



**Community Literacy Programs and the Politics of Change.** Jeffrey T. Grabill.  
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Is it possible to change institutions in order to better serve participants of community literacy programs? This seems to be the underlying question in Jeffrey T. Grabill's *Community Literacy Programs and the Politics of Change*. Grabill investigates how "the meaning and value of literacy" in the context of a community literacy program, Western District Adult Basic Education, is influenced by institutions such as school districts, local governments, and federal agencies. Specifically examining the values and practices associated with writing, Grabill finds that institutions themselves need to change in order for a positive change to occur within literacy programs. He examines such issues as ethics and politics, access and use of writing technology, and the need for workplace and technical writing. Finally, Grabill provides a tangible plan, a map, for creating change within institutions, using a participatory institutional design based on the work of Barton (1994) and Street (1995), who similarly argue that too much pressure to change has been placed on those whom the programs serve, not on the institutions that do the serving. This book is particularly illuminating for literacy practitioners; researchers; and federal, state, and local agencies involved with literacy.

Too often teachers and researchers involved in community literacy programs approach institutions as permanent and unchanging. Strengths of this book include Grabill's evidence that institutions can indeed change and his clear and feasible plan for creating institutional change through a participatory design. Grabill describes several examples of how grassroots changes have effected institutional change. He proposes important steps that directly benefit program participants: better access to technology, writing classes that emphasize memos and reports over short stories and poetry, and learning plans that are directed by the participant. In terms of theory, Grabill complicates notions of critical literacy, which aims to empower through developing critical consciousness (Freire 1995), and functional literacy (Robinson 1998), which aims to teach job-related skills. Navigating between theories of critical and functional literacy, Grabill shows how some participants have personal reasons--separate from functional reasons--to attend programs, and how some programs fall short of their functional goals because they do not prepare participants for the workplace. He suggests that literacy programs be both critical and functional, allowing participants to "move" in ways that benefit their lives--their "everyday literacies"--and their "workplace literacies."

Western District provides readers with a clear example of how institutions can sometimes unknowingly hamper or limit the life chances of participants through their definitions of



literacy and the values they pass on to programs. In addition, the book shows how curriculum changes can put into motion larger institutional changes. One area that may need more attention is how grant-making institutions, and the strings that come attached to funds, influence the meaning and value of literacy, and whether real change is possible in this area. Perhaps this book will trigger more research on the topic of community literacy programs and institutional change, and a study of grants and institutional theory will provide further insight.

Overall, this book is extremely useful for teachers and researchers because it problematizes literacy theories and then offers clear steps toward solutions. Grabill notes that in our changing economy, categorized by Reich (1992) as increasingly global, technological, and information or knowledge-based, literacy programs face the challenge of not only providing participants with basic reading and writing literacies but with computer and technical workplace literacies, as well. When institutions recognize the gap between their literacy services and the changing literacy meanings and values, participants can and will be better served by their community programs. At the end of the book, Grabill writes, "to change a literacy institution might change everything" (p. 161). Although this is indeed a tall order, perhaps Grabill is right.

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