 6. Socializing. (Van Ek, p.26).

These functions are addressed through different activities as well. A volunteer might be asked to interview their family about a topic, discuss what they found out with other volunteers in class the next day, and then express how their host family's feelings differ from their own feelings as an American.

A special emphasis in the curriculum is on Speaking/Listening. It is stated that speaking and listening are the emphasis, and thus there is a special section on listening activities. Almost all the activities incorporate speaking of course.

Many of the activities also incorporate literacy.

Depending on the needs of the Peace Corps Volunteers, reading and writing tasks can be integrated with the listening/speaking tasks. In addition it is recommended that Grammar be incorporated into the curriculum (p.7).

In addition to Speaking/Listening, Culture is also included in the competencies.

"A competency-based curriculum by definition includes culture" (p.7) Thus many of the lessons are language-based, but address different aspects of cross-

cultural development by virtue of the Peace Corps trainee interacting with native speakers. In class, the volunteer trainees might sing folk songs, cook a native food, and have discussions on religion and festivals. Customs are discussed and role-played in classroom situations, and differences and similarities between the native and American culture are defined.

Peace Corps training is meant to be interactive and participatory. Volunteers engage in role-plays, discussions, games, field trips and excursions in town.

Activities are divided into Presentation, Practice and Use stages. The initial competency is presented in a classroom setting and its relevance to the volunteer would be discussed, along with special vocabulary or grammar. The volunteers would then practice the new competency through playing a game, having a discussion, drawing a picture or another activity. In the use stage, volunteers would use the new language in a real situation with native speakers, either with their host family, or in town.

The curriculum for teaching language to Peace Corps Volunteers has important Guiding Principles. They are:

1. Successful communication is the goal of the curriculum. Lessons should be sequenced from presentation activities to guided practice activities to communicative ones.

2. Language practice should be meaningful. Practice should be communicative and situationally used. "Real" language should be emphasized.
3. Language occurs within a social context. The setting where the communication takes place as well as the social roles of the speakers affect the language used. Extralinguistic features of the target culture such as gestures and eye contact can also be addressed within the contexts of various situations.
4. Teaching grammar and pronunciation is important and can easily be incorporated into a competency-based curriculum.
5. Frequently, the language which students need to comprehend is different from what they need to speak or write. Not all language needs to be produced. Some words, phrases and sentences should be taught for listening (or reading) only.
6. Language should be spiralled and reviewed. Since some language will reappear in different topics and in different competencies, there is ample opportunity for review and reinforcement of vocabulary and structures.
7. The number of items presented must be carefully determined. Studies suggest that no more than nine language items should be emphasized at any one time. Grammatical complexity and vocabulary should be adapted to the ability of the student to avoid excessive frustration.
8. Moving from the known to the unknown facilitates learning. Students should practice the target language in situations familiar to them first. For that reason, the curriculum begins with the language that Volunteers immediately need with their host families. Then the same topic areas will be re-visited in unknown situations. For example, Volunteers learn the language to ask about how to use items in the host family's house in the first housing unit; then they learn how to rent a house of their own in a subsequent housing unit.
9. Instruction should focus on individual needs as much as possible. If students in the classes do not need certain competencies included in the curriculum, these should be deleted. Also, students should focus on language they themselves need rather than what a classmate needs. For example, each Volunteer should be able to describe his/her own past work experience, but not the work experience of other Volunteers.

10. Not everything has to be or should be fixed. The curriculum was designed to ensure maximum flexibility. Teachers who feel their students can handle more complex structures or more difficult vocabulary items should introduce them. Teachers must constantly assess their students' ability to go beyond the minimum.

11. Competency-based language instruction allows for the use of a variety of methods, materials and techniques. Since adults have individual learning styles, a variety of auditory, visual or physically active tasks should be included in a given lesson (p. 9).

These guiding principles are integrated throughout all of the activities. In addition, there are many activities which incorporate aspects of Participatory Community Literacy, but two in particular, described in the General Activities section, seem like perfect matches to incorporate PCL. Both activities use dialogue with native speakers as a basis for learning like PCL. The first of these is Interviews:

*Purpose* : to provide an experience where students interact with native speakers and practice listening, speaking and perhaps note-taking skills.

*Directions* :

- Assign students a topic (or let students help select a topic).
- Brainstorm with the students a list of vocabulary, possible questions needed for the interview.
- Have students work in pairs to develop questions they may need for the interview.
- Review with the students clarification techniques that they may want to use.
- Have students practice the interview questions in a role play situation.
- Students conduct interview.
- When students return to the classroom, have them give brief reports on what happened, for example: how did they feel? were there any surprises?
- Have students report what they learned from the person they interviewed.

-Make a list of tricks the students learned, e.g., how to ask for clarification, how to control the questioning, how to get the conversation back on track (p. 23).

The other activity that is particularly appropriate for a Participatory Community Literacy project is going on a field trip, because the student is going out in the community and learning from community members through dialogue:

*Purpose* : Going outside the classroom allows students to use the language in a real situation with native speakers.

*Note* : Make sure to choose field trips that will be appropriate in your culture. If necessary, arrange with businesses or people before the students take the field trip. Be sure to talk with the students before the trip about what actions will and will not be culturally appropriate.

*Directions* :

- Give students assignments related to the topic area.
- Have students go out and complete the assignments-When students return to the classroom, talk about what happened and what they learned (see Interview above) (p. 23).

The lessons described are related to language acquisition, but incorporate aspects of cross-cultural training. According to the Peace Corps Language Coordinators Resource Kit on Pre-Service Training (PST Kit), (1998), "Language Coordinators have identified language practice activities that are especially useful for integrating language content with the technical and cross-cultural training that also makes up the PST " (p. 36). The suggestions for integrating language and culture include:

- Homestay Activities & Assignments - interviewing family members; learning local songs, games, sports, and dances.
- Critical Incidents - family members relationships; community relationship (social structure)
- Hands-On Activities - working with farmers, fishermen, craftsmen, cooks, seamstresses, musicians, artists, etc.. (p. 36)

These activities would of course be done outside the classroom. They are interactive, as implied by the “hands on”, and certainly would be a valuable and relevant way to practice language competencies while learning about the culture. Most importantly, the culture would be learned from the actual practioners, rather than from a lecturer or book or movie. Thus there could be an interchange of ideas.

For integrating language with both technical and culture the PST Kit suggests, “Conducting simple community surveys, using procedures based on participatory rural appraisal and other such tools” (p. 37). The PST Kit goes on to explain:

Keep in mind that in a competency-based curriculum, each competency provides an opportunity for integration of language with culture. Because the content is based on real situations, learners can go out of the classroom and try the language in the actual cultural context (p. 37).

Once again, this incorporation of language and culture would be relevant to the learner. The participatory rural appraisal would integrate technical skills because community members are surveyed or interviewed on how they do things, for example, planting corn. This knowledge is then incorporated into Peace Corps skills, and volunteers learn the same techniques, or variations of these skills, to be used in their development efforts.

Another specific curriculum is suggested for this type of integrated learning.

This curriculum is described as a community contact assignment and is described as:

an activity that gets learners to go out of class into the actual community to accomplish a task. The community can be both familiar and unfamiliar - people that they regularly come into contact with, such as shopkeepers, or strangers. For certain kinds of assignments, especially those that require gathering personal information, it might be easier to consider the community to be host country people who already know the Trainees, such as their host family, close friends or other language instructors (p. 64).

The community contact assignment is further described as a five step process.

1. Select the topic and destination - To pick a topic for the activity and a destination that will provide good application opportunities, it is helpful to consider these criteria: Are the topic and destination relevant? interesting? language rich? Does the task have an appropriate level of difficulty?
2. Design the assignment - One of the suggestions here is to interview a specific person.
3. Prepare trainees for the assignment - Be sure they (PCT's) have been provided with: the language (including vocabulary and formulaic phrases) they will need for the situation; an opportunity for rehearsal and practice in a "safe" classroom environment through role plays and simulations; any necessary cultural background that they will need in order to carry out the assignment.
4. Carry out the assignment.
5. Follow up - There should be a clear outcome from the assignment. This might be a presentation to the class or written work. It might be a physical object. It could even be a videotape of their experience. But it is important that you include a follow-up processing of the experience, so that trainees can maximize the learning and strategize for improved performance on the next task or in other similar situations (p. 65).

## Summary

All of the competencies, guidelines, activities and assignments have the primary goal of preparing the PCV to work as a productive member of a community for two years. The volunteer has a primary development job within the framework of the community. It is hoped that at the end of two years, the development of the project will be such that the community members can take over the project on their own. Of course some projects take much longer, and in those cases, another volunteer is placed in the site. Peace Corps training has a varied, competency-based program to create a volunteer who can arrive in a community and begin working. Regardless of the length of time of the project, volunteers are expected to work as professional members of the community, with some expertise. They must be able to speak and listen competently in the native language from the outset. Just as important, the volunteer must have the respect and cultural understanding of the community. Fluency in language, knowledge of the culture, and capable technical aptitude are key goals of Peace Corps training, and vital to gaining this respect and to being an effective volunteer as soon as possible upon arrival in their new home.

Through a competency-based curriculum, volunteers are thought to be well-prepared for their development job assignments. Activities designed to fulfill these competencies are also opportunities to integrate Participatory Community

Literacy projects to enhance the curriculum through contact visits, interviews, dialogues, and the writing of an integrated, thematic curriculum.

### Integrated Thematic Curriculum

The creation of an integrated thematic unit by Peace Corps trainees would demonstrate language fluency, knowledge of the culture, and, depending on the topic, technical skills.

Peace Corps trainees could write an integrated thematic unit on a chosen topic. An integrated thematic curriculum is an accepted and advocated way to teach all aspects of a topic or theme. It is a commonly used method for teaching throughout the United States and is taught in most university teaching programs, including the one I attended at Sonoma State University, CA.

A topic is taught through all academic content areas, so that learners are immersed in the subject. They see how learning is related because they are writing math problems, reading science books and illustrating stories. Any academic standard that can be incorporated into a lesson in a valid manner is positive reinforcement of the interconnection between subject areas.

Relevance and application are equally compelling arguments for integration. Many children don't see any reason for learning to read, write, and compute. When reading, writing, and math are taught as separate skills, children often do not apply them at other

times or to other subjects (Cunningham, P. and Allington, R. 1994, p. 192).

The authors go on to explain how an integrated curriculum allows children to really learn about a theme across all academic subject areas, increasing relevance of the topic, and retention of information.

Eisele (1991) is even more descriptive of themes when she says, "A thematic unit is a method of organizing instructional time and materials around a topic which lends itself naturally to the integration of curriculum content areas" (p. 53). She goes on to give a rationale for why teachers should organize instruction through themes: "Students learn best when the curriculum is integrated and taught holistically. Themes permit skills instruction through activities that relate to real life experiences" (p. 55).

Most schools have a list of competencies, standards, and topics that they are responsible for teaching. These can often be incorporated into themes or topics that children actually want to learn, giving them choice. This choice leads to increased interest and participation, and a feeling of empowerment. The children are no longer passive participants, but equal learners with the teacher. As Manning, Manning, and Long (1994) envision an integrated thematic curriculum, they describe a complete immersion in a topic:

Theme immersion is an in-depth study of a topic, issue, or question. Students engage in the planning of the study with the teacher. Together they find resources for information, determine the important issues for discussion, and decide how to

communicate their learning. Specific content evolves as Theme Immersion progresses: some students become interested in new topics as a result of their study and begin to explore areas that may not be directly related to the original topic, issue or question. The role of the teacher is not to impose or control ideas but to be an active member of the community of learners (p. 1).

Eisele outlines the procedure that one could use after a theme has been selected. One would first determine the curriculum goals and objectives for the selected theme. She then advises that the teacher organize ideas under the content areas and language components of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. She suggests a web planning form for a theme outline (see Appendix A), with all content areas addressed (Listening/Speaking; Reading; Writing; Social Studies; Math; Science; Art/Music; and special activities like field trips and guest speakers). While this is more structured than theme immersion, it would be an easier and thus more appropriate form for Peace Corps trainees and volunteers to use while learning how to create curriculum.

### Literature Review Conclusion

A review of the literature on Participatory Community Literacy, Peace Corps training, and integrated thematic curriculum provides a solid foundation for my initial assertion that a Participatory Community Literacy Project would be appropriate in a Peace Corps training context. The interviews, community contact assignments, and the emphasis on interacting with native language speakers that make up a vital part of Peace Corps training are also components

of Participatory Community Literacy projects with their emphasis on community involvement. Creating curriculum of relevance to the learner is a cornerstone of PCL, Peace Corps training, and of an integrated, thematic curriculum. The components of each are similar, and would be complemented by implementing a Participatory Community Literacy project into Peace Corps training, with an integrated thematic curriculum for use by the community as a product of the implementation.

## Chapter III

### Methodology

My initial question in doing the research for this study was to discover if a Participatory Community Literacy project would be an appropriate approach for Peace Corps training. I wanted to find out more about PCL and Peace Corps training in order to see if there were any commonalities between the two. There was nothing written on this question, and very little research that critically examines Peace Corps training approaches, so I decided to adopt an exploratory research approach.

Exploratory research is conducted with the goal of developing preliminary findings. A study of this sort takes a look at the available information about the topic or topics. It might compare two topics to see if they have any parallel components. These preliminary findings would then either be developed or dismissed depending on what was discovered. If the two topics are so incompatible as to be unworthy of further study, then the research would go no farther. If the two topics were found to have some common components, then the research might be more fully developed.

Development might take the form of doing an experimental study. A training session using a Participatory Community Literacy would be compared to one using the current Peace Corps training methods. Volunteers and the

community could then be surveyed at the end of the study to discover if the PCL project had made any significant difference to the volunteers or to the community. An integrated thematic curriculum developed out of PCL's integration into Peace Corps training could be developed as well. This curriculum could be the focus of further study, to see if student learning, interest and feelings of empowerment in the school and community were increased by using the new curriculum.

I explored literature relevant to Participatory Community Literacy projects and Peace Corps training philosophy and principles. I looked for commonalities and differences between the two topics by first gaining a thorough understanding of each one separately.

I first started my research on family and transformative literacy, as my initial interest in PCL was started by reading about a transformative community literacy project. After weeding through many articles and books, it became clear that these family and transformative literacy projects were using a form of Participatory Action Research. They used interviews and dialogues, validated knowledge from the community thus empowering the community, and worked for social change or greater equality for the learners through community-responsive literacy programs. However, some of the PCL projects did not strictly adhere to the tenets of Participatory Action Research. In some, the goals of the community literacy program were determined by the teachers. In others,

there was less of a push for social change, and more of an emphasis on empowerment of the community and the creation of a culturally relevant curriculum in the local school. In all of them, the vehicle of change was literacy. This is somewhat different from Participatory Action Research, in which the community and learners determine the issue and topic to be studied and ask all the questions. In addition, PAR is used in other types of community projects, such as the organization of farm cooperatives and unions. Because of these differences, I determined that Participatory Community Literacy was a more accurate term for the research materials I studied. Participatory because I found sources that identified Participatory Action Research as the philosophical origin of their programs. Community Literacy because the literature I studied had this emphasis. After a thorough grounding in PCL, I researched Peace Corps training.

My sources for Peace Corps training were the official manuals used by trainers and language coordinators throughout the world. Some had examples of country specific lessons, but all were expected to follow the guidelines of the competency-based curriculum. The language survival skills and cross-cultural knowledge were universal in Peace Corps training centers, whether the centers had one training center where volunteers met daily, or a multi-center model, where volunteers lived in small groups and only came together for specific large-scale activities. All Peace Corps training involves the use of competency-

based language activities based on the training manuals, with the volunteers being taught in small groups based on their language competence.

Because the training manuals are used throughout Peace Corps, I could look for commonalities between Peace Corps training and PCL. I found that both use interviews and dialogues and both want to empower the community. A main difference was that the topics in Peace Corps training were generally based on competencies set in the manuals, while in PCL, the topics are generated by needs of the community of learners.

I discovered that PCL and Peace Corps training had enough common components to warrant further exploration. I developed a model of integrated thematic curriculum based on PCL and addressing the competencies expected in Peace Corps training. This model is found in Appendix B.

## Chapter IV

### Analysis

In order to analyze the research for this thesis, I searched for common components or themes in both Participatory Community Literacy projects and Peace Corps training. I will compare these themes and analyze my discoveries about both PCL and Peace Corps training by showing what they have in common, and how they differ.

#### Developing the Concept of Participatory Community Literacy

Participatory Community Literacy is used in a variety of literacy settings. It is used in programs for families and their children, and could be found under a definition for family literacy. PCL is also used in adult education programs teaching English as a second language. It is the type of project that is adapted for the learners it serves. However, the basic principles of Participatory Action Research are a common thread throughout the different programs in which it is found. PCL is concerned with creating dialogues with the community in which it is implemented. A goal of empowerment of the learner by the validation of his or her knowledge is a constant in PCL projects. This empowerment is central to Participatory Community Literacy, in that the participants determine the outcome of the curriculum.

In some settings, Participatory Community Literacy was engaged in by the adult learner, with the group initially being interviewed to decide on topics of interest to the community, and then dialogues held to gather information on that topic. These dialogues sometimes led to an academic curriculum, and sometimes led to a call for social action. The interviewing was conducted by the researcher with the interviewees deciding on future actions (Ada & Beutel, 1993).

In some cases, Participatory Community Literacy was used by teachers to create dialogues with families. The chief focus of these dialogues was the creation of literature to be shared by the families in a community setting. The families created books and the teachers acted as facilitators(Ada, 1989).

The Participatory Community Literacy done by Laughlin (2000), was closest to the project I envisioned as being integrated into Peace Corps training. In this project, the teachers were the interviewers, and went out into the community, gathered information, and designed curriculum to be used in the village school.

Despite the many different manifestations of Participatory Community Literacy, I did find three themes in common in all the literature. The first of these themes is that the community selected (whether adult learners, families in a community, or families involved in a specific project at a school), was interviewed for their insights into a topic. The interviews may have been conducted by researchers

or the learners as a project, but the end result was that the community was a source of knowledge, and information was gathered in the words of the interviewees. The interview component was a constant component in all the PAR projects, and so I developed the term Participatory Community Literacy to describe all the projects that used the elements of PCL.

This leads to the second theme that I found, namely that the knowledge of the community is valued and used to create relevance to the learner. Whether the topic to be discussed was selected by the community or by the researcher, information was collected through the interviews in order to enhance curriculum or decide on a future social action. The knowledge and wisdom of the community was valued during the interview process, and the community and family members felt empowered because their voices were being heard. The researcher or learners benefited because of the relevance of the information gained. This relevant information created an interesting, dynamic curriculum. It also created learners who were taking responsibility and thus ownership of their own knowledge acquisition because of the curriculum's relevance to their lives and the culture of their community.

These two themes, of using interviews and valuing community knowledge, led by inference to a third theme. The knowledge gained, whether put to use as curriculum, for creating literacy, or by deciding on a plan of social action, is all knowledge that would not have been known without the Participatory

Community Literacy process. There is an underlying theme here, that this valuable information would have lain dormant except for the dialogues of the participants. The informational interviews led to new knowledge and the use of this knowledge in a concrete way. The interviewees all became actively involved in the process, and new knowledge was created. This is a positive development in any educational setting.

One component or stated theme of PCL was very contradictory. With its roots in PAR principles, one would expect that the questions to be considered in dialogues and interviews would originate from the people. It was hoped that the community knowledge would answer the question, lead to more questions, and finally to a feeling of empowerment and thus impetus for social change in the people themselves. In almost all articles or books describing PCL projects, there is an underlying theme that a major goal is to empower the learner or participant by validation of the community fund of knowledge. However, in some PCL projects, the questions are now generated by researchers to fulfill curricular goals. One has to wonder if the interview questions then have the same relevance to the community members. The assumption is that the knowledge is still relevant to the community, but it may be addressing concerns of the researcher more than of the community members. This is especially true when the PCL project revolves around creating curriculum for the schools. It is understandable that a teacher might want to pose questions in the community that address academic standards while creating a relevant curriculum, thus

satisfying the two needs of relevance and established academic standards. A teacher or researcher must be aware of this while considering PCL, and decide whether he or she is really embodying the PAR principles if the questions are not coming from the people she or he wants to interview. The ultimate source of the questions must be determined at the onset of any project. Only by having the questions initiated with the community will the theme of empowerment really hold true in a PCL project. Because of this dichotomy, I felt PCL was a more appropriate term to use for the various projects that used PAR as a way to approach community literacy.

#### Peace Corps Training Language Learning Themes

The use of interviews as a way to learn language and cross-cultural skills, the relevance of acquired knowledge to the trainee, and the goal of empowering the learner and community were three themes that ran through the Peace Corps training manuals.

The literature on the Peace Corps repeatedly discusses the importance of having volunteers learn the language in “real” settings, with native speakers. One way that this is accomplished is through interviews, and there are several activities mentioned to achieve this objective. These interviews are expected to

be conducted by volunteers, with community members, much like the interviews of Participatory Community Literacy.

Another guiding principle of Peace Corps training is the importance of having the learning be relevant to the trainee. "Competency-based curricula help students learn language that is relevant to their lives in a new country" (PCLT,1993). Being able to dialogue with community members about a topic would be relevant to both the trainee and the community member.

Empowerment of the learner is implicit in the very goals of the Peace Corps. Peace Corps volunteers are working at a grass-roots level, helping people in a lower socio-economic level to develop projects to improve their lives. The community members involved in the project become less dependent on the volunteer as the development project proceeds. The ultimate goal is for the community members to eventually take over the development project. The community is empowered by the knowledge gained from having a PCV in their community. They hopefully will continue the project, enjoy its benefits, and in turn improve other areas of their lives, based on their initial success.

Thus, the themes that I found in the Peace Corps literature were that interviews in the community were an important and suggested activity for Peace Corps trainees. I also found that the learning should be relevant to the volunteer. In

addition, one of the Peace Corps goals is to empower people to improve their lives or surroundings through development programs at the local level.

### A Model Integrated Thematic Curriculum

The themes of using interviews, relevance of the curriculum, and empowerment of the learner were evident in both PCL projects and Peace Corps training. I designed an integrated thematic curriculum research project based on PCL and incorporating Peace Corps competencies.

As an experienced teacher both in public schools in the US, and as a mentor teacher of Environmental Education in the Peace Corps, I knew that countries have commonalities in their school curriculum. For example, every country teaches the basics of Reading, Writing, Math, Social Studies, and Science. I also know from experience through both observation and undergraduate and graduate study, that Art and Music are also considered important parts of the curriculum, although not with the same emphasis as the “basics”. In addition, in Panama I learned that Agriculture, Home Economics, and English are part of the curriculum. The country had also added Environmental Education as an academic area, and our job as Peace Corps Volunteers was to model for the Panamanian teachers ways to teach this new subject.

In addition to this practical experience, I drew on learned information from my teaching practicum and from my own classroom. In the literature review I mentioned Eisele's book as one source that informed my theme development. I will mention here that other books I have read and used in the classroom echo her recommendation of mapping out a theme in a web. I used this webbing technique to design my integrated thematic curriculum as described in full in Appendix B.

I selected a theme that would be relevant in almost any Peace Corps setting. I decided on Medicinal Plants as a topic because it would be of interest to different types of Volunteers from a technical aspect, (Agriculture, Health, Environmental Education). Learning about medicinal plants would also incorporate cultural beliefs and relevancy into the curriculum. Finally, one of the competencies for volunteers is being able to communicate during medical emergencies, thus they need to learn some medical terminology.

Once I had decided on my topic, I selected the content areas that would be relevant to both trainees and to the community. The content areas I selected were Writing, Reading (stories that were gathered from the community during interviews), Math, Science, Social Studies, Art, and Music. I considered that the community might have few resources (a library for example), so did not use Reading or literature as a departure point as is commonly done.

After this I thought of questions that would elicit the information necessary to design the curriculum. I knew that the questions would have to involve symptoms and treatments, as these were the Peace Corps competencies I had chosen to fulfill through this activity. I also knew the questions would have to address the content areas.

I developed each lesson idea according to what would have the most relevance to both trainee and future curriculum recipients. For example, for Math, I decided to design a measurement lesson, because this is a universal mathematical concept. I also considered lessons from Laughlin's study, (2000), and so one of the activities developed is an ABC book.

I tried to design lessons that would use little or no materials, as each volunteer lives in a different situation, and some are far from stores. Thus, I used common sense to determine what materials would be readily available to volunteers, such as paper and pencils.

Finally, after considering what a community might have as resources, I decided that the creation of books informed by the Participatory Community Literacy project would be a welcome addition to any school. These books would have to be cheap and easy to make, so that became another criteria.

I did not have an opportunity to actually do this project before this study, but I have used integrated thematic instruction based on class input in the past, and it has been very successful. Students appreciate the relevance of the curriculum to their lives, and the opportunity for input that the interviews afford them.

I do realize that I selected the topic to be explored and thus violated one of the PCL's tenets. The topic seemed appropriate to me because it is a Peace Corps competency, and because of my own experience as a PCV in Panama. Many times I was doctored with local medicinal plants, and some were grown in the school garden. I learned about the plants from friends and community members, and actually researched the uses by talking to various community members and other volunteers throughout the country. I now realize that I was engaged in an informal PAR project, because I was a student during these conversations, instead of a teacher. People delighted in telling me about how the plants could be used, and how they were better and cheaper than going to a doctor. They felt empowered by being able to cure themselves using local knowledge. In addition, the selection of this topic allowed me to develop my curriculum model based on the reality of a Peace Corps experience.

In a Peace Corps setting, it would first have to be determined whether the questions to be asked in interviews be initiated by volunteers or the community. This conflict of who decides the questions is common in all PCL projects. Peace Corps trainers do have to teach certain competencies, and would want a

PCL project to encompass those competencies, much as a teacher has to address the state standards when designing curriculum. Any PCL project that is implemented in a formal education setting is going to have the same dilemma of addressing mandated curriculum standards while creating curriculum relevant to the students.

In a Peace Corps training session, I would suggest that the questions be selected by volunteers, as they are the chief learning recipients, and one must consider their language abilities and interests. The volunteers could possibly choose from questions that were initially solicited from the community by Peace Corps trainers. In this way, the questions would be valid to the community and would give the interviews relevance to the trainees. However, a volunteer should be taught that ideally the questions would initiate from the community in order to have the most relevance and ability to empower community members.

## Chapter V

### Discussion, Conclusions and Recommendations

#### Discussion

In this study, I discussed the components of Participatory Action Research in Participatory Community Literacy projects. I concluded that the distinguishing elements of PCL are the use of interviews, the validation of community knowledge and thus relevance of this knowledge to the curriculum, and the empowerment of the community of learners because of this validation of their knowledge.

I also discussed the goals of Peace Corps training. One goal is to make use of a competency-based curriculum in order to prepare volunteers for their job assignments. Volunteers are trained in language, cross-cultural and technical skills. Interviews are an important method used to establish competence in language and cross-cultural skills. Another goal is to make the learning relevant to volunteers. A third goal is to empower the volunteer so that the PCV can be an effective worker in his or her development role.

I compared the goals of Participatory Community Literacy and Peace Corps training and found that they did have common elements, namely the themes of using interviews, relevance of the curriculum to the learner, and empowerment

of the learner and community. If one accepts this premise that Participatory Community Literacy has the themes of interviews, empowerment and relevance of knowledge to the community, and the creation of new knowledge, as commonalities with Peace Corps training, then the integration of the Participatory Community Literacy approach into Peace Corps training would seem to be appropriate. This would answer my initial questions about the goals of PCL and Peace Corps training and what constitutes an effective PCL project.

After answering these questions, I had to determine what could be done to improve the community interview component of Peace Corps training. I feel that after looking at the research, a PCL approach would improve a community interview because of the choice volunteers would have in selecting a topic. This would lead to the interviews having more relevance to the trainee, and thus more interest and retention of the topic and the language used to conduct interviews. This choice and relevance would lead to a feeling of empowerment for the trainee and for the members of the community interviewed.

There would be an added benefit of teaching volunteers how to create an integrated thematic unit, and my model ( Appendix B), is an example of how this could be done. A volunteer with this ability to create curriculum would be able to contribute significantly to the school in his or her area, or to curriculum at the national level. During my time as a Peace Corps volunteer, I worked on the development of a national curriculum to be used in the implementation of a new

program of Environmental Education for the country of Panama. Fortunately, there were some teachers in my training group, and we had the education background to create an effective, experiential Environmental Education curriculum that is still in use today. The volunteers who did not have an education background learned how to create curriculum from us, as curriculum writing was not addressed in training. A PCL approach in training, followed up by the writing of an integrated thematic curriculum based on interviews and dialogues, would give volunteers an extra technical skill that could prove very useful in their development work. Even if the volunteer was not involved in education per se, doing a PCL project with curriculum as an outcome would benefit the community in which they were living with a relevant, empowering curriculum. It would enable the volunteer to meet members of the community who might not be involved in his or her primary development job. This would better integrate the volunteer into the community making him or her more effective as a volunteer.

### Conclusions

One question that arose while doing this study was whether a PCL project would be presumptuous for a volunteer because he or she is new to the culture and might not have learned subtle ways of behavior and socialization. I think the answer hinges on the method of generating questions and topics used in a PCL project. Earlier I discussed the two approaches to asking the questions

used in a PCL project. Some studies used questions and topics generated by the community, and some teachers and researchers thought of questions and topics themselves. I would suggest that for PCV trainees, it would be presumptuous to think of questions on their own. However, on the other hand, it would be difficult for volunteers to conduct the preliminary interviews necessary to generate questions from the community because of the short three month training period. A compromise could be that the community could be solicited for questions and topics of interest to them prior to the training period. This could be done by the trainers. Volunteers would then have a choice of questions or topics to pursue while doing a PCL project that the community has generated. Once a volunteer was in his or her site, he or she could conduct initial interviews to solicit questions and topics of importance to the community, and then conduct a PCL project. This would be especially relevant for education volunteers but would be applicable to other volunteers as well during any "down" time in their site.

I reached an unexpected conclusion while doing this study. Initially I had thought that a PCL project would be ideal for all volunteer trainees. I feel that this still holds true but with some modifications because of the range of language fluency of trainees. Beginning language learners, like myself when I was in training, would not be able to effectively conduct interviews and dialogues. The competency-based curriculum was appropriate for my level of instruction, and I needed to learn the "survival skills" in language. I now realize

that the interviews I was sent on had a very specific purpose in that they were designed for me to practice specific language in the setting where that language would be spoken. Thus I learned to mail a letter by going to the Post Office, and learned to describe my development job by talking to native speakers. My beginning group and I had to struggle to carry on a conversation, and were not capable of an extended dialogue. However, there were two groups of advanced language learners in my training group, and they were also practicing the same competency-based skills as my beginning group. This was not challenging for them, and did not significantly improve their language skills. They would have benefitted from doing a PCL project. They could have conducted the interviews, and then the information gathered could have been developed into curriculum by the whole group, beginners to advanced, at the training center. This would have created more interest for all of us, and we all would have learned the skill of creating an integrated thematic curriculum. Of course as my language skills improved in my site, I could have conducted a PCL project because I would have been exposed to the method during training. Thus my conclusion is that PCL would be appropriate for intermediate to advanced language learners in Peace Corps training, with all language learners participating in the actual curriculum development phase.

### Recommendations

I would recommend that Peace Corps conduct an initial study on using a PCL project in Peace Corps training. Based on my preliminary findings, it would seem to be an appropriate and valuable addition to the competency-based curriculum. I would recommend that two similar training centers be selected for the study. Education trainees would be ideal participants in this study.

Community members could be interviewed before the study to address the question of what benefits the Peace Corps training center provided to the community. The community could also be solicited for interview questions and topics.

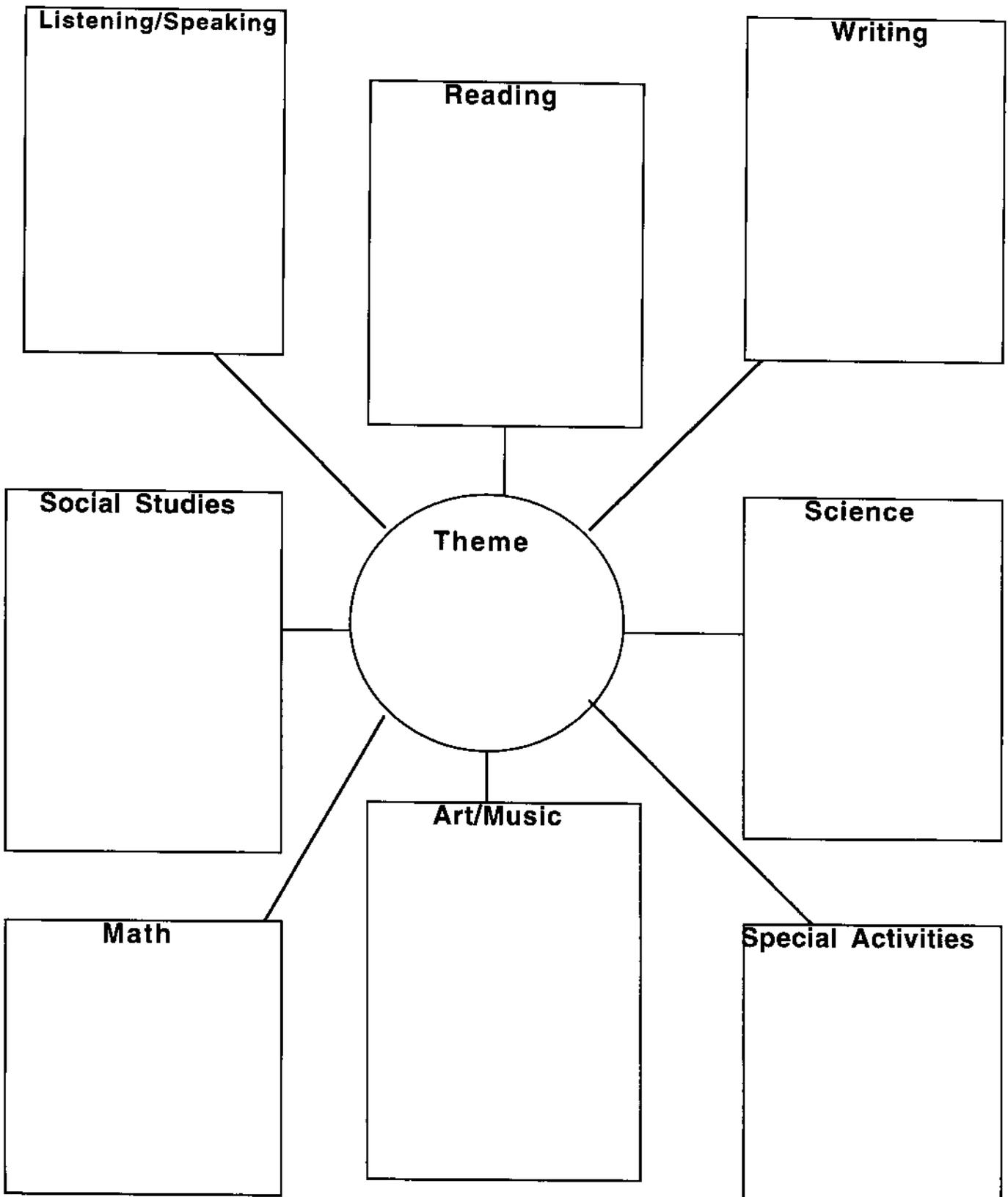
The study would proceed with one training center conducting training as usual, and one incorporating a PCL approach. In the PCL center, the intermediate and advanced language learners would conduct the interviews, and all volunteers would participate in the creation of curriculum. The education volunteers could then model teaching the curriculum in the local school. Community members near both training centers could then be interviewed again about the benefits of having a Peace Corps training center in their community. The people could also be asked about their feelings of being interviewed and seeing their local knowledge used as a basis of curriculum to determine if they did gain a feeling of empowerment. These interviews could be compared to see if the PCL curriculum project was actually perceived as a benefit by the community members.

Volunteers could also be interviewed or surveyed at the end of the study to determine their feelings about their training. Questions addressed could be on how relevant they thought the training was, and how prepared they felt to teach upon reaching their development site. The issue of empowerment and choice could also be addressed in these training surveys.

I believe that an initial study as just described would confirm my contention that Participatory Community Literacy would be a beneficial component integrated into Peace Corps training. I recommend that a study be initiated by Peace Corps.

# Appendix A

## Theme Outline



## Appendix B

### **Integrated Thematic Curriculum based on a Participatory Community Literacy Project in Peace Corps Training**

#### Principles

- 1) The PCL theme topic would be selected by the group of PC trainees from a list of questions and topics solicited from the community by trainers. Topics would address one or more of the language (and ideally, cultural) competencies of current Peace Corps training.
- 2) The Peace Corps trainees would be the researchers, and would create and ask the questions of community members, starting with their host family.
- 3) The thematic unit would cover the following academic areas: Writing; Math; Science; Social Studies; Art ; Music; Folklore (Language Arts); and Reading.
- 4) The volunteers would have the option of creating books arising from the interviews by themselves, in groups, or with their host family.

#### An Integrated Thematic Curriculum based on Participatory Community Literacy

I selected Medicinal Plants as a topic since Peace Corps volunteers have a language competency to describe symptoms of an illness, and follow directions for treatment. There is also a suggested activity in which volunteers are

encouraged to ask questions about local flora and fauna, and so learning about the medicinal uses of flora would be an extension of said activity.

I designed questions for the volunteers to ask in their interviews. I tried to make them simple, with repetitive language, so the trainee would have ample opportunity to practice. These questions are:

1. Do you use plants as medicine?
2. What plant would you use for a headache? Does this plant work for any other problems?
3. What plant would you use for a stomachache? Does this plant work for any other problems?
4. What plant would you use for nausea? Does this plant work for any other problems?
5. What plant would you use for a rash? Does this plant work for any other problems?
6. Are there any other medical problems where you would use a plant to feel better or cure yourself?
7. Where do you find the plants that you use?
8. Do you grow any of the plants that you use?
9. How do you know how much of the plant to use?
10. How do you measure how much of the plant you want to use?
11. Do you have to prepare the plant in any special way to use it? (drying, boiling it down, extracting sap, etc...).

12. Can you use any part of the plant or do you have to use a certain part?
13. Are there plants that cure more than one problem?
14. Do you have any stories about any of the plants that you can tell? Maybe about how they affected you or someone you know?
15. Are there any stories (or myths, folktales, etc...) about how the plants came to be? (The history of the plant).
16. Are the plants that you use easy to find now? Why or why not?
17. Are there any plants that you use for emotions or potions?
18. Can you show me the plants you are talking about?
19. Do you know any songs about plants, medicines, curanderos, etc..?
20. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about plants used for medicine?

The volunteer trainees would ask as many of the questions as possible of host family and community members. They would be free to add questions according to how the dialogues were progressing. The information gained could either be written down or taped (with permission).

After the information was gathered, trainees would design lessons to be used at the school. There are many other lessons that could be generated with this topic, and volunteers would be encouraged to think of as many as they can, in order to create a well-rounded academic, thematic curriculum. This project incorporates Participatory Community Literacy through the interview process

and use of community knowledge. It also is a relevant topic to volunteers, allowing them input and individualization in their learning process. Finally, it addresses and exceeds competency requirements for Peace Corps trainees. The following are examples of lessons in each content area.

### Lessons

#### **Writing**

Objective: Trainees will write stories about medicinal plants.

Method: Trainees will use anecdotes gathered through interviews to write, or co-write (with the interviewee), a story about plants. They will write in a picture book form, with easily accessible language and clear pictures illustrating the story.

The stories will be bound (stapled, laced up, etc...) to be used as research material for the school.

#### **Reading/ Writing**

Objective: Students will read plant stories with fluency.

Method: Elementary students will group, pair, or individually read trainee generated plant stories. They will then interview their own family about plants and write their own plant story from family information. The students will illustrate these stories and read them to the class. The stories will be bound and kept at the school as an addition to the library.

#### **Math**

**Objective:** Students will measure the length and width of plant specimens using medicinal plants, and write down the measurements using the correct abbreviations (mm. cent., etc.). They will then weigh the plants using a balance scale.

**Method:** Teacher will model measuring a plant using a centimeter ruler. (If there are not enough rulers available for the class, students will be taught to measure with a length of string, and then compare the string measurement to the ruler). Students will then measure the length of their plant specimen and write down the information.

Students will weigh the plant specimen using a balance scale (which can be made beforehand, see appendix).

**Extension Activity:** Students can measure amounts of dried/powdered medicinal plants using teaspoons, cups, etc...depending on quantity needed.

### **Science/Art**

**Objective:** Students will draw a picture of a plant specimen and label the plant parts.

**Method:** Students will be taught to lay out the plant specimen in order to see all its parts (roots, stems, leaves, flowers, seeds). They will then draw and label the plant specimen.

**Extensions:** Students can also classify the plant specimens in the class. After all have been drawn, groups of students can be given five or more different plant types to classify. They may classify by appearance, medicinal use, or any other

valid criteria. They will write up a table showing the plant categories, and explain why they classified their plant samples the way they did.

### **Social Studies**

**Objective:** Students will draw a map of the local community and where medicinal plants can be found. They will create a key for the map.

**Method:** After students have gained familiarity of locally grown medicinal plants through writing their own stories, measuring plants, drawing and labeling plant samples, and classifying plants, they can be taken on a field trip around the community. During the fieldtrip, students should be identifying medicinal plants that they have become familiar with during this unit. They can jot down notes on where the plants are located, or sketch a quick picture.

When students return to class, they will draw a map of the community and plant locations.

Students should create a key for the map to include symbols for each plant, and any major community buildings (health clinic, store, church, etc....). They will use symbols for plant locations using the key they create.

**Note:** A lesson on map symbols and keys should be done before this lesson.

### **Social Studies/Art**

**Objective:** Students will identify medicinal uses of plants used in national or local symbols (on shields, flags, etc...).

**Method:** Students will select a national symbol featuring a plant and list any medicinal uses of the plant. The students can use previously written, community

generated plant books, or further interviews for research. They can then draw the symbol and present their findings to the class.

#### **Music/Writing**

**Objective:** Students will write lyrics about a medicinal plant set to a tune of their choice.

**Method:** Students will select a tune of their choice (a nursery rhyme type song, for example). They will then select a plant and list the medicinal qualities of the plant. Students will think of rhyming words for the plant, plant parts, medicinal qualities, etc...they will then write lyrics for the tune they chose, substituting the lyrics with ones they have written. Students can then perform the songs together.

#### **Writing/Reading/Art**

**Objective:** Students will write an ABC book about medicinal plants.

**Method:** Students will brainstorm medicinal plants that begin with all the letters of the alphabet. They will then write an alphabet book with illustrations for each letter. If desired, they can write a sentence about each plant. The book can then be used in primary classrooms as a resource on plants and ABC's.

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