

PO R T R A I T

A Grassroots Think Tank

Linking Writing and Community-Building

Hal Adams

IN A SMALL wooden structure across the blacktop playground from their children's elementary school, a handful of adults smoke cigarettes, eat doughnuts, drink coffee, and talk about their lives. The focus of the discussion is a short piece one of them wrote last weekend.

The author is 23 years old, pregnant with her third child. Her oldest is seven. She has no husband, no job, little formal education, and uncertain housing. Because of her situation she thinks she is a failure. Her writing is self-critical. She fears she has violated God's plan for her life. She is weeping as she responds to others' comments, though the comments are gentle. They say it is not God's plan she has violated, but her own. They say she is following God's plan by preparing for her baby's arrival and providing for her other children as best she can. The conversation alternately focuses on her writing, offering her emotional support, and debating religion. She begins to reconsider her writing and her views.

Sometimes these meetings unfold as literary criticism sessions, other times as church revivals, coffee klatches, therapy groups, or political caucuses. But mostly they are writing workshops, which turn out to be a kaleidoscope

of possibilities and enactments. The participants are preparing their work for publication in a magazine that will be distributed in their school and community. The magazine is called the *Journal of Ordinary Thought*.

For three years I have been offering a parent writing program in local elementary schools in Chicago. The purpose of the program is to increase community involvement in the schools and demonstrate the link between education and community life. This is the story of that effort in one school. It began as a writing class for parents and grew into a community-building program that called itself a grass roots think tank.

Every Person Is a Philosopher

The school is in Austin, a poor black neighborhood on the west side of Chicago. Everybody in the group lives in the neighborhood, most of them all their lives. Two mornings a week we gather, usually 10 or 12 of us, to write and talk about life. It was not always relaxed, especially not the first day. People were anxious then. They had come because they wanted to help their children with their schoolwork. Only a couple viewed themselves as writers, and

here I was, the outsider from the university, under scrutiny, asking everyone to write freely about their experiences. I insisted that each of them had stories worth writing. Even strangers would be interested, I told them. They were doubtful, but polite. I persisted.

Every person is a philosopher, I said, thinking of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, who thought people with power maintain dominion over ordinary people through the control of ideas as much as through the exertion or threat of force. If ordinary people develop confidence in their own ideas, Gramsci reasoned, they can challenge the control others hold over them. I was thinking also of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, who thought ordinary people limit themselves by rejecting ideas that grow from personal experience and instead adopt ideas from the class that rules them. These ideas tend to justify class and race privilege. If ordinary people learn to recognize the alien ideas they have adopted, they are able to discard them and act in their own interest. Last, I was thinking of the Caribbean revolutionary C. L. R. James, who thought the artistic expressions of ordinary people contain truths essential for social change. If ordinary people recognize the truths within their art, James

concluded, they are more likely to trust their capacity to make a better world.

The ideas of these three thinkers can be summarized like this: Ordinary people hold the key to a better world; experience is the best guide to thinking and action; to achieve social progress people must think for themselves and reach their goals through self-activity rather than rely on outside authority to think or act for them; it is the responsibility of everyone to strive for a better world; those who are not political in this broad sense are illiterate, no matter how well they read and write.

I was in a poor neighborhood on Chicago's west side, facing ten mothers and grandmothers who had vast experience in raising their families while keeping life and limb together under harsh conditions. Gramsci's, Freire's, and James' emphasis on the experience and thinking of ordinary people was compelling. The parents were intrigued by the idea that it is people leading ordinary lives who understand the world most clearly and create the truest meaning of their situation. Heads began to nod.

Near the end of the first session, having discussed lofty ideas about the importance of experience and the role of the ordinary person in creating a better world, the parents wrote what was on their minds. "Use your own language," I urged, "don't worry about spelling and grammar. If you don't know a word, leave a blank space; we'll figure it out later." Everyone gave me something.

The papers were so brief and cautious I was tempted to dismiss them as shy attempts to "get over" on the first day, to avoid drawing attention to themselves. Perhaps the good stuff would come later. But more was there than immediately apparent. Several papers, for instance, made reference to religious practices and beliefs. Looked at as a whole, they formed a religious theme that

could not be denied. I typed all the submissions and distributed them at the next meeting. The group focused its attention on one, which read, in its entirety: "I went to church Sunday. I had a good time."

If the author were to write more about this topic, I asked, what would you as a reader like to know? They gently began to ask questions aimed partly at the author, partly at the group. Why do you go to church? How did you choose this church? Do your children like it? What happened in church Sunday that made it a "good time"? Each question sparked discussion. People offered opinions on the differences between churches, the role of pastors, how churches have changed, their importance in African-American communities, disputes and disagreements within churches, and so on. They talked about how church communities and religious beliefs had helped them in everyday living and during crises.

From a simple two-sentence piece of writing I had nearly dismissed as "getting over" grew a discussion about how people create institutions to deal with the difficulties they face and how articles of belief influence everyday life. The discussion had its effect. The author had new directions to pursue, and others who were stimulated by the piece began writing ideas of their own.

The lessons were not lost on the group:

1. Even apparently simple writing contains meaning for the group.
2. The group helps develop the meaning in a piece of writing.
3. Writers develop their work by discussing it with others.
4. Writing by one person stimulates writing by another.

Primacy of Experience

The writing group was a place to identify questions from the gritty reality of life experience

and to address them in discussion and writing. Nothing in these meetings took precedence over the experiences of the members. The parents took to this idea quickly. It was as if it affirmed an approach to learning they already intuitively had accepted, namely, that life is the best teacher. Within a few months, armed with the confidence that its perspectives on the community were valid, the group would begin to take action on issues raised in the writing.

The meetings were run as writing workshops. I collected the writing, commented on it, and photocopied some for the class to read and discuss in future sessions. All discussion started with a member's writing. Discussion often went off in disparate directions, but inevitably it returned to the writing.

Mary was a leader but she was not a confident reader or writer. Each meeting the group would encourage her to write, but to no avail. A tape recorder and individual attention helped, but she still refused to write. One day, months later, she appeared with a piece of writing and proudly distributed it to the group. She had written it over the weekend with help from her teenage daughter and two of her daughter's friends. The four of them were lounging about in Mary's bedroom one night discussing their relationships with men. Mary asked the others if they would help her write something summarizing their discussion. Mary spoke while her daughter wrote and the others made suggestions. This grim piece, the result of that cross-generation writing session, clicked immediately with the writing group and brought expressions of understanding that came from places formerly kept secret. An old bond was deepened between Mary and her daughter in the writing of the piece, and a new bond was forged in the group with the reading and the discussion of it:

Males obsession over females. It starts with friendship, then they fall in love. The relationship begins wonderful; the nice secrets they share, gifts, romantic dinners, and the first time they make love. That's when the changes begin. The female is not allowed to have other male companions, no going out with her friends. All she can do is sit at home and wait on him. Then they have children and it really gets bad. The crying and fighting starts. All of a sudden the female loses interest and breaks the relationship off. Some get away, others can't. They are chased, harassed, and some even get killed in the process. Then all the male can say is, "If I can't have her, no one else can." Don't ever think you have made the right choice because you never know.

This story, based upon the experiences of Mary and her young friends, prompted others to tell similar stories about sexual relationships. A furious discussion followed about the oppressive conditions under which black men and women live in the United States and the stress these conditions place on intimacy between black men and women.

The group members brought new writing every session. They wrote about commonplace and extraordinary experiences: bus rides, kids getting ready for school, funny episodes, scary times, childhood memories, illness, death. The group discussions that followed the reading of these pieces always demonstrated the complexity of experience, including experiences that appeared trivial at first. It became second nature for the group to explore each story for its broader implications.

One mother wrote about taking a summer trip as a teenager with her mother and aunt to the southern United States. She was surprised that life in the rural South was so different from the northern city life she had always known. She disliked being in the South because there was nothing for her to do. After the others read her story they identified words they considered to be essential to

it, even words the author did not use: surprised, different, peaceful, safe, friendly, boring, caring, violence, drugs. Using these key words as a point of departure, the parents discussed the difference between Northern urban and Southern rural life. How did values differ in the two regions? Was life safer in the South than the North? Were families closer in the South? Was the educational system better? Did it cost less money to live in the South?

The parents' attention was rapt during the reading of these experience-based stories, and the ensuing discussions were intense. The stories rolled on, about family life, raising children, relations between the sexes, living amid violence, finding affordable housing, dealing with the public aid system, and surviving as women. The mothers first came to the writing group because they wanted to learn how to help their children with schoolwork. They returned for the chance to explore the meaning they had gleaned from lives lived under stress of poverty, and because it was comforting to make explicit to each other the common struggle they shared.

Publishing

Inside the front cover of the *Journal of Ordinary Thought (JOT)* is its statement of purpose: "The *Journal of Ordinary Thought* publishes reflections people make on their personal histories and everyday experiences. It is founded on the propositions that every person is a philosopher, expressing one's thoughts fosters creativity and change, and taking control of life requires people to think about the world and communicate the thoughts to others. *JOT* strives to be a vehicle for reflection, communication, and change."

It was time to publish writing from the parent group. I previously had published *JOT* in other settings: a public assistance office and a single residency hotel for

formerly homeless people. The writing group's response to these earlier issues was positive. They liked the plainly written style and the stories by people who lived lives similar to their own. They were fascinated by the prospect of seeing their names in print. The decision to publish was unanimous.

A few weeks later the group published an issue of *JOT* featuring writing by its members. The magazine's appearance in the dead of winter must have taken some bite from the Chicago wind, because group members were dashing without coats between the school and the little back building where we met, waving copies. It was high drama. They were celebrating having published a magazine that would cast them in a new light in the community, as writers and thinkers to be taken seriously.

The magazine contained several stories about family life and, as a portent of what was to come later, a few about violence in the community. The family, troubled as it may be, was viewed in the writing group as a buffer against the harsh outside world. Charlene's piece reflected both of these themes and, by implication, suggested a relationship between them. She foreshadowed the strong fear of violence other group members would pursue later in their writing. The security of her home, described in the opening, three-sentence paragraph, allowed her the psychological protection one evening to reflect on this disturbing experience:

I have put my kids to bed, finally. My house is peaceful, quiet. I will do some writing.

Two weeks ago I was standing at the bus stop. I noticed a guy walking up wearing house shoes. There were three other ladies standing there too. He was standing there looking at everyone's purses. He was moving a little closer every second, so I moved up a little closer to the pole at the bus stop. My heart was really pumping hard. I turned to the left to see if

the bus was coming. It was, thank God. The bus pulled up and I rushed to the door as it opened. I did not want to be the last person to enter, but the lady behind jumped in front of me. I entered the bus gripping my purse real hard. As I sat at my seat I asked the lady why she jumped in front of me. She told me she too was frightened that she was going to have her purse taken. I finally felt at ease for a while.

The story, interesting in its own right, opened the door for others to write later of experiences more frightening than Charlene's. The group began to explore the violence that, while it surrounded them, did not overwhelm them.

Alberta, like Charlene, introduced a topic that would become a theme for the group as time passed. In only a few lines, she explored tension within the family, between men and women in particular.

My brother called. He wants some money. I want to give it to him, but he don't work like he could. I wish he could get the right job and clean himself up. He only had one real job, and then didn't do so well. I don't want to give him money to waste up on something else.

The world is such a mess, not like it used to be. I know it has to change.

The explicit recognition by the group of the tension between men and women, introduced here by Alberta, was a primary factor in establishing a separate writing group for men within a few months. Starting the men's group and openly discussing the tensions eventually increased the potential for men and women from the neighborhood to collaborate as the group evolved toward community action.

Publishing the magazine changed the group. Commitment to the writing sessions soared as almost nothing took precedence over the writing class. Membership grew. The group was asked to speak at several university classes. The children's teachers

began to take notice of the parents' writing.

Influencing the Classroom

The stories the group published were not primarily about children, nor were they written primarily for children. From the beginning the authors wrote for themselves and each other, which is good because honest self-expression is the best way for adults to win children's respect and attention. Children learned from seeing adults tell stories about lives fully lived. The parents' history was the children's history, and committing it to writing demonstrated the truth in the adage that people are accumulated history. It was good to convey to children that experience counts, and that we are all philosophers interpreting the experience that forms our lives. There was wisdom in the stories for anyone in the community who read them, including children. Children grasped the meaning of some of the stories, while the meaning of others eluded them. Even stories beyond their reach, however, made a point with the children: there were stories from the neighborhood worthy of publication, and there were adults close to the school who cared enough to write them.

The parents began visiting primary-grade classes as guest authors. The purpose was to show the children that adults familiar to them were writing and publishing, reinforcing the idea that literacy was an everyday, important part of their community. The children enjoyed seeing familiar faces in the magazine, and gave close attention when the mothers read their work. Karen read her piece to her daughter's first grade class.

Let me tell you what a bad day I had. First I woke up late. The kids were hungry. I had to iron. I had washed only one of every sock. Finally we got out the door and wouldn't you know it, we missed

the bus. So, I walked to get my check, but the lady said it was not there. My caseworker said I missed my appointment, which I didn't know about, and I had only one day to get my medical card. I got to the doctor, but he was gone for the day. Then I got some money to go to the store only to find that what I wanted was not on sale anymore. So I went home and cooked what I had. There was not enough for me, so I went to bed hungry. Now that's a bad day, but everybody has them.

The first-graders gave it a positive review. The children's comments showed an understanding of the subtle message of Karen's story: Bad days are hard, but they can be handled. It was tiring and difficult to run around town with your kids, the children agreed, and scary to go bed hungry, but at the same time it was pretty funny that only one sock from each pair had been washed. The children emerged from Karen's reading with an understanding that one can survive a bad day with dignity and humor. Equally important, they developed new respect for Karen for having written about her bad day.

A Men's Group

The inclusion of men in the writing group on a regular basis was problematic for several reasons. The school had become the almost exclusive place for the women to meet socially; men in live-in relationships with women receiving public aid often remained in the background for fear their known presence would reduce the women's already-meager public aid checks; most importantly, living in poverty strained the relations between the sexes because men were unable to find decent jobs to support their families, often leaving women with the sole responsibility for raising children.

It was gratifying, then, when two young men from the neighborhood asked to start a men's writing group. They had seen *JOT* and thought they could

recruit several men to a group to work toward publishing a men's magazine. The women and the school administration enthusiastically agreed to have the men meet at the school once a week. Four men attended the first meeting, but the group quickly grew to twelve. All were in their late teens and twenties; some were former or current gang members; most were not employed; and only one had a secure, well-paying job. The group met for a year and published two issues of a magazine called *Through the Eyes of a Villain*.

"unemployed, but not without work to do." It was an important phrase because this author and his writing group were taking a new look at their community. The men approached this task by offering highly personal critiques of two cultures—mainstream U.S. culture and the street culture of their neighborhood. Their critique of the mainstream was angry. Their critique of the street was poignant. Both cultures, the mainstream and the street, have ravaged the lives of these young men. The men expressed surprise

the Westside of Chicago that about seen everything from group beat downs to getting shot, to getting cut, to shooting first, to seeing murder, to kicking it with murderers. I ain't saying that I'm a bad guy or a nice guy, but I came a long way. All the things I did in my life, I'm surprised I didn't go to jail or die, but I know I came a long way. I got a long way to go. Looking back through all the madness, I believe I was possessed, but now I feel peace and blessed and the demons have left and I can start with my self evolution, evolving to a peaceful state.

The men wrote about what most men think about—what does it take to be a man? Existing on the outside of the only two cultures they knew, they faced a void they sought to fill with their manhood. They recognized the tremendous potential in the world and in their own lives for creativity on one hand and for barbarism on the other. At this point in their lives, like C. L. R. James, they were seeking an artistic solution to the crisis. Most of them made rap music, and they all wrote. It was no escapist art in which they were involved. It was art that told the truth, for them the only path to being human and to manhood. Kevin wrote:

Life, it's a hard subject to talk about because I'm having a hard time dealing with it. A buddy of mine was smoked about a month and a half ago on the South Side. It was gang related. Another one of my homies had his picture taken with a 12 gauge. The last thing he saw was the flash. It was drug related. When I lived in California one of my boys got beat down by some Bloods over his truck ... I could go on and on with these types of stories, but it's hard, especially when it's one of your boys. Each time I heard the bad news I wanted to strap up and take care of business. But who gives me the right to kill another muthafucker just cause he killed my boy? Like I said in the beginning, life, it's hard to talk about. We're becoming extinct, being hunted by our own kind. ...



Hal Adams with the Parent Reading Group at Dett School in Chicago.

I objected to the title at first, arguing that it made them sound evil. "That's the point," they explained. "That's the irony. We are seen as evil. Our music strikes people as evil; our appearance strikes people as evil. They have to listen carefully to rap music to discover it is far more complex than 'bitches' and 'hoes' and violence. They will have to read the magazine to see beyond their fears, to realize we are men thinking about the world and how to remake it."

One piece in *Through the Eyes of a Villain* described the author as waking up one morning

that they had survived the racist violence of the mainstream and the street violence of the neighborhood. Here we are, they said with some surprise, in our twenties, still alive and out of jail. Who would have thought? As Derrick put it:

Growing up on the Westside is a task all people can't do. There is a fear of death that haunts the neighborhood. Many people are scared because of drive-by shootings and drug sales on the corner, to come outside or even let their children play in front of their own houses. I can see where they're coming from. Sometimes I feel like that, because I'm a Black man on

A Grass Roots Think Tank

Before the men's group was formed, the women had become more active in the school. Writing and group discussion seemed to make them more free to offer public opinions about school policy. Several ran for the local school council, which in Chicago has considerable power in neighborhood schools. As their confidence grew, some parents who previously had viewed their classroom volunteer role as primarily disciplinary began to take a different initiative with students. Linda contributed to the discussion of this process with "Parent Volunteer":

There is a child in the classroom where I volunteer. His name is Marvin. He is so cute. He has a problem reading, but he is trying hard. He also has a problem with adding and subtraction, but he is learning. When the teacher passes out the homework he gets his and puts it in his bag. The next day she asks the kids to bring up their homework, and she asks Marvin for his. He says, "My mom wouldn't help me." So, I suggest, "Marvin, do the best you can. Try by yourself, and if you can't get some part, leave it blank." For a while he wasn't bringing in any homework, but boy, now he's doing it and turning it in. ...

The discussion of Linda's piece, where members reassessed their roles as parents in the classrooms, was part of a larger discussion about the relationship of neighborhood culture to the educational process. The physical environment, family traditions, educational expectations, child-rearing practices, family structure, and community institutions were described in writing from a personal perspective.

Toward the beginning of its second year of existence the writing group began to discuss taking action on issues that had arisen in the writing. As members continued to write about the experience of living in the community,

the group expressed an awareness that the community environment was related closely to the quality of education their children received in school. They convened a meeting to discuss the matter with about 30 neighbors. To get the ball rolling, members of the writing group read selections from writing in progress. Three authors who subsequently published their works in *JOT* caught the attention of the meeting. Paulette went first with a piece she called, "Abandoned Buildings":

I imagine people staying around abandoned buildings. Sometimes you have to pass these buildings. You're actually scared to walk by them because you never know who might be inside. Sometimes you know they are inside watching you come by, but you don't know who is there. It might be a drug addict or someone to kill you. So when you pass these buildings, you have to watch carefully.

Joyce followed with "Dangerous World":

It is a dangerous world today. Something I wonder about a lot is how my children will live in this world. I know it's coming to an end one day. I hope and pray I will live to see my children grow up and make something out of themselves.

So much is happening out there every day of their lives. I see things and hear things—people and deaths, and so many young people killing one another over nothing. That's why I worry about a lot of things. I pray to God every day that nothing will happen to my kids. I tell him, don't forget us down here. Just keep watching over us and everybody in the world.

Theresa read last with an untitled piece:

Most everywhere you go in the 29th ward there is a vacant building. Some are torn halfway down or boarded up. Some were boarded up but the drug dealers have taken the boards down and made the buildings into spots to sell drugs, or they take someone in there to rape or kill.

One night I was going to work. After taking the kids to the baby-

sitter, I was on my way back to Central and Washington to catch the bus when I happened to walk by a vacant building and heard a lady screaming. I did not stop because I was the only one walking on the street that night. I was frightened. I ran fast and prayed—just get me to the bus stop and then, please bus, hurry up!

Each author's story was greeted with nods and murmurs of approval. As it happens, there was a large abandoned apartment building next to the school playground. At the time of the community meeting it was well known as a center for drug activity, and a few years earlier a woman had been raped in the building. It is no wonder the three essays struck a responsive chord.

It was agreed that the group would do something to stop drug activity near the school, but there were no illusions about the limited effect a victory would achieve. Everyone knew if the dealers were removed from the school area they simply would set up shop in another place, but at least parents would not have to worry about their children passing by drug deals on their way to school. People understood the complex nature of the problem. The deeper social and economic problems would not be solved by removing drug activity from the school area or, for that matter, even by eliminating drugs from the entire neighborhood. Many expressed sympathy for the young people selling drugs. There was strong sentiment in the discussion for the group not to take an unalterable position against the desperate people, some of whom were acquaintances, who had turned to selling drugs as a last resort. What appeared on the surface to be a simplistic solution (get drug sales away from the school) was in fact a solution that took into account complex social factors beyond the comprehension of many people not from the community. The lesson here is that long-term solutions to

the complex problems of poor communities cannot be found without the broad, realistic perspectives that can be developed only by community residents.

At least once a month for the next year the writing group met not as a writing group, but as the Austin Grassroots Think Tank.



If ordinary people learn to recognize the alien ideas they have adopted, they are able to discard them and act in their own interest.



The Think Tank was an organization committed to planning community action based on ideas that grew from the writing of ordinary citizens who lived in the area. During Think Tank meetings the group discussed what to do about the abandoned building next door. They took pictures of the many vacant buildings in the area and wrote stories about their experiences with them. They called in the police to discuss increased security (to little avail) and invited the city housing department staff to explain procedures for addressing the matter. They discovered how to do a title search to identify the owners of abandoned buildings. They learned about housing court. They sent representatives to testify in court several times during the year, and on two occasions rented buses to carry groups of people to the downtown courtroom. They invited building owners to meetings to discuss the threat their buildings posed to

the children. With pressure from the court and the Think Tank, the owners of the building next to the school agreed to secure their building, post a guard during school hours, clean the area, and report to the school office each day.

The Men's and Women's Groups Unite (Sometimes)

As time passed, the men's writing group joined the Think Tank sessions. The effect was significant as both sexes shared their often-differing perspectives on common problems. At one meeting, for instance, Detrich read a piece in which she asserted that black women coped better than men with drugs, poverty and violence. She concluded that it was difficult to find "a good Black man." Joe uncurled his long limbs, reached for a paper of his and said, "Yeah, women go through a lot we don't understand, but we go through things women don't understand. Check this out." He began to read about hanging out with his buddies after a writing group session:

... An hour later I smoked a blunt and drank a couple of brews with my buddies in the alley behind my house. I turned to walk away and there was an unmarked police car flying towards me. In my neighborhood cops like to hit you, so I was hoping they would drive right by. All four doors flew open and the car screeched to a stop. I took a step back and threw my hands up. I was snatched and thrown roughly against the gate alongside my buddies. ... One cop [started yelling], "Hit him, hit him, hit him, hit him! One of you fuckers is going to jail." ... one [of the cops] reached into my underwear looking for dope. My cousin came out of the house to see what was going on. "What the fuck do you want," one of the officers asked ... "you're going to jail too, motherfucker, put that bag of dope on him. ..."

I got angry at myself. I felt like a sellout. I was afraid. It was five of them with guns, but that was

no consolation. I kept quiet because I was afraid they'd make good on their threats. They left as suddenly as they came. "Get out of the alley," they warned, leaving us spread eagle against the fence.

... I think I've been searched by the police at least a hundred times, but I've never gotten used to it. Each time it's like being raped. Sometimes they even do it with a gun to my head or ribs. I told my mom what happened and she said I shouldn't hang with my friends. My aunt called and told me to stay out of the alley. My alley! ...

A heated discussion followed the reading of Detrich's and Joe's papers, with all the men and some of the women initially siding with Joe and most of the women taking the position of Joe's mother and aunt that Joe should not be hanging out in the alley. Eventually the group decided there was an overriding matter that concerned everyone in the room: the tension in the community regarding its diverse expectations of the police. At the time of this writing, the Think Tank is debating a program to address this issue.

By becoming more active in the school as volunteers and policy-makers, by addressing community issues that have an impact on education, and by basing these actions on experiential writing, the Grassroots Think Tank has taken beginning steps toward realizing the visions of Gramsci, Freire, and James, who imagined a primary role for ordinary people in changing society. The steps are encouraging when one considers the pressure in contemporary society against such political initiative. (Gramsci would call it self-activity.) Democracy has been reduced in popular consciousness to the occasional casting of a ballot. True community action based upon collective deliberation is rare, and those who engage in it are often viewed cynically as being naive. The Think Tank and the *Journal of Ordinary Thought* are instances of participatory democracy in practice.

Looking Ahead

The Grassroots Think Tank would like to expand the concept of a writing-based community organization beyond its current location in one school. It would like to establish writing groups around the neighborhood in different settings: housing complexes, churches, libraries, public aid offices, and so on. Each group will be responsible for publishing its writing. Periodically the expanded organization will convene forums where the writing groups will make their work available to each other. *Ad hoc* action committees with participation from several writing centers will form around shared community concerns. In this way people from several community bases will be working on issues of common interest.

The early success of the Think Tank was largely a function of its non-hierarchical, informal, organizational character. Individual, experiential writing and group discussion drive the Think Tank. Thus, it relies simultaneously on both highly independent and highly collective activity. Any expanded version of the program must preserve this mode of operation to preserve the intimate atmosphere. Otherwise, new, honest writing about personal experience will not be forthcoming.

Moving from writing groups to action groups is both the most promising and most problematic aspect of an expanded Grassroots Think Tank. It is promising because the movement from writing to action will be based on

perceptions of the community by people at its roots, a condition implicit in the ideas of Gramsci, Freire, and James. It is problematic because there will be no central staff to assume responsibility for organizing action programs and moving them forward—but one cannot simultaneously have self-activity by community residents and central control of them. Central control often discourages ordinary citizens and otherwise weakens their initiative. It is the philosophy behind the Think Tank's organizational approach that people will be more likely to take control of their community if they are not expected to hand over their initiatives to a central administrative body.

We propose to set in motion a process where residents of the community can examine with each other the weighty matters of family, community, and economic development. The process will rely heavily on writing and publishing by community residents. We do this to demonstrate the critical role literacy plays in community development, and because community writing is an effective way to reveal the profound wisdom and understanding residents can develop by examining their community experiences.

The time is ripe for such initiatives in poor communities where people often are discouraged by their chronically limited economic prospects. It is clear that help from the outside is not immediately forthcoming. Self-activity is now the only real alternative.

A writing-based community project offers a practical way for citizens to be involved at the center of a process that will address their own futures. The precise direction the community will take in the process is not certain; but that is the nature of self-direction, and it is part of the reason it appeals to people who have long since become skeptical of solutions imposed from the outside. *✍*

Hal Adams is Visiting Associate Professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago. The final version of this article will appear in the forthcoming Handbook of Research on Teaching and Communicative Arts, edited by James Flood, Diane Lapp and Shirley Brice Heath, to be published in 1996 by Macmillan Publishing USA, a division of Simon & Schuster, Inc. All rights reserved. © 1996 by Simon & Schuster Macmillan. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

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"Reeling and Writhing, of course, to begin with," the Mock Turtle replied [to the question of what was taught in school], "and then the different branches of Arithmetic—Ambition, Distraction, Uglification, and Derision."

—Lewis Carroll