

## Teamwork

### *Celebrating Learning Together*

Teamwork is a principle of adult learning as well as an effective practice. You read about teamwork in Chapter One and in many of the previous stories. In this story we will see how this principle worked for Tainie Mudondo and her comrades in Zimbabwe. This landlocked nation suffered a bloody civil war before a coalition government was set up. This story shows how learning and teaching teams were used in the education of literacy coordinators in the national literacy campaign of Zimbabwe after independence.

#### **The Situation and the Setting**

Tainie Mudondo, one of the literacy coordinators, was a high school student when the call came for Zimbabweans to join Robert Mugabe in the early 1970s in a guerrilla army that would move the struggle for independence into the forests and mountains. She told me of the day she heard the call. Every single boy and girl in her high school class, she said, left their books on the desks and went off to the designated center, where they began their transformation from high school students to guerrilla soldiers.

Ms. Mudondo spent seven years in that army. She met and married her husband there and they had their first child. She went from being a raw, young, frightened recruit to being the education director of the army of liberation. She spent much of her time in the

guerrilla army organizing literacy and public health courses for the young soldiers. After independence, she was demobilized into a confused Zimbabwean society with her husband and young son. There was a scramble for jobs in the large, modern city of Harare.

A letter from a colleague in Zimbabwe brought me the unexpected invitation to become part of the team that would design a national literacy campaign for Zimbabwe. This was an invitation I could not refuse. After having spent twenty-three years teaching in Tanzania, during their ongoing struggle for social, political, and economic development, I was still deeply engaged in Africa. This invitation was from the minister of education, Dzingai Mutumbuku, who had heard through my colleague, Janice McLoughlin, of my work in literacy in Tanzania. Dr. Mutumbuku invited me to join their team to design and implement a national literacy campaign by using the army of young men and women recently demobilized from the liberation forces as literacy teachers. I would be expected to train them as trainers of local village literacy coordinators.

The Ministry of Education was deeply engaged in the thousand and one political problems of the moment. At the bottom of the list lay the issue of the literacy campaign. Although my skills and advice were needed, they would be welcome only when asked for. I had had a similar role as a consultant from the University of Dar es Salaam to the Ministry of Education in Tanzania, so I had good experience in waiting. I learned at this time one of the most useful conceptual distinctions I had ever heard: a consultant has a consultative voice, that is, you can make suggestions; the members of the ministry team have a deliberative voice, that is, they make the decisions.

Once I got this distinction clear, I could relax, make my suggestions, and wait. I was introduced to Ms. Mudondo one afternoon in a town square in Harare. Tainie Mudondo (pronounced "Tiny") is just that: ninety pounds of intelligent, charming, fun-loving lady with a flair for telling stories and a passionate devotion to her family. I spent much time with Ms. Mudondo, learning her history in

the army and the history of modern Zimbabwe that her story reflected.

## The Learners

The ministry knew that their first advertisement for literacy coordinators would bring a flood of applications from former soldiers in the guerrilla army. These young people did not have jobs, nor did they have easy access to places at the colleges or university. It had been less than a year since independence. It would be politically dangerous to invite them to begin a program that was not ready for them. Who decides? This was another critical organizational question for the literacy campaign. Zimbabwe as a developing nation was inspired by reports of the successful Nicaraguan literacy crusade. Zimbabweans wanted to emulate much of what they were reading about that program. But that Central American nation was considerably smaller than the massive landlocked Zimbabwe. A church-based organization, the Adult Literacy Organization of Zimbabwe (ALOZ), had been doing literacy work in Zimbabwe for more than twenty years. Would ALOZ, without a political ideology and with a history of white supervision, be invited to be part of the team? Or would the ministry demand that we start from scratch?

Oliver and Gershman (1989, p. 43) remind us: “the observer is part of what she observes.” The quantum concept of participation shows that we do evoke the world we perceive. I was on the Zimbabwean team just by being there, affecting the decisions without making them. My work with Ms. Mudondo continued as we learned together about literacy and about Zimbabwe, preparing ourselves to design and lead a useful training program. Finally, a decision was made at the upper levels of the Ministry of Education. We would proceed. A team of writers, to which I would be a consultant, would start designing materials for the training workshop for literacy coordinators that would be held in Harare in two months. Materials

for the literacy campaign itself would be prepared by another team and sent to the training team. We would have members from ALOZ on the design team for training. We would not use their literacy materials, however, because they were not deemed politically appropriate for this moment in the history of this young nation.

Before I could teach others how to form a literacy team, I had to learn how to work in one. In this case, my professional soul screamed in frustration at the fragmentation of preparation efforts. Such fragmentation violated every principle of integrated program development. I called on my newfound awareness of my role as consultant with a consultative voice and discovered the necessary joy of detachment. I offered my opinion, gave my suggestions, and waited. This sounds easier than it was. As a member of this team, I was being asked to feel something of what these young people had felt under military discipline for seven years. “Yes, sir; no, sir; no excuse, sir!” Their membership in the guerrilla teams that had eventually won the war for independence had demanded that they do what they were told. This was what I had to do on this design team. I confess it was very difficult for me.

We met regularly under the direction of a young man named by the minister of education to head the task force for designing training. This young fellow also headed the materials development team, so we were linked at that point. Ms. Mudondo was on the ministry’s payroll as a teacher assigned to design the training program. She was a vital link to the former soldiers whom we would be teaching, since she was one of them.

### **Teams Are the Real World**

Complicating the political scene at the time was that the people of the southern part of the new Zimbabwe were not in agreement with those around Harare and in the north. This strong cleft in loyalty and political perspective was reflected in the response to the public announcement about building literacy teams for a national campaign. The people in Bulawayo, central city in the south, insisted

that they would not come for a training session in Harare. We would have to do two trainings: one for the north in Harare, one for the south in Bulawayo.

In some ways this made our work easier. We would not be dealing with the tensions of a mixed set of political opinions among the trainees. It meant we had to design two training sessions for two very different groups. We had only one representative of the southern group on the training design team. He was a strong man, a church leader, and he struggled courageously to have his voice heard. If dialogue education is a way to structure listening and learning, the making of this training design team was excellent practice. We had to listen to one another and share leadership. As an external consultant, I realized how little I knew and understood of Zimbabwe's history and culture. Leadership roles on the team went to those like Ms. Mudondo who represented the literacy coordinators whom these trainers would be teaching. We had to listen to those representing the national factions, too, like our friend from Bulawayo.

The teams had to reflect the structure of the rural and urban society they were addressing. We, on the design team, were not to decide who would be accepted as literacy coordinators. We knew, however, that we had to give explicit attention in the training to the issue of respect for the adult learners to whom these young people would be teaching literacy skills. The pressure of the political moment precluded the kind of needs assessment that would have been most appropriate for this design team.

The report of the Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade indicates how they did needs assessment there before their literacy campaign: "The core team spent the first month studying—reading about the experiences of other countries, discussing the small church-sponsored literacy projects that had been attempted in Nicaragua, talking with experts, writing position papers, and outlining a possible primer. At the end of September, the core team of seven visited Cuba for a week" (Cardenal and Miller, 1981, p. 10).

A lesson from all this is the need for a team to form its own consensus over time and become a unit with an integrated focus. When this does not happen, when time is not given to such preparation, the team and the project pay for it throughout the entire program.

### **A Pedagogy of Shared Responsibility**

The slogan used by the Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade in their orientation program to train the immense teacher corps of high school and college students in the Nicaraguan program was, "A Pedagogy of Shared Responsibility." The Zimbabwe team used the Nicaraguan experience as a framework for designing the training of literacy coordinators. In Nicaragua, the teacher's manual provided step-by-step instruction on the use of the literacy methodology and also contained detailed back-up readings for each of the twenty-three themes. It gave the young literacy teachers, called *brigadistas*, the necessary social, political, and economic information to generate a knowledgeable discussion and dialogue. Since the crusade was considered a reciprocal learning process, the handbook also outlined a systematic set of study activities for the volunteers. The basis of their learning was their own living and teaching experience. As such, they were responsible for conducting a careful research study of their communities and keeping a field diary of their activities (Cardenal and Miller, 1981, p. 19).

There were significant differences between the Zimbabwean and Nicaraguan campaigns. Zimbabwe's literacy coordinators would be paid staff of the Ministry of Education. The Nicaraguan campaign used youthful volunteers from the schools.

The design I proposed for the training of literacy coordinators incorporated some of the reciprocity issues named by the Nicaraguan crusade. The coordinators would be learners as well as teachers. If we were to do this training well, it would not only be Zimbabwe's preliterate men and women who would learn, but the coordinators as well.

## The Program and the Process

We made work teams the basis of the entire experience. These young people had very recently been on military teams, driving a tank together or flying a fighter plane. They had seven years' experience of military teamwork. How was this new team experience to be similar for them? How would it be different? My concern in the design was for demonstrating the kind of respect and listening that we all knew was essential if the young people whom team members were to train were to reach the hearts of their elders in the villages whom they would be teaching how to read and write. I could bring technical expertise, and I did. I could bring planning, design, and evaluation skills, and I did. But I knew all too well that these skills were not the heart of the matter. The heart of the matter lay in the meaning and potential of the dialogue that would have to occur among team members and between literacy coordinators and the adult student. Their first job was to learn to listen to one another in their own team and show respect to one another in new and appropriate ways. On the first day of training, we invited each team to decide together on a name for their learning team related to the recent war of liberation. Many chose names of their friends who had died in the struggle for independence. They were deeply moved as they introduced themselves and their teams by these honored names.

Using a strong element in African culture, we invited teams to create or share songs they could use in teaching. Early on, in the first training, a group of six men and women began to sing the marching song they had sung as guerrilla soldiers: "The Soldier's Song." It was a beautiful moment, as the whole group took it up quite spontaneously. At that moment of the training workshop, the difficulties they had experienced getting selected for this job, the confusion and ambiguity about their role, all fell aside and they found themselves restored to the unity of purpose of a team that had

won a war of independence. These two team tasks, naming their learning teams and selecting a song, had achieved what was needed to get us started with the training in how to teach and how to use the Zimbabwean literacy materials. They had worked as a team, made decisions with some consensus, observed leadership emerge among themselves. There were no lieutenants and captains now, no stripes or rank. Team leadership would emerge by action.

When setting learning tasks for teams by the use of open questions, the teacher is admitting that she does not know “the” answer to the question. The facilitator has no control over what the team will say or how it will respond. We found that the leadership of one team’s sharing “The Soldiers’ Song” evoked a great deal of energy in the other teams to do as well or better. This is the element of *com + petition* (asking together) that such teamwork offers. These young men and women were challenging one another, asking how far they could go together. The Nicaraguan training used a Central American genre called the *couplet*, a popular Latin literary expression. In Zimbabwe, we used the *methali* or proverb to summarize or question what we were learning. Each team selected a familiar proverb, or made one up, at the end of each day to synthesize all that they had learned about teaching literacy that day. “One hand does not wash itself!” “On the third day the guest receives a hoe!” Such proverbs caught the wisdom of the language and the people.

It was not hard to find preliterate adults for practice teaching classes in Harare, where we did the first training course. We happened to be at the University of Zimbabwe and were able to enroll a small group of workers who cleaned and kept the grounds as learners in the first round of the program. The teams decided who would teach and how they would arrange the situation so that they could both observe their colleague and respect the learner. Each team selected a set of evaluation indicators that was then reviewed by the entire group. They held their friend’s feet to the fire with those indicators. We did some work beforehand on how to give and get feedback so that there would be no defensiveness and no attacks

(Vella, 1995, pp. 50–51). The practice teaching sessions were an excellent chance to test the written materials, as well. As these were still in draft form, the young people knew that their recommendations would be given serious attention. We did not have the luxury of a video camera at these practice teaching sessions. If we had, the videos could have been reviewed by the entire team, and the learning would have been shared by all. When we use video as we do today for practice teaching, the learning is immediate, affective, and effective, and the data are objective.

## Evaluation

Immediate evaluation of learning—measuring how well they knew they knew—told us that all the young people in both sites, north and south, could demonstrate the skills they needed to design and teach literacy. Their practice teaching sessions were personally rewarding to themselves and to the adult students. They felt and demonstrated a bond to their team members.

The teamwork aspects of this training program were sound. There is no way these men and women could have learned what they learned in six days without having done so in those working teams. Team tasks were sometimes completed without any intervention from trainers. Ms. Mudondo worked as a team member, and I was out of the loop because teams often worked in their own language. Their learning in their teams was both autonomous and independent. Such autonomy and independence is the deeper purpose of a literacy campaign. The people of Zimbabwe did not simply need to learn to read and write; they needed to learn to work together as members of village and community teams to create their new nation.

Impact evaluation, the effect of this training session on their future work as team members of the ministry managing the literacy campaign, was less encouraging. We had designed a careful sequence of tasks in the six-day training workshop, but there was not a careful sequence of follow-up work with the teams of literacy trainers

after they started their work of training coordinators. The team structure, used so well in the training sessions, was not used for follow-up and support of the literacy staff in their widespread teaching posts around the country. Ms. Mudondo was not in a position of power at the ministry to get systems for follow-up and support of the teams of literacy teachers in the field. If they had maintained the team structure, even with teams of two, and nurtured those roles and relationships, they might have created a long-lasting program.

Quantum theory teaches that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. As a practice, teams are useful. As a principle, team is essential. The Ministry of Education had yet to learn this. The political fragmentation of the time affected the whole effort.

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## Design Challenges

- The dialogue approach naturally invites people to work in teams. What happens in the teams is not vicarious: it is real life! There is no “getting back to reality” but rather a getting *down* to reality in doing a learning task as a team. This puts the burden on us to compose teams wisely and well. Teams may be composed by the adult learners themselves; they may be composed by the teacher’s putting similar or different people together; they may be composed by chance. In any case, the composition is intentional. And it is your responsibility. What have you learned from the Zimbabwe story about composing teams in your next training event?
- A learning task done by a team involves peer pressure and many overt and hidden dynamics within the group. Quantum theory shows us the importance of context. As you saw in this example from Zimbabwe, the political fragmentation of north and south affected

the literacy campaign. The team is a group of adults, and the responsibility to learn is theirs. Your responsibility is to compose teams and prepare a well-formed educational design. You cannot learn for others. The team, or small group, is there to help members learn. Your detachment is of value to yourself and to the adult learners. How can you show that you trust the team? Consider a time when you, as teacher, wanted to interfere in a team or small-group activity. What was the advantage to you—and to them—of resisting that temptation by “sitting still, keeping quiet, and paying attention”?

