

Focus on Basics

CONNECTING RESEARCH & PRACTICE

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YES! A Literacy Program's Antiracist Journey

by Margery Freeman & Lou Johnson

In September, 1995, a group of community leaders gathered with staff, volunteers, and adult learners of YMCA Operation Mainstream, New Orleans' oldest and largest literacy program, to craft a new vision for the organization. As they shared their hopes and dreams, one neighborhood resident began speaking about the organization's name: "What do you mean, 'operation'?" he asked. "Are you operating on someone who's sick, or do you mean a military operation against an enemy?"

Another local resident spoke up, "And whose 'mainstream' are you talking about? If my people leave to become part of your mainstream, what happens to my community?"

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National Center for the Study of
Adult Learning and Literacy



Welcome!

We know that welfare recipients, the working poor, people of color, and immigrants are disproportionately represented in adult basic education (ABE) and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). We also know that the majority of adults enrolled in literacy programs are women. Thus, as Deborah D'Amico writes on page 27, ABE/ESOL serve primarily those whose access to opportunity and power is restricted due to class, race, and gender.

How does adult basic education “do” in tackling issues such as class, race, gender, and all the other categories that can differentiate people from the majority in society, which, for want of a better word, we have called here “isms”? We could not find much research to report on, but as the articles about practice in this issue demonstrate, we have a long way to go. Many of the traditional biases built into US society are perpetuated rather than challenged in ABE programs and classrooms. At the same time, many programs and people are attempting to change this. YES!, the YMCA literacy program featured in our cover story, for example, has spent the last eight years transforming itself into an antiracist program. Margery Freeman and Lou Johnson write about the reasons for, the challenges of, and theories behind the transformation of this New Orleans program.

Multicultural education is education that challenges and rejects racism and other forms of discrimination in schools and society, writes researcher Allison Cumming-McCann in the article that begins on page 9. She presents a curriculum-based model of multicultural education that ranges from a “heroes and holidays” approach to one encompassing wider social transformation. See where your program falls along the continuum she describes.

Staff development that is intentional and thoughtful about supporting teachers in examining their own identities and how those identities influence teaching philosophies and practices is one key to unlocking issues of race, class, and gender. So writes North Carolina-based adult basic education teacher and staff development provider Jereann King. She reflects on her 30 years in adult literacy and suggests directions for the field in tackling “isms” (page 15).

Writing from Oklahoma, ESOL teacher KayTee Niquette explains how she enabled conservative Muslim women to participate freely in her class (page 13). In their article on page 23, Rick Kappra and Maria Rosales Uribe, ESOL teachers in San Francisco, admit to themselves, to each other, and to us how hard it is to recognize and address biases you did not think you had. Staff developer Cassie Drennon, too, felt the sting of self-recognition when she realized that she was ignoring the power relationships inherent in her training activities. In researching that issue for her doctoral dissertation, she found that naming the issues is a necessary first step. Turn to page 20 for a framework that we all can use to do this.

We hope that the articles assembled here provide you with ideas that challenge your thinking and resources that enable you to start the transformation of your corner of the ABE/ESOL world: away from “isms” and toward an inclusive, truly multicultural approach.

Sincerely,

Barbara Garner
Editor

Antiracist Journey

continued from page 1

People in the room shifted uncomfortably, defensively. Finally, a young woman who was on the resident council of a nearby public housing development stood up: “They want to tear down our homes! They bring all these HUD HOPE VI documents for us to read, and not one of us has finished high school, so we have to depend on outsiders to interpret for us. We need literacy so we can make our own decisions! Can you help us do that?”

Thus challenged, we began the process of transforming our literacy program into one that measures its worth by the strength and self-determination of adult learners and the communities in which they live. Seven years later, YMCA Educational Services (YES!), formerly Operation Mainstream, is still striving to become genuinely community-based and community-led.

The following story is told by two people who have led YES! since 1995. Margery Freeman was executive director from 1995 to 2001, and Lou Johnson served as program director for four years before becoming executive director a year ago. Both Margery and Lou are resource trainers with The People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond, a national, multiracial organization, and drew upon its Undoing Racism™ principles and practices in working with YES!

First, a Little History

Margery YES! began like many literacy organizations around the country. It was founded in 1977 by the Greater New Orleans Federation of Churches and rooted in

the Laubach “each one teach one” philosophy. Operation Mainstream focused on teaching individuals, through one-on-one tutoring, so that they could “enter the mainstream of society.” Its founders believed that a volunteer-centered program would ensure its success (i.e., satisfied volunteers would result in satisfied students). By the time I was hired as executive



director in 1995, Operation Mainstream, now a branch of the YMCA of Greater New Orleans, was the largest adult literacy program in Louisiana.

Nonetheless, the YMCA presented several challenges. Many people in the New Orleans YMCA did not view literacy work as “real Y” work. This was ironic, since the YMCA had been among the first organizations in the United States to offer literacy classes. Adult literacy practitioners were not regarded as educational professionals and had virtually no presence or voice in Louisiana’s policymaking circles. Also, adult learners who had internalized the stigma of illiteracy rarely thought of a literacy program as a place where they could challenge their second-class status. Perceiving ourselves as thrice marginalized, how would we go about transforming Operation Mainstream into a student-centered organization with a vision of social justice?

The fourth challenge came from the staff and board: Why change what worked? After all, Operation

Mainstream had a reputation as an excellent, award-winning program. Its tutors and students loved their sessions.

About three months after joining the staff, I visited with members of the St. Thomas Housing Development Resident Council. I had been involved with that community for a number of years, so they knew me. The Development had been located in the Lower Garden District/Irish Channel neighborhood of New Orleans, Louisiana. The buildings were demolished in 2001 and the dispersed community continues its struggle to return and rebuild. I sat at a table with about 10 Resident Council members who, coincidentally, had recently taken stock of their basic skills and realized that not one of them had a high school diploma or a GED [certificate of General Educational Development]. I told them that I had taken a job with the Y’s adult literacy program. “What should we do?” I asked them.

“We need literacy!” they responded. “You need to root your work in our neighborhood so that literacy becomes a way of life for us.”

“But we don’t know how to do that!” I worried aloud.

“Let us help you learn,” was their reply.

Lou Comes Aboard

Lou My involvement with YMCA Educational Services began in late July of 1996, when I answered an ad for the Program Director’s position with YES! Being a native son of New Orleans, I knew that 920 St. Charles Avenue, the address to which I had sent my resume, would be close to Lee Circle, a local landmark named for Confederate General Robert E. Lee.

I knew very little about this Lee Circle Y. I am an American of African descent. As a child, I had spent many hours “at the Y,” but in the segregated South, that meant the Dryades Street Y in my neighborhood, not the Lee Circle “white Y.” The one thing that I did know about the

“white Y” was that not many folks who looked like me had ever worked there in positions of authority. With some reservation, I went to the interview with Margery Freeman and three YES! staff members.

Nothing prepared me for the questions they asked of me during the interview: One was “Why do you think people are poor?” Another was “What role do you think racism plays in the way things are in America?”

Picture the scene, if you can: I am a 50+-year-old American of African descent in a conference room at the “white Y” and a panel of three whites and one American of African descent is waiting for my answer. I figured they were trick questions, given where I was. I also figured I had nothing to lose. That being the case, I “let it rip.” I spoke of my connections with the Black power movement, with the Black Panther Party, with the movement against the Vietnam War. I also described growing up in New Orleans, where I attended separate but unequal schools, where by law I had to ride on the back of the bus or streetcar, where I was not allowed to try things on in the Canal Street stores, where I could only drink from the uncooled “colored” water fountain. I told how I dropped out of high school during my senior year and joined the Navy at the age of 17, despite being in the top five percent of my junior class, because I foolishly thought that color would not matter in the Navy.

I answered the interview questions to the best of my ability. I guess I did okay, because I was offered the position. Soon after I settled into my new office, which was within the Y’s corporate offices, I learned that I was but the second American of African descent that the YMCA of Greater New Orleans had ever hired in a management capacity in 145 years. I also learned that to the white power elite of the YMCA’s board I was invisible. As the only American

of African descent in the entire open space office area, I was hard to miss. But they did. They always did.

Three things helped me “get it” with respect to this literacy work: the Undoing Racism™/community organizing workshop; Literacy South’s analysis of “Literacy, Language, and Community Action”; and attending two literacy conferences: one national and the other statewide. (I will write about the Undoing Racism workshop later.)



Photo by Sarah Eva Krancic

Charlie Booker, Sr., Student, Orleans East Class

From Literacy South, I learned that this literacy work is about a whole lot more than “see the word, hear the word, say the word, and write the word.” Honoring what students bring has to be part of the work as well. At a Laubach conference in Columbus, Ohio, I learned how capable students could be. I met students who helped create the *Voyager Series* for New Readers Press, a basic skills text based on adult real-life experiences. I met a learner from Durham, North Carolina, in a public policy workshop, who helped me understand what Ron Pugsley, then director of the US Office of Vocational and Adult Education, and Andy Hartman, then director of the National Institute for Literacy, were talking about. At a local adult education conference, I learned about the rivalry in the field of adult education among

community-based organizations, local education agencies, and community colleges. These events galvanized me and solidified my thoughts about what I needed to be about in doing this work.

Some Definitions: Racism and Antiracism

We understand and use the term “racism” to mean “race prejudice plus institutionalized, systemic power.” We have gained much of this understanding from an analysis developed by The People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond (see box). Racism is more than individual prejudice and bigotry. It is an “ism”: a system that gives advantages to some people and places barriers in the way of other people, based on race. The effects of racism are evident everywhere: in schools, prisons, housing, jobs. The disproportionate number of persons of color who have low literacy skills means that literacy practitioners and advocates must understand and deal with racism. If we do not analyze the power of race and racism, we are likely to reach false conclusions about individual learners: that they are less qualified, less motivated, less capable, less... less.

We also believe that literacy programs (and all organizations) that strive to become “antiracist” are better able to build authentic relationships across racial lines. By describing ourselves as an antiracist literacy organization, we communicate an immediate message to students, teachers, and the larger community that we are working to undo racism in ourselves, our programs, and our community. Rather than being seen as negative, being an antiracist literacy organization announces that we are part of the struggle for equitable education that has historically included antislavery societies, moonlight schools, and freedom schools.

The YES! Antiracism Journey

As YES! travels toward becoming an antiracist literacy organization, we have followed certain organizing principles originally developed by the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond. These principles move and breathe in our everyday work. Even as they take new forms, they help us

keep a clear vision and a steady purpose. So we have framed our story within these principles.

We seek to be accountable to learners by building relationships with them and their communities

Margery If we were to take seriously the St. Thomas Resident Council's challenge "to make literacy part of the community's

The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond

The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond is a national, multiracial organization of veteran community organizers, educators, and people of faith dedicated to building an effective movement for social change in this country. The People's Institute's principles, analysis, and practice over 22 years have earned it a reputation for being among the most effective antiracist training and organizing institutions in the country. The People's Institute recognizes racism as the primary barrier preventing communities from improving their effectiveness, building useful coalitions, and implementing a more equitable and just society. Its Undoing Racism/community organizing workshops, conducted with more than 75,000 individuals across the country, are rooted in an understanding of racism as a system that can be "undone" once we understand what it is, where it comes from, and how it is perpetuated.

The People's Institute's working definition of race, informed by the analysis of Maulana Karenga, is the following: "Race is a capricious or arbitrary classification of humans, created by white men in the 16th century, that assigns human worth and social status using the concept of white as the model for humanity, for the purpose of establishing and maintaining white skin access and social status and a legitimate relationship to power."

The workshop provides an analysis of racism and power in the United States that enables people to work more effectively toward building a just and equitable society. Through a 20-hour dialogue-based process, workshop participants

- Understand racism as a social/political construct that can be undone
- Analyze how racism manifests itself in all institutions of our society
- Appreciate the need to overcome the internalized myths of racial inferiority and superiority
- Know why the concepts of "race" and "white people" were invented and why they have continued to be used throughout US history
- Recognize the importance of culture to community self-determination and liberation
- Learn strategies for effective antiracist organizing
- Value the collective wisdom of people connected through a strong network

<http://www.thepeoplesinstitute.org>

everyday life," we needed to go to students' neighborhoods and spend time visiting with them and their families. In New Orleans, we call this "stoop-sitting" or "front porch-sitting."

Such a notion brought us right up against the cultural chasms that separate literacy providers and students. YMCA Educational Services students are mostly Americans of African descent, economically poor, and historically marginalized. Teachers and tutors are largely middle class and educated. Few know about the cultural ways or the impact of racism on the students they teach. How could we build genuine relationships where decades of educational and social service programs have failed?

Lou We decided to start a monthly gathering of learners, volunteers, staff, supporters, and family members to open some dialogue. We named this event the "Happening Hour." At first it was a challenge to get not only learners to attend but also staff and volunteers. "Happening Hour" was new and different. We were encouraging learners to get together just to hang out with staff and volunteers and talk about current events or anything else that was on their mind. We used a few program dollars to buy some food for the event. We invited a couple of staff who also are poets to lead the assembled group in writing activities. Together, we wrote group poems, everyone adding a word, a phrase, a thought. Anyone could contribute, regardless of writing skill levels.

"Happening Hours have been a great breakthrough in forging more informal and creative relationships between staff and students," reflects Manon Pavy, a 12-year veteran tutor/instructor with YES. "They provide wonderful opportunities for our students to meet outside of the classroom and outside of their neighborhoods." Today, two years later, "Happening Hour" is a marvelous mixture: It is a pot-luck, a poetry slam, a current events forum, a place

where old friends meet and new friendships are formed.

We learn the history of literacy, poverty, and racism in America

Margery Spending time with learners and their families was helping us build stronger, more trustworthy relationships, but YES! staff and volunteers needed more: We needed to understand our history. Otherwise we would see literacy simply in terms of individuals and not as a systemic challenge. We had to ask: How did our literacy program get started? How do the policies, procedures, expectations, and ways of behaving in our program reflect the dominant culture, which is biased in favor of people who speak standard English, understand what is expected of them (“Be on time”), and value product over process (academic results over building personal relationships)? We asked ourselves: Do people of color feel they can really “be themselves” when they come through our door? Or do they have to “code switch” to fit in? Do they feel they have to focus on the lesson at hand and suppress heartfelt concerns of family, jobs, health? Such self-analysis was hard. We were so used to focusing on the object of our concern, which we often called our “target.” We viewed the problem of illiteracy as those persons with low literacy skills. We wanted to fix that problem.

Lou Not long after I came to work at YES!, Margery urged me to attend the Undoing Racism/community organizing workshop that had been mentioned during my job interview. YES! would pay my way. I told her that having been born black in New Orleans I already knew about racism. I added that my years in Oakland during the Black power movement had given me even greater insights on the issue. But, being the “new kid on the block” and a team player, I went to the workshop.

Wow! Was I touched. The work-

shop analysis helped me “connect the dots” in more ways than anything I had ever done before. It served to crystallize things I felt, in my gut or my heart, into my consciousness. The following Monday morning, I informed Margery that she was right and she was wrong. She was right in realizing that the analysis I learned would give us a common language



Marie G. Black, Student, Marrero Class

Photo by Sarah Cat Cutliff

with which to communicate about our work. It would help us develop strategic plans for YES! based on our understanding of power, racism, and culture. Most importantly, the anti-racist principles and values we now shared would serve as a foundation for our relationships with students and staff, volunteers and community groups, and with each other.

That’s why I also told Margery she was wrong. We could not continue to allow staff members to make the call as to whether they would go to the Undoing Racism workshop. That day, I established a new policy: All YES! employees must attend the workshop. That policy remains in place today.

Margery As we studied, talked, and listened, we began to understand why people are poor and illiterate. In workshops and retreats, we analyzed our institutional history, values and standards. We began to see how literacy — and illiteracy — is a product of certain social and cultural mores, and of political decisions made to support existing power arrangements. We

recognized that YES! — like most US institutions — was grounded in an Anglo-American world view. We realized that such values as punctuality, formal English, and efficiency were the standards against which students were measured. We noticed that programs that practice these beliefs were often rewarded with funding, certifications, and awards. As we examined our cultural assumptions, we realized that we had often labeled as good students those learners who came on time. Those who missed their classes, or worse, dropped out, we had dismissed as not serious.

Now we began to see learners for who they are and what they bring, to work with them, rather than evaluate them by our (unspoken) standards. Manon Pavy talks about her changed perspective: “I had to challenge myself to be more respectful of a student’s personal goals and of each student’s own understanding of what the written word can do for them. In doing this, I have learned to separate my own interests and markers of success from the student’s. While this has often meant giving up certain ideals, and my understanding of a proper education, I am now better able to experience my students as individuals with unique histories and not as my project, something that needs fixing.”

We promote and value the culture of our students

Lou In 1998, YES! received a small grant to do a creative writing event with its learners. Louisiana Endowment for the Arts provided the money and a writer, a university professor and well-known poet, to conduct the four-hour workshop. Both Margery and I worried that the Tulane University professor, Peter Cooley, might do more harm than good. We briefed him about literacy issues and described our antiracist views and approaches to learning. Peter was nervous but we agreed to try the event.

Peter showed up with a bag of potatoes. He asked everyone, even me, to take one. Peter had us contem-

plate our potato. He then led an hour-long writing session on the potato. The stories and poems that emerged amazed and delighted us all. Shortly after the workshop, Peter offered to recruit a few students from his creative writing classes at Tulane to work with YES! learners for one extra credit in his course. We would give them an orientation to the world of the adult learner beforehand.

In September, 1999, we started the YES! "Writing to Read" workshop with one small class of basic literacy students. At the class Thanksgiving party, learners read their work to one another. They talked, excitedly, about writing to relatives for the first time ever. The Tulane student/teachers were just as enthusiastic about what they had learned from YES! learners. "Writing to Read" is now part of every YES! small-group curriculum. "New writers" have published two anthologies. The first, entitled *Fridays: From Potatoes to People*, was named in recognition of the learners who participated in Peter's original potato workshop. The name of the second volume, *Courage from Behind the Mask*, is taken from an essay one of the contributing authors. One author had less than one month of schooling as a child. She is 69 today. Two authors finished first and second in a writing contest sponsored by the New Orleans Area Literacy Coalition.

We "go outside the box" to adopt new approaches to teaching and learning

Margery Our program was beginning to feel different. It had a robust, energetic quality about it. We could tell from their eagerness to participate and their informal connections with one another outside of class that an increasing number of staff and students were catching the spirit, internalizing the values of learner self-expression and self-determination. YES! students now read at poetry forums, on television shows, to radio audiences. Last year, YES! students wrote and staged a play, *Burying*

Illiteracy: A Louisiana Jazz Funeral, for a talent show at the South Central Literacy Action conference in Fayetteville, and won first place.

Yet for all the excitement, we knew that much of our program remained the same: Our volunteers and many of our staff were devoted to teaching individual learners how to read. Period. They either ignored or sometimes disagreed openly with an approach to literacy that was rooted in a community-guided, antiracist value system.

They stayed, nonetheless, and we continued the dialogue. A major challenge before us was how to prepare volunteers and staff to teach/tutor within our new, antiracist construct. Our traditional workshop went first. Doug Anderson, who replaced Lou as YES! program director and lead trainer, urged YES! staff to participate in designing a workshop that would engage volunteers and staff alike in pedagogy that we would call a "teaching/learning" model.

Photo by Sarah Cat Cuttito



Mario Moreira, Jr., and Marta Calleja, Students, Hispanic Apostolate Uptown ESL Class

Students, board members, and colleagues from sister programs all participated in the redesign process.

"We needed to prepare volunteers and staff to be effective in working with students first, to become self-reflective and culturally competent before they begin tutoring," Doug insisted, to the consternation of many who worried that volunteers would

not be given enough tutoring skills. "We needed to help tutors see (in Jane Vella's words) the 'learner as subject.'"

The volunteer/staff orientation was expanded to give workshop participants an opportunity to reflect on their own values and cultural assumptions. Tutors, students, and staff brought a variety of voices to the workshop. We made a strong connection between poverty, racism, and literacy, emphasizing YES! social justice values. We used provocative quotations from well-known writers like Jonathan Kozol ("Charity is not a substitute for justice") as points of discussion. Volunteers were given ample time to build a sense of community so they would feel part of a collective effort. Again and again, we asked for feedback. After our summer, 2002, workshop, Doug said, jubilantly, "No one seemed anxious about getting lots of 'tutoring tools.' They got the value of building relationships with learners and realized their skills would improve over time."

One volunteer wrote after the workshop, "I realized that both my student and I needed to talk about: Why am I here? What do I want to learn? What has value in my life? Then we could begin to build a teaching/learning process where the student was the subject of her own learning."

As we write, the process is still in formation. Perhaps it always will be.

We network locally and nationally with other antiracist groups and individuals

Margery YES! needed allies if it was truly going to transform itself. Although our program and budget were robust and growing, we could not continue our antiracist journey without local and national support. We met continually with a

wide spectrum of local community leaders: resident councils, grassroots tenant organizations, cultural and faith groups, local foundations, and other literacy practitioners. With each, we described our antiracist

their own analysis of racism and recognized the close intersection of race and illiteracy. In December, 1997, key LLA staff came to New Orleans to participate in an Undoing Racism/community organizing workshop that YES! was sponsoring for staff, board, and students.

Lou Having Peter and several of his key staff attend the Undoing Racism™/Community Organizing workshop was a benchmark event. Peter said something that I shall always remember. He said, “While I get the intent of the workshop, I’m not sure how it will play in Peoria.” We agreed to “test the waters” by co-presenting a “Literacy and Race” roundtable in June of 1999 at the

South Central Literacy Action (SCLA) conference in Fayetteville, Arkansas. The roundtable was scheduled to last 90 minutes in a room that could seat 25 people. The workshop had standing room only and lasted over three hours. Folks from Texas, Oklahoma, Nebraska, Kansas, Arkansas, Mississippi, Missouri, and Louisiana spoke of their concerns about “race issues” in their literacy programs. Since that Arkansas event, Peter and I have conducted “Literacy and Race” roundtables at every Laubach (now merged with Literacy Volunteers of America to become Proliteracy Worldwide) national and SCLA gathering. Other antiracist literacy leaders regularly hold workshops on literacy and racism at many state and national conferences. The number of people and organizations engaging in dialogue and training on literacy and racism grows each year.

We help learners and their families get a sense of their own power

Margery Ultimately, antiracist literacy work must be measured by whether learners are finding their voices and becoming leaders in their own communities. Often, organizations seeking to

become multicultural will “colorize” their front office (i.e., hire a person of color as receptionist), employ community residents as “field workers” to reach out to prospective students, or add a learner or two to their board. YES! has taken all those steps over the last few years. While such actions don’t usually harm anyone, they cannot be mistaken for organizational transformation. An organization that sets the rules, determines the curricula, hires the staff, and speaks for students does not have to account to those students for its actions. And an organization that is not accountable to its constituency can come and go as it pleases or as funding dictates. So we at YES! continue to grapple with that first question put to us nine years ago: “If my people leave to become part of your mainstream, what happens to my community?”

Conclusion

Lou This fall, at its annual planning retreat, the YES! board reaffirmed the purpose and values of our vision statement. Once again we ask ourselves: What does it mean to operate a literacy program that is student centered and antiracist? A couple of stories will suffice. Recently, we met with a big shipbuilding company to negotiate a workplace literacy contract. I handed our YES! vision statement to the Director of Training.



Vincente Paulino, Instructor, Marrero Class

“This is what we stand for,” I told him. “YES! puts students’ goals first. Your employees in our literacy class will not only gain stronger skills but

Photo by Sarah Eva Krancic



Sandra Matherson with daughter, Latanya, Student, Howard Avenue Class


literacy vision: learner-centered; respectful of neighborhood traditions and leadership; committed to strengthening individuals, families, and communities. We asked, “How can YES! help you achieve your goals?” And we listened. With an AmeriCorps grant, we hired residents of several neighborhoods where we had established relationships. These AmeriCorps members, whom we call Reading Leaders, tutor in local schools, lead parent support groups, and organize forums on educational issues and family learning fairs. They have become valued community leaders. After seven years, we have built partnerships based on our antiracist values with more than 130 groups and organizations in the New Orleans region.

At the same time, we understood the dynamics of power: Our experiences could have meaning for the literacy field only when regional and national literacy leaders took note. Our long-term membership in Laubach Literacy Action (LLA) was our starting point. Fortunately, Peter Waite and Mark Cass at LLA had been doing

Photo by Sarah Eva Krancic

more confident voices.” We got the contract (after three previous unsuccessful efforts).

At about the same time, I was seeking to be elected to the board of our new regional literacy alliance. I, like YES!, hold a “literacy as social justice” position. And I won.

YES! continues to grow, to be known as the organization in town with the “Literacy and Justice for All” T-shirts. We — students, staff, volunteers — bring our message into every funder’s board room, write it into every grant proposal, tell it at every Rotary Club meeting. Michael Polit, a third-year literacy student, captures our vision best in his Introduction to the YES! students’ publication, *Courage from Behind the Mask* (YES, 2002): “We hope this anthology opens your eyes to our experiences, helps you realize we are intelligent and creative. But most of all, we hope it inspires you to overcome your struggles...” 

Reference

YES! (2002). *Courage from Behind the Mask: A Creative Writing Anthology from the Adult Literacy Students of the YMCA Educational Services* (YES!). New Orleans.

About the Authors

Margery Freeman was executive director of YES! from 1995 to 2001. She is an educator and community organizer who has taught in public schools, early childhood, and literacy programs for 30 years. She is recognized nationally as an advocate for equitable and fair education and for better understanding of how racism impacts the literacy field. Margery Freeman can be reached at freemannola@cox.net.

Lou Johnson served as program director of YES! for four years before becoming its executive director a year ago. His effective advocacy for adult learners in local, state, and national literacy venues is rooted in his experience as an American of African descent raised in the segregated south. Lou Johnson’s email address is loujyesnola@netscape.net.

The YES! website can be reached through www.ymcaneorleans.org. ♦

Multicultural Education

Connecting Theory to Practice

by Allison Cumming-McCann

Multicultural education is more than just teaching about “heroes and holidays” (Lee et al., 1998). It goes beyond teaching tolerance of differences, and it is much deeper than studying or celebrating Black History Month in February. So, what is multicultural education? To answer the question, we must first understand the goals, definitions, and a predominant model of multicultural education (Banks, 1998). Although I am not an adult basic educator, multicultural education as it is studied, conceptualized, and practiced in K-12 and higher education is applicable to adult basic education as well. In the next sections, I review the goals of multicultural education and provide a theoretical framework for implementing multicultural education into adult basic education programs.

Defining Multicultural Education

If you were to ask educators to define what multicultural education is, you would be unlikely to receive the same answer twice. The responses would range from adding new and diverse materials and perspectives to existing curricula to discussions of

teaching styles and pedagogical approaches that meet the needs of traditionally underrepresented groups. Others might talk about education as a part of a larger, oppressive system, and explain that multicultural education must work to deconstruct this system. While multicultural education can be conceptualized in many different ways, some of the leaders in the field (for example: Banks, 1997; Nieto, 1996, 1999; Sleeter, 1996; Sleeter & Grant, 1994), define the goals and ideals of multicultural education similarly.

The primary goal of multicultural education is not merely to promote human relations, to help students feel good about themselves, or to preserve students’ native languages and cultures. While these outcomes may be by-products, the primary goal of multicultural education is to promote the education and achievement of all students, particularly those who are traditionally dismissed and underserved in our education system (see box on page 10). Sonia Nieto (1996) defines multicultural education as antiracist basic education for all students that permeates all areas of schooling, characterized by a commitment to social justice and critical approaches to learning. Furthermore, multicultural education challenges and rejects racism and other forms of discrimination in schools and society. It accepts and affirms differences in race, ethnicity, religion, language, economics, sexual orientation, gender, and other differences that students, communities, and teachers encompass. It should permeate the curriculum and instructional strategies used in schools, as well as interactions among teachers, students, and families in school and outside of it (Nieto, 1999).

A Model for Curricular Infusion

The implementation of multicultural education varies greatly. James Banks (1997, 1998), a leader in the field of multicultural education, developed a model to explore and define different approaches to the integration of multicultural content into the curriculum. The model includes four approaches to content integration from easiest to implement and least likely to lead to the goals of multicultural education, to most challenging, and offering the most potential.

The Contributions Approach

Commonly referred to as the heroes and holidays approach, this first level of content integration is probably the most frequently utilized form of multicultural education. It is characterized by the addition of ethnic heroes into the existing curriculum by using criteria similar to those used to select mainstream heroes. The curriculum remains essentially unchanged in terms of its basic structure, goals, and main ideas. Ethnic content may be limited to special days, weeks, months, or events. Martin Luther King, Jr., Day, Black History Month, Women's History Month, and Cinco De Mayo are examples of events celebrated in schools that use this approach. Teachers might involve students in lessons or experiences related to the event, but little attention is given to the ethnic groups either before or after the event, nor is the cultural significance or history of the event explored in any depth.

The contributions approach gains its popularity from the fact that it is the easiest approach to use. It requires no alterations to the existing curriculum, and can give the illusion that diversity is being celebrated. The approach, however, has many limitations. Perhaps most significant is that it does not give students the opportunity to see the critical role of ethnic groups in

US society. Rather, the individuals and celebrations are seen as an addition or appendage that is virtually unimportant to the core subject areas. Furthermore, teaching about heroes and holidays does not ensure any discussion of oppression, social inequity, and struggles with racism and poverty. In this approach, the heroes that are represented tend to reinforce the American bootstrap myth: "If you work hard enough you can make it." The implications are that if you don't "make it" you must not be trying hard enough. Individuals are taken out of a cultural context and viewed from a dominant perspective. This approach can potentially — yet inadvertently — lead to the reinforcement and perpetuation of stereotypes by presenting a superficial and trivial understanding of ethnic cultures.

The Additive Approach

The second level of content integration is the additive approach, sometimes called the ethnic additive

approach. Much like the heroes and holidays approach, this one allows the teacher to put content into the curriculum without restructuring it. It takes little time, effort, planning, or training. For example, when teaching a unit about "the Westward Movement," a teacher might decide to include a section on the Crow Indians. The unit remains from the dominant perspective because it is focusing on the movement of European Americans from the East to the West of the United States, rather than considering that the Crow Indians were already in the West, and they were not moving.

The additive approach is often the first phase of curriculum restructuring yet, in itself, it poses many of the same problems as the contributions approach. Material is studied from the perspective of mainstream historians and the events, concepts, ideas, and issues are presented from a dominant perspective. Like the first level, this approach seems to defy many of the basic tenets of multicultural education. Individuals or groups of people from

Multicultural Education

- Analyzes ways in which schools and the education system as institutions in our society work to maintain and perpetuate racism (Banks, 1997)
- Examines the history and underlying causes of racism, sexism, and other forms of institutional oppression (Banks, 1997)
- Encourages academic excellence (Nieto, 1999)
- Is for all students, not just students of color (Nieto, 1996)
- Requires the authentic examination of white privilege and the legacy of white dominance (McIntosh, 1989; Howard, 1999)
- Teaches how racism hurts not only people of color but also whites, and how it keeps us from being allies (Howard, 1999)
- Demonstrates how people have worked together in history to fight against all forms of oppression (Howard, 1999)
- Teaches about the shared aspects of racism and other forms of oppression (Gorski, 2002)
- Helps students, families, teachers, and administrators understand and relate to the histories, cultures, and languages of people different from themselves (Sleeter & Grant, 1994)
- Provides opportunities to envision a better world: a just and fair society with equitable opportunities for all
- Inspires and empowers us to work to make those visions come true.

marginalized groups in society are included in the curriculum, yet racial and cultural inequities or oppression are not necessarily addressed.

The additive approach fails to help students understand how the dominant and ethnic cultures are interconnected and interrelated. Neither of the first two levels of content integration attempts to examine and deconstruct structures in our society that maintain racial inequity. Because these approaches are the easiest and require the least amount of change on the part of educators, they are the most commonly seen in the field of education.

The Transformative Approach

The transformative approach differs fundamentally from the first two. It enables students to see concepts from several cultural and ethnic perspectives. It requires the infusion of perspectives, frames of reference, and ideas that will expand students' understanding of an idea. In the transformative approach, a teacher might introduce a unit on emigration by studying the "Eastward Movement" of Asian Americans, the "Westward Movement" of the European Americans, the "Southern Encroachment" of European Americans, and the impact these movement patterns had on those people already living on the land (Native Americans). Specifically, a student might examine the impact of the creation of reservations, Indian schools, missionary work and other genocidal policies from the perspective of both the people of the Crow tribe (or other native tribes across the United States), and from the dominant, European-American perspective. They might explore how such policies contributed to the loss of thousands of lives, the obliteration of entire tribes, and the eradication of language, religion and culture for

the Native American people who lived on this land.

The challenge of this approach is that it requires a complete transformation of the curriculum and, in some cases, a conscious effort on the part of the teacher to deconstruct what they have been taught to think, believe, and teach. For example, growing up in the United States or Canada, most of us, regardless of our race or ethnicity, have learned that white, European men made the history, and, on occasion, others helped out. When taught about people of color, more often than not, it has been from a dominant perspective.

To embrace the transformative approach, teachers must be willing to deconstruct their own existing knowledge, explore alternative perspectives critically, research and include voices and ideas other than those traditionally presented to us, and address their own roles in perpetuating racism and oppression.

The Decision Making and Social Action Approach

The fourth and final approach to the integration of content into the curriculum includes all of the elements of the transformative approach but adds components that require students to make decisions and to take action related to the concept, issue, or problem they have studied. This approach requires that students not only explore and understand the dynamics of oppression, but also commit to making decisions and changing the system through social action. For example, in a decision

making and social action approach curriculum, students develop and implement strategies to eradicate racism, sexism, or any other form of oppression in their schools, work environments, and personal lives. Students working at this level of infusion might explore

"...the primary goal of multicultural education is to promote the education and achievement of all students, particularly those who are traditionally dismissed and underserved in our education system..."


how racism, stereotypes, and detrimental policies are still manifested in our society and in their environments by using self-reports, interviews, and other data to provide multiple perspectives on the topic. Then they could analyze their own values and beliefs, apply their new knowledge, identify alternative courses of action and decide what, if any, actions they will take to address these issues in their school, workplace, or community. The major goal of this approach is to teach students thinking and decision making skills, to empower them, and help them acquire a sense of political awareness and efficacy.

Conclusion

While the decision making and social action approach is perhaps the most challenging approach to curricular infusion, it is the most commonly ascribed to by the leaders in the field (e.g., Nieto, 1996; Sleeter, 1996). If the primary goal of multicultural education is transformation, it will happen only when students are given the opportunity to participate in an equitable

education, when they are informed about existing inequities, and when they are empowered to make decisions to change our society. Finally, it is unrealistic to expect teachers to move directly from a dominant perspective curriculum to one that focuses on decision making and social action. Rather, it is more reasonable to see teachers blending their approaches and using the contributions approach as a starting place from which to move gradually to the more challenging approaches.

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Implementing multicultural education effectively can take time, energy, and a great deal of work. But imagine, for a moment, the potential: Learners seeing themselves in the curriculum, their voices being heard and valued in the classroom. Students feeling a part of the educational process, learning and obtaining the high expectations that are set for them, and beginning to believe that they belong. Imagine students feeling informed, competent, and able to make decisions that have an impact on their lives, their children, and generations to come. Multicultural education holds the power to transform, it provides hope at a time when the future is unclear, and, perhaps most importantly, it provides an opportunity for us to imagine the world as a fair, equitable, and just place in which to live and work. 

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About the Author

Allison Cumming-McCann is currently an assistant professor in the Rehabilitation and Disability Studies Department at Springfield College in Springfield, Massachusetts. For many years, she has worked across the country as a training consultant with various school districts, colleges, and continuing education programs in the area of diversity and multicultural education. ♦

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Idealism and Realism in the Formation of a Culturally Sensitive Classroom

Niquette found she could retain her female Muslim students by thinking “outside the box”

by **KayTee Niquette**

I have spent the last seven years teaching English to nonnative speakers in the Union Public Schools’ Adult Education Program in Tulsa, Oklahoma. My classes have always been very multicultural and multilevel. Until three years ago, the student population in our program was predominantly Hispanic. In the last few years, due in part to the growth of large corporations locally, I have seen an influx of students from Vietnam, Korea, Venezuela, as well as a number of countries in the Middle East. The majority of the Middle Eastern students have been men. The Middle Eastern women who first entered the program had husbands who were students at a local school. Students knew that I had taught in Lebanon and have many Middle Eastern and Muslim friends. This drew women to my class.

Many of the women were coming to class in traditional head coverings called a hijab. This did not pose a problem with my non-Muslim students, but, for some reason, the women from the Muslim community

never attended for very long. They stayed less than a month in any given English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) class. In July, 2001, I was teaching an evening class.

A young Saudi Arabian man, whom I shall call Sam, came to class with his new bride. He was very American in mannerisms, but his wife was very traditional and wore the full black sheath with a hijab that covered to below the eyes. Sam admitted to me that

he had no problem with his wife studying in a mixed class, but that she did not feel very comfortable and was going to try the class out.

I made every attempt to make her feel at ease. When we sat down, she sat at a distance from the male students, and when we had a circular group discussion, I made sure the men were on one side and the women on the other. Although I tried to get her to speak in class, I got little or no response. Before the class was even finished she asked me if she could go to see her husband, and I said that would be fine. After a few minutes, her husband approached me and asked if I had an all women’s

class. I told him very honestly that because the program was funded through a grant from the federal government, we could not run women-only classes. It would be discriminatory.

At that very moment, I realized that the ideal — students from all countries sitting together in a classroom — is not always possible. In reality, some individuals want to learn English, but social customs and dedication to certain religion beliefs prohibit them from learning comfortably in a mixed gender class. Sam explained that many Muslim women were interested in taking classes. He could give me the name



KayTee Niquette (back row) and her students.

of a man who was responsible for the mosque and its facility. I agreed to take his phone number and told him I would contact him with any information I could provide.

Considerations and Interventions

Our adult learning center has always offered mixed gender, as well as culturally diverse, classes. At the same time, the challenge of retaining Muslim women in the classroom was something that needed attention. As a full-time teacher, it is my responsibility to assist all part-time employees, making sure the classes

run smoothly and the students do not drop out. My coordinator and I agreed that we needed to find a solution, and we thought that a women's class would be the answer. We also thought that the situation could be a great opportunity for the Union Adult Education Center: we were hoping to create a culturally sensitive class of students whom the nation seemed not to fully understand. Classes would not be able to be offered on school property because of the concerns about segregation or discrimination. The adult learning center, by district policy, would be unable to turn away students interested in taking the class, specifically those who were male. The policy is based on Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

We started thinking about locating a site that had no connection to the school. I was able to offer Sam's suggestion of the use of the mosque run by the Islamic Society of Tulsa. The mosque was a place of religious worship that many of the women would be comfortable attending. We



could have use of the mosque library for class. Around the same time (September, 2001), I was chosen to represent the state of Oklahoma at the National Symposium on Adult ESL Research and Practice in Washington, DC. While in Washington, I spoke to the Ron

Pugsley, then Director of the Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE), about the class our adult learning center was interested in starting. I explained all the concerns we had and what we had proposed to do. I was worried that there might be a problem, but my fears were quickly

“The word spread and the class began to grow.”

allayed. He told me that our learning center had an opportunity not to be missed, and that an all-women's class was not and should not be an issue. With this last bit of affirmation, I was ready to start a class.

Wonderful Response

A call to the facilities coordinator at the mosque about a possible space for classes was met with a wonderful response. I was offered the use of the library, as well as help in finding


Muslim women in the mosque who were interested in learning English. One would have thought that September 11th would have affected the class, but it did not. The word spread and the class began to grow. My students were quite surprised

when I showed up in class wearing a scarf over my head. I was asked by my students if I was a Muslim, and I told them I am not. I explained that I was wearing the covering out of respect for the culture and for the place they hold holy. All their faces lit up and they began to ask me if

I would be interested in a hijab, since the scarf kept falling off my head.

Classes at the mosque are very flexible to allow for prayer changes that occur during daylight saving time. The observance of religious holidays, particularly Ramadan, means that class times may need to be adjusted for one month or classes may be placed on hold. My students may leave for 10 minutes in the middle of a class to pray. Otherwise, my expectations of the students are no different than those I have for my other ESOL classes. The women study the same topics as the other classes, but within a

group that affords them the opportunity to express their ideas out loud without worrying about a male presence. Many of the learners are very outspoken and have no problem working in a mixed class, but this class makes them feel more comfortable. The class at the mosque is listed on all our fliers. Should a non-Muslim of either gender wish to attend classes, it would be fine. The classes are not based on religion, but were created because of a cultural awareness of customs.

Today, the enrollment of the class, which is on break for Ramadan as this article is being written, remains stable at eight to 10 learners. In recognizing the need for a culturally sensitive class, I have been given the opportunity to work with a wonderful group of students. It has been a rewarding opportunity to be able to partake in pioneering a class of this nature in Oklahoma. Sometimes, we have found, it is useful to think in what might be construed as a more traditional way to meet nontraditional needs. 

About the Author

KayTee Niquette is a full-time teacher-trainer for the Oklahoma State Department of Education (SDE), and a BEST tester in Tulsa, Oklahoma. A native of Vermont, she has a bachelor's degree in English Literature and a masters degree in TESL. A love of travel prompted her to teach in Lebanon. ♦

A Conversation with FOB...

Addressing Racism, Gender, and Classism in ABE

Jereann King has been involved in adult basic education since 1979. An African-American woman, she has thought about and tried to address issues of racism, gender, and classism over the course of her career. Focus on Basics talked to her about her experiences and what she feels adult basic educators can do to address power differentials that interfere with best teaching practices.

FOB: How did you get started in adult basic education?

JEREANN: I moved to rural Warrenton, North Carolina, in 1977, shortly after I finished college, to work for a small community-based public radio station. To supplement my income, I took a part-time job at the local community college teaching adult basic education. I had no background in adult ed. The first night of class my supervisor brought me a box of books, registration forms for the students, and other paper work. I didn't know where to start. I had not one bit of training.

FOB: So what did you do?

JEREANN: That very first night I realized that I had pretty good instincts for teaching adults because I asked people to tell me about themselves.

As they described themselves, I wrote the sentences and descriptive words that they used on the blackboard. Those words became our spelling words. People said things like: I'm a grandmother. I'm a worker. I'm a good church member. Those became the content that I started to build curriculum around. I did that for a while, just sort of playing on my instincts.

FOB: When did you start to work as a professional development provider?

JEREANN: I went to a Laubach training workshop. Deborah Gaddy, who was leading the workshop, complimented me on some of the things I told her I was doing in my class. She was working with Hannah Fingeret and Page McCollough at the North Carolina Center for Literacy Development at the time, the predecessor to Literacy South [a now-defunct organization with a social justice orientation that provided professional development services to adult basic education programs]. Deborah told them about me and I started as a Center consultant in 1986 and continued to work at the community college.

In 1990, I took a job full-time at Literacy South, while continuing to

teach ABE at the community college until 1994-95. At Literacy South, I was director of programs: designing and implementing training with literacy and basic skills teachers. After about four years, I started to pay more attention to teacher research as staff development, or inquiry-based staff development. That's when Cassie Drennon [see article on page 20] and I worked with teachers in Georgia and with NALPIN [National Adult Literacy Practitioner Inquiry Network, no longer in existence]. We were trying to do what we thought were more empowering ways of doing staff development. So that's my background. Now I'm working independently and collaboratively with individuals and organizations to build communities around literacy education and cultural awareness.

FOB: When did you first come to recognize race and class as issues in ABE classrooms, programs, and staff development interactions?

JEREANN: In my classroom work, back in the 1980s, all the students in those first years were African-Americans and I am African-American. We shared a common culture, even though we had some differences between my upbringing in southwest Georgia and their upbringing in North

“They could not understand how their adult students made it as far as they did, to adulthood, not being able to read. They brought all of their class values to teaching.”

Carolina. I grew up in a very Jim Crow situation in the 1950s and 1960s [Jim Crow signifies obstacles, legal and cultural, that work to keep African-Americans from equal status with whites]. When I started to use

cultural content as teaching content, I could see regional differences around certain themes: getting baptized, surviving cold weather, certain natural remedies. There were things like farming traditions that were different, or community survival, some of which were unfamiliar. However, we shared a common racial identity and culture.

When I came to do staff development and worked with mostly white teachers — 80 percent of the people I worked with were white — I recognized race and class as differences. I recognized class in the work that Hannah and I did in the mountains of North Carolina. We were working with a small volunteer library-based program. All the volunteers were white. In the mountains of North Carolina, most of the students were probably white; perhaps there were some black students. The teachers who volunteered were from a different class than the students. A lot of the volunteers were people who had retired to the mountains and were sort of acting out of their sympathy for people who could not read. They were very benevolent and wanted to help. They were not people who had experienced education as a barrier: a good education was part of their privilege. Most of them were college graduates. Some had held very good union jobs in the north. Those who had not had a working career were mostly women and had husbands who supported them and maintained a privileged life for them. They came to the ABE field with no experience of not having an education or access to education. They could not understand how their adult students made it as far as they did, to adulthood, not being able to read. They brought all of their class values to teaching.

FOB: How did these values manifest themselves?

JEREANN: Oh, one way was around language and how people

talked. Often these teachers would say that the students “talked country.” Instead of using the richness of the mountain language, the volunteers saw it as nonstandard and a deficit. I’ll never forget this one woman who told the story of a person who said that they were going to the «fahr». The volunteer tutor thought they were going to a fire, and the person was saying they were going to the fair. She made a very big deal of saying she couldn’t understand how people could talk like this.

“I knew some things about learner-centered education, but some of the other sort of subtle racist attitudes I didn’t know how to confront.”

The volunteers made fun of people’s dialect. I saw myself as bilingual: I was comfortable speaking in an African-American dialect, and I could do pretty well with standard English, but I knew I could be scrutinized in the same way. I felt totally intimidated. So, as a trainer and leader that was scary. I was comfortable with my black identity and didn’t feel like I needed to be white, but I felt like I needed to get it very right. Where would I start in helping people identify their own classism? Would they feel attacked? There were all sorts of issues.

The second time [I recognized issues of race and class] was in the inquiry-based staff development work in Georgia. It was during a time when there was a lot of attention on welfare reform. All over the South there was an emphasis on getting poor women on welfare into adult education classes: they had to get in and out before the new legislation. Community colleges and technical schools in Georgia hired a lot of retired African-American public school teachers in the adult education programs, although there

were plenty of white teachers also. It seemed to me that both the white and the black teachers perceived that the women who came to their programs were on welfare because they were lazy and irresponsible, sexually promiscuous, and had all of “these children out of wedlock.” What I noticed about race and class was that even though the teachers were talking about their students in those ways, those social and race issues were never addressed in the classroom. They were

pretty much using decontextualized materials, which were totally irrelevant to the issues and challenges that the women experienced in their everyday lives on welfare. The students weren’t reading about the struggles of single women, about women getting and keeping jobs, and [the

teachers had] no awareness that there should be any connection [between the class content and the learners’ lives]. Then when I raised that issue — I felt that was my responsibility — it was too new. The teachers said the people were there to get their GEDs; they didn’t want to talk about other issues; the only reason they come is to get their welfare check.

The teachers never had any empathy for what it means to be a woman dealing with raising children as a single parent. Many of these teachers had had similar experiences but they never saw that as a correlation. That’s where the sexism came in. They never saw how the education environment could be a springboard for these women to act or think differently. To me, that was the empowerment piece: helping people take on new roles and to explore their identities. But all of that was very frustrating. I was stuck because I didn’t understand how to confront it. I knew some things about learner-centered education, but some of the other sort of subtle racist attitudes I didn’t know how to confront. I was

terrified. I know now that some of that fear comes from my own upbringing in a Jim Crow environment.

FOB: Your reluctance certainly makes sense. How did you end up addressing their attitudes?

JEREANN: The extent to which I could address it was to introduce ideas of doing learner-centered lessons. That meant that teachers and learners had to deal with social and economic issues. The teachers had to put the lives, the experiences, the culture, the histories, and goals of the students in the center of the teaching and learning. I was not really comfortable naming these things. I was better able to confront the black teachers, particularly the male teachers, than the white teachers. I never knew how to tell the white women.

Remember, the project was an inquiry-based staff development project, and there are lots of power issues ingrained in the process. That was the point: to give teachers power in their own learning. As we did this teacher research stuff, I was afraid about how the teachers would use their power. I felt like they would use it to justify their own assumptions about poor women who were going to these welfare-to-work programs. I believed that some of the white teachers and the African-American teachers believed that poor African-American women and poor white women just didn't know how to act. So much of the attention at that time was on teaching people how to write a resume, dress for the job, and about good work ethics: get to work on time, don't talk back, don't call in sick. They would teach that, and then, what they would observe when these women went to get jobs was failure. They taught people to dress for success, and still the women failed. So for the teachers, it was proof that these women couldn't get

it. But the reality, at least from where I was looking, was that there were no jobs for these women.

The jobs for them did not require resume writing, dressing for success, or work ethics. They required networking with family and friends, getting there before daybreak in the morning, and you sure didn't show up with a navy blue suit on. You wore jeans and a sweatshirt, and tried to look like you wanted a job. The women needed to say, "My cousin told me to come on this morning and I'm here." It's difficult to suggest that to teachers who have not considered that angle. With the black teachers, I was more comfortable asking questions like: Where are the real jobs? Do you think you need a suit to get a job where nothing is going on but poultry production?

One way of looking at class is as a stance. That stance was based on the teachers' assumptions about who the students were and what the students deserved. So the education maintained class boundaries. Teachers — they had a little bit of privilege — the students were poor and what the education reinforced was a sort of poverty mentality. All this emphasis on success and no consciousness

"...education maintained class boundaries. Teachers — they had a little bit of privilege — the students were poor and what the education reinforced was a sort of poverty mentality."

about what the real situation was: no jobs, or only minimum wage jobs. Nothing about the adult education served to break down these class barriers. The message was, "You're here to study for your CNA [certified nursing assistant's certificate], get your nursing certificate, and work in a

nursing home," which is nonunion, low pay, and for every one job there are nine certified people available to do it. In this message there was no mention of hospital settings as places of employment, where the employment ceilings are higher than in nursing homes, and there are generally more opportunities for advancement. The educational approach and the content served to maintain poor women in a traditionally low paying industry and not helping them to understand how to take what they had and do better.

FOB: How did you learn to feel comfortable addressing these issues?

JEREANN: I started learning to feel comfortable asking the teachers hard questions: What was it about your education that gave you what you needed to be where you are today? It was a simple way to get teachers to look at important elements of their education and how they were not doing this for their students. I also asked them, "What opportunity does this afford the students?" Then I started a graduate student program with all this reading about culture and how culture matters in adult education.

That answered so many of my questions. That helped me to feel a lot more comfortable.

I think you have to deal with it all — class and race. Culture is the basis of our values. Race and class have a lot to do with our values, but I still think that there's a lot of ambiguity with any kind of 'isms' analysis. It's complicated by history,

values, by beliefs, and how people act.

In terms of values, telling women on welfare to pull themselves up with their own bootstraps is an individualistic approach. Encouraging women to work together is more relational. Whether you're black or white, culture adds another lens to

the situation. It adds another dimension to all the 'isms'.

FOB: What about people who say they're not racist or classist. What do you say to them?

JEREANN: That's very hard, to tell someone that they're racist. Sometimes a teacher says she sees no difference between white students and black students, as a way of saying she's not racist. She might say, if people would just not pay attention to race, everything would be OK; yes, you're black; and yes, you're white, but it doesn't really matter. Part of what teachers have to do is accept difference and the fact that there are many cultures. I think we also have to recognize the social and economic circumstances that historically contribute to the gaps in educational achievement and economic/social stability. We might need to ask, "I have a black student here who is reading on a 5th grade level, and a white student who has one more GED test to take. What is that about?" There was something different about the education or social systems that resulted in these two people of the same age being on such different levels.

There is a difference between black and white, between poor and rich, between men and women. We study in this [graduate] program a lot about change and what it means to support people in a change process. That's what staff development is about: helping people change, helping people shift their values and beliefs. Change doesn't happen automatically. You have to grieve, first of all, what you lose in the change process. That grief process is important.

FOB: What do teachers lose? What do they have to grieve?

JEREANN: Teachers have to grieve not being in charge. They lose

some power. Their identity is not primary. They have to grieve that. They have to grieve the fact that they don't know all the answers. Until they deal with their own stuff, they can't change.

Dealing with isms in the classroom also means dealing with a lot of unknowns. Teachers would have to explore their students' cultures, backgrounds, environments, and social situations. They grieve losing

"I think we also have to recognize the social and economic circumstances that historically contribute to the gaps in educational achievement and economic/social stability."

their centrality. For me, as a staff teacher working across race and class, I grieve lost comfort and self-confidence in addressing issues of race.

I think that meanings change when students and teachers come to grips with race and class and culture. For example, is the definition of success different? Success may have been getting all the answers right on a test. In a more sensitive environment, success might be having a successful meeting with your child's teacher or applying for a job that requires writing a resume. There's a shift in how people understand things.

FOB: Should teachers and students be of different cultural backgrounds?

JEREANN: I think so. But they have to be mindful that there is some difference: their students are not like them. I don't know what it would look like if teachers would talk about that difference with the students, telling them what their educational experience was and how and why education is different for their students.

One of the things I learned [in graduate school] which was another "Ah ha" was about identity development. Identities really do develop: you're not born with them. Life takes you through stages. When it comes down to race and class, those developments can shift: from not paying attention to race to wanting to recognize how society builds on and exploits race. As a staff developer, it helps me to realize where people are in terms of their identity. If people are trying to accept their differences, I might ask questions differently than if they were not acknowledging differences at all.

FOB: What steps do you think the field of ABE should be taking to address issues of racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia?

JEREANN: I think funding for staff development, for training and for materials [for programs] is necessary. This would really give ABE programs the materials that they need: not just tests and standardized books, and money for field trips, new technology equipment. I think that ABE should consider all the ways in which technology could give students more of an opportunity to break down this divide. That's the new line. There's not enough funding, so we sort of maintain the status quo.

I think intercultural sensitivity is necessary for adult educators. Attention to culture has been much more prevalent in ESOL classes and programs. We don't pay as much attention to culture and how it fits into issues of race and class in ordinary basic skills programs. We maintain the status quo by maintaining a culture of teaching people skills that don't necessarily open new doors for students, skills that keep them in low wage jobs, that keep them from being able to challenge the system for better jobs, and for better communities. We often don't have the resources or use

Useful Resources

Ms. King has found these books to be particularly useful in understanding the interplay of race, class, and culture in adult basic education.

- Salett, E.P., & Koslow, D. (1994). *Race, Ethnicity and Self*. Washington, DC: NMCI Publications.
- Bennett, M.J. (1998). *Basic Concepts of Intercultural Communication*. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press.
- Sue, D.W., & Sue D. *Counseling the Culturally Different: Theory and Practice*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- Ponterotto, J., & Pedersen, P. (1993). *Preventing Prejudice: A Guide for Counselors and Educators*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Marris, P. (1975). *Loss and Change*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Wilkins, R. (2001). *Jefferson's Pillow*. Boston: Beacon Press.

resources to provide staff development that helps teachers to really think broadly about the students' overall learning and development and the broader development of the community in which students live. One of the great benefits of the Equipped for the Future model [the National Institute for Literacy's standards-based reform initiative] is that it expands the conversation to include adult learners in their roles as parent/family members, workers, and community members.

To examine our attitudes about students from other countries and combat xenophobia, it might help if we, as teachers, learned more about international politics. We have to look at the world's situation and understand what's going on in the world. Why are the Sudanese or the Hmong here? How does our country relate to Central America and what are the implications of the political/economic situation there for adult literacy programs? And as practitioners, it's important to understand the culture and situations from which our students come. If they are

new immigrants, then teaching and learning should support them as they transition to this country, this culture, this economy. Again, we can't put blinders on and claim people's differences do not matter.

Race and racism are at the core of American culture: the economy,

“Race and racism are at the core of American culture: the economy, the social life, and about everything else we can think of has some relationship to race.”


the social life, and about everything else we can think of has some relationship to race. There is no getting around race in this country, a country whose economic origins were built on African slavery. I don't believe white people can say they are not racist, when they benefit, knowingly or unknowingly, everyday from a racist society. We have to challenge that racism and we have to remember that racism is internalized deep in our

souls and reflected in everyone's life. We have to look at why one out of every four black men is in prison. Why is that? We have to ask those hard questions. What is it about the economics of black communities that result in black men going to prison? Who really benefits in the long run? And bringing it back to adult education, is there a role in ABE for addressing issues of race and class?

FOB: What's the role of staff development in addressing these issues?

JEREANN: Staff development that is intentional and thoughtful about supporting teachers in examining their own identities and how those identities influence teaching philosophies and practices is one key, I believe, to unlocking some of the frustrations about race, class, and gender issues in adult basic skills and literacy and language education. The ethnic and racial diversity seen in America today is good and can provide opportunities to explore new ways of interacting and communicating in educational setting. However, the old

American black/white paradigm still colors and defines our identities. For students and teachers to reach the full power of education, we have to examine not only our personal identities but all of the assumptions we make about who needs and deserves what. I don't know if the immediate goal is to overcome

racism, but rather to understand it and begin a systematic process of changing our lives and attitudes to recognize race and it's oppressiveness. Then we can make informed choices and take the appropriate action. 



Naming the Power Dynamics in Staff Development

by **Cassandra Drennon**

We were nearing the end of a two-day practitioner inquiry workshop that I had been leading in the ballroom of a local hotel. At this point in the agenda, 12 adult literacy teachers were enthusiastically helping one another come up with data collection strategies for their individual classroom research projects. As a staff developer, I could not have been more pleased with how this peer-led activity was going. Then a bomb seemed to drop out of the blue. Helene, a middle-aged white woman from a rural area of our state, was telling a story about a conversation she had overheard between two students in her adult basic education (ABE) class. When quoting one of the students, she let the “n-word” fall matter-of-factly from her lips.

An excruciating silence overtook the room. As I glanced around, most of the white group members were looking down and seemed uncomfortable. I saw African-American group members locking eyes with one another. As I sat with my heart pounding and my thoughts racing, Janice, a young African-American woman who had been facilitating the discussion, posed a relatively benign question to Helene. It was about the situation she had been describing, and the conversation took off again. I admit I felt some relief when the awkward silence broke. However, it was obvious that the stress we all seemed to be feeling would be there until I, as the leader, did something to

help the group recover from it. I wasn't even sure what had just happened; I definitely didn't know the right thing to say or do next.

First: Find the Words

Over the course of my career, I have adopted a vocabulary to describe my perspective on adult education and my intentions in the classroom. It includes such terms as participatory, learner-centered, and democratic. When planning and carrying out this particular practitioner inquiry workshop, I drew from practices that I thought would reflect this perspective. For example, to engender a sense of shared ownership, I involved the participants in developing the agenda. To demonstrate my respect for the participants, I made their knowledge and experience the starting point for all activities. To sustain a learning community, I encouraged participants to collaborate on every research project, not just to focus on their own individual projects. I tried to minimize my role as an expert or authority by moving away from the front of the room and participating along with the group. I put processes in place — such as rotating peer facilitators and allotting time for individual presentations — to balance participation among group members. Not only do I assume that these practices are effective methods for teaching the group members about inquiry, but I also consider them ethical and socially just practices that can go a long way toward ensuring that everyone has an equal learning experience. However, the incident that occurred in the inquiry workshop reminded me there are no guarantees.

We have to be able to name something before we can begin to change it. Naming the workshop incident “racism,” however, didn't go far

enough toward helping me to understand or cope with it. Although I had acquired a vocabulary to describe the kind of classroom environment I wanted to achieve (which, in effect, were my values as a white, middle-class woman) I hadn't acquired words at the time of this incident to convey how and why reality often fell short of my ideals. Without such a vocabulary, classroom life would continue to feel somewhat messy and unpredictable.

This incident and others like it became the impetus for my dissertation research. I set out to interview women facilitators of adult literacy staff development who, like me, tried to enact teaching practices that were participatory, learner-centered, and democratic (Drennon & Cervero, 2002). I asked the staff developers to share stories with me about when these ethical goals for teaching had been challenged and how each of them responded in those situations. By the end of the interviews, I had accumulated dozens of what might be termed critical incidents, which I then analyzed for patterns and themes. I wanted to find out exactly what they and learners were doing when the challenging moment occurred, what they thought caused the challenge, how they responded, and what the effect of their response seemed to be.

Although I never asked the study participants directly about issues of race, class, gender, or role status, I found them to have considered these and other categories of difference as key factors in almost all of their stories. When I was studying the critical incidents, the following concepts provided a lens through which to see, name, and explain what they really consisted of. I continue to find these concepts valuable in my teaching practice because they offer possibilities for action: choices I can make in the face of racism, sexism, and the like, for teaching differently.

Power and Interests

The assumption that classrooms and training rooms are neutral spaces where teachers and learners are

basically alike and equal is not valid. A far more realistic view is that teachers and learners are ranked in relation to one another, just as they are in the world outside the classroom. People are allocated or denied privileges based on where they are in the social hierarchy. We bring our long-held ideas about each other based on race, class, gender, sexual preference, age, and physical ability into the classroom. Without consciously changing these ideas, relationships in this setting play out based on these identity categories as they do in every other setting. Relationships based on organizational role status continue to play out as well.

Within every classroom or training room is a web of these relationships structured by power. Cervero & Wilson (1994) ask us to think of power as the capacity to act, which is distributed unequally among us.

They explain that we are always exercising power in the direction of our interests. In other words, we exercise power to get what we want. Unequal power relationships, by their very nature, can threaten participatory, democratic classrooms.

The language of power now offers me a way to talk about how classrooms and training rooms are organized around unequal relationships. I know to take stock of the privileges that are awarded or denied me and others based simply on the identities we were born with. I am getting better at “reading” classroom power dynamics for the interests besides mine that group members bring to bear. Even when a decision I make seems very mundane, I try to remember to ask myself, “Whose interests are being served here and whose are not?” When trying to make sense of a classroom situation, I can specifically ask myself questions like this: How are the

people in this room different from one another in terms of identity and organizational status? How are these differences being played out in relationships?

The practitioner inquiry workshop included men and women who were African-American, Latina/Latino, Asian, and European-American. Most were classroom teachers but others were program administrators. Some had lived in the South so long that



they strongly identified with being “Southern.” Helene, however, had recently moved to the south from the Northeast and a few group members had playfully teased her about being a Yankee. That regional difference with her peers may have been a source of misunderstanding and distrust.

Another useful question is: What interests of my own am I trying to advance or protect in this situation? During the practitioner inquiry workshop, I was advancing two sets of interests simultaneously. In a practical sense, I wanted to ensure that all the participants were exposed to a range of data collection options. At the same time, I wanted to be certain that leadership of the activity was shared among the group members, and that everyone collaborated on the development of each inquiry project. When Helene surprised us all with her racially charged comment, I wanted time to collect

my thoughts and carefully plan a response. This decision to stay quiet served my own interests to avoid conflict but not necessarily those of others in the room.

A final valuable question is: What interests might other people be trying to advance or protect? No one else in the room directly confronted Helene with their reactions to her use of the n-word either. However, two

group members — a white man and an African-American woman — separately called me a few days later to talk about what had happened. Both said that they were offended by the word Helene had used. Both said that they stayed silent because they thought a direct discussion about it would be uncomfortable for everyone and would take valuable time away from completing the group’s assigned task.

At the time that they called, their interest was in seeing that the comment was addressed with the whole group. Later, Helene explained to me that she had quoted students using the word only to depict a slice of life in her rural mountain community. Janice, the African-American peer-facilitator leading the discussion at the time the comment was made, told me that she moved the conversation forward because we were in an “academic setting for research purposes.” The way the comment was made did not strike her as racist and to construe it as such would have been, in her words, “hypo-critical and distracting.” An African-American man and a Hispanic woman later commented that they were very offended by the use of the language. They did not disclose why they chose to stay silent about it in the workshop.

Positionality

In their study of feminist teaching in action, Maher and Tetrault (1994) organized their understanding of power relationships among teachers, students, and texts into several major themes. The theme they call “positionality” refers to a teacher or learner’s position in the classroom as defined by socially significant factors such as race, gender, ethnicity, and class. Positionality implies relationship; that is, we are only privileged or marginal in relation to someone else.

It was an eye-opener for me, after reading their work, to grasp that our identities are not fixed. For instance, I can be privileged in a group by virtue of my position as the leader or simply for being a white middle-class woman. However, if it happens that I am also a lesbian, or a senior citizen, or a physically disabled person, it is likely that some of my privileges will be undercut: such as the privilege to talk openly about my significant relationships or the privilege to have my credibility assumed. Our identities are defined within a shifting web of relationships according to Maher and Tetrault. Given the will of the group, power can be more equalized. Some believe that positionality, more than any other single factor, influences teaching and learning in the classroom environment (hooks, 1994; Maher & Tetrault, 1994).

The language of positionality offers me a way to understand who teachers and learners in a specific classroom are in relation to one another. An understanding of positionality helps me understand why I can facilitate the same workshop agenda with two different groups and they will experience it very differently. These questions related to positionality are helpful to ask of specific classroom situations: What privileges can I or other members of this group take for granted simply

because of our identity or organizational status? In this group, who is privileged or marginal in relation to whom?

In the practitioner inquiry group, I was able to take my credibility largely for granted. I had been an ABE teacher myself at one time, I had lots of experience helping people conduct inquiry projects, and I was the official leader of the group. For at least these reasons, participants seemed open to what I had to offer them. In contrast, months later I found myself in another state

“By doing nothing in response to the comment that clearly offended some people, I chose to reproduce rather than interrupt a historically rooted power dynamic in the group.”

far from home, facilitating a workshop called “Teaching the Adult Learner.” The participants were Midwestern, white, male scientists new to the training profession who were all much older than me. From the moment I walked in the classroom door until the session was over, the participants vigorously challenged my credibility. They questioned my sources, dismissed my participatory approach as “touchy-feely,” and even made comments about how I was dressed. I did not feel that I was an effective teacher in this setting and I doubt that the participants learned much, if anything. While I may have been privileged in the inquiry group in the sense that my race or gender in no way worked against me, I was definitely disadvantaged in the second group on the basis of gender. Sometimes it takes a contrasting scenario to help us grasp how deeply positionality affects teaching and learning.

Negotiation

In the web of relationships that is always present in the classroom,

teachers and learners are constantly negotiating interests from their relative positions of power. We do this on two fronts simultaneously. We act within the web of power relationships to accomplish the practical aspects of teaching and learning. We also act on power relationships by either strengthening them or changing them (Cervero & Wilson, 1998). Our actions on one front affect what can be accomplished on the other. I would like to think that, as a teacher and staff developer, the

actions I take in the classroom are always toward ethical ends but this, I have come to realize, is not always true.

Using the language of negotiation, I am able to explain how I sometimes make tradeoffs in the classroom that do not move us in the direction in which I want us to go. Learners make tradeoffs, too. I realize

that my responsibility as a teacher or staff developer is to consider the direction and effects of my actions with respect to power relationships. Now I know to ask myself, What is being negotiated in this situation? What tradeoffs am I making? What is the effect on power relationships and is this acceptable to me?

During the brainstorming activity, I encountered a fundamental issue of power that had to do with the negotiation of identities within the group. Once the racially charged comment was made, it seemed to matter who was white and who was black, who was from the South and who was from the North, who was the real leader and who were the real participants. Through my silence I allowed my practical interest in getting through the brainstorming activity to prevail. I did nothing to advance the interest I claimed in creating a democratic environment. By choosing not to make space for dissenting voices I ended up granting Helene and her comment privilege. By doing nothing in response to the comment that clearly offended some

people, I chose to reproduce rather than interrupt a historically rooted power dynamic in the group.

Closing Thoughts

It is not easy to admit how flawed my teaching practice sometimes is. The fact that what I do in the classroom is wrought with tensions, ironies, and contradictions is something I would rather keep to myself. However, I continue to seek out conversation with others about classroom struggles, especially those that emerge from race, class, and gender differences, because of the deep pain they cause and the disruption they bring to learning. Applying the vocabulary of power and interests, positionality, and negotiation has shed light for me on issues that I had a hard time “seeing” previously. It has allowed me, in turn, to talk about those issues with teachers and learners and, I hope, expand the possibilities for teaching democratically. 📖

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About the Author

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Personal Journeys of Transformation

by Maria Rosales-Uribe & Rick Kappa

Maria Rosales-Uribe and Rick Kappa are both teachers at City College of San Francisco. Coming from minority communities themselves, and working with the diverse populations that make up adult basic education, they each considered themselves to be open-minded and unbiased. One day their paths crossed, and they began to challenge each other to question their core beliefs, boundaries, and teaching practices. This is the story of their transformations.

Maria During my first semester at the Teacher's Resource Center (TRC) of City College of San Francisco, my English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) counterpart was facilitating a diversity presentation for ESOL teachers. I had invited some teachers and was there to support the workshop. I had no idea who the presenters were and expected it to be just your ordinary, two-hour workshop on a topic that City College of San Francisco was encouraging its staff to explore: diversity and tolerance.

Rick I had been teaching ESOL for nearly 15 years. In the fall of 1999, I had just started talking about lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) issues and had just transferred to the Mission Campus of City College of San

Francisco, which served a mostly Latino neighborhood and student population. I was invited to participate in a half-day workshop organized by our professional development committee on “Diversity Issues for ESOL Teachers (and Others)” because I had recently published an article about a gay Japanese student of mine. He longed for home because he found the homophobia he experienced in his program at University of California at Berkeley to be too oppressive. I was asked to talk about LGBT issues and to provide some guidelines on how to make classrooms safe for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students.

Maria Little did I know that that would be my first day on a journey towards coming to terms with my own issues with homophobia. I was raised in a traditional Nicaraguan Catholic home in San Francisco, a very open, liberal city. On my journey, I have had very close, deep friendships with gay men: my husband's brother, my first CCSF mentor, my Mission Dolores Church soul mate, but I could not or would not openly talk about LGBT issues with my peers. I was afraid to have honest conversations exploring my questions and admitting my own confusion.

Rick It was a Friday afternoon, not the best time for a workshop, and it was one of those unusual days in San Francisco: it was hot, which is weather we are neither used to, nor prepared for. I remember standing up and trying to make contact with the audience, looking for support — the nodding, smiling, signs of understanding or



solidarity — all of the things I had so far gotten from workshop audiences, since I was only used to “preaching to the choir.” Instead, I saw looks that appeared to me like boredom, discomfort, and even anger. This crowd was obviously comprised of the “unconverted.”

I spoke about my experiences in my new class at Mission Campus. It was a large class, predominantly male, which was usual for evening classes. The guys in the class, in spite of their limited English abilities, were able to make jokes about gays in English, which surprised me. I talked about how uncomfortable their joking made

me feel. Then Maria spoke.

Maria So there I was at this workshop where this very articulate, passionate, young man spoke about being sensitive to our LGBT students and how to approach different topics in the classroom. I suddenly felt an urge to respond

to how his Latino students joked about gays.

Rick I had been looking at her while I was speaking because, to be honest, I kind of thought she might be a lesbian. I

could tell that she was Latina, and I thought that she understood what I was talking about. Her body language indicated interest or fa-

miliarity with the subject; she was nodding as I spoke, and I even detected hints of a smile.

Maria I was scared to death to say anything, but I did. I wanted to share that maybe we joke and laugh when we don't know how to react. Or maybe we just don't have the strength or courage to openly admit our discomfort. I know that I was petrified to even allude that I was equally confused and that I was How can I talk about it with my own students comfortably and openly when I could not openly share with my colleagues? How could I grow?

Rick Her response nearly floored me. She said that when students make jokes about gays, it is a reflection of their own discomfort. I don't remember my response because by that point I felt entirely defeated. I probably did make a feeble attempt to respond, but ended up leaving the workshop right after my segment and reflecting mostly on Maria's comments. I wondered whether or not she would say the same thing if I were talking about students making racist jokes, sexist remarks, or other derogatory comments in class.

Maria I remember that I wanted to be swallowed up in a huge hole after I spoke and that my heart was pounding. As I walked back to the office, I never imagined how Rick would guide me on a journey to greater sensitivity and personal understanding.

Rick I remember seeing Maria at Mission Campus after that, but pretending that I didn't recognize her, and hoping that she wouldn't recognize me either. We rarely crossed paths and when we did it was either in the hallway or in the frenzy of preparing for classes. I felt like she didn't understand where I was coming from and never would. I didn't know how to open up a dialogue with her about how I was feeling.

Maria I also started to see Rick at Mission Campus. At Mission Campus, there is warmth and sharing of conversation among the teachers from the different depart-



More Reading Read Azad's story.

I was born in Baghdad, Iraq to an Armenian family of eight children. Since I was a little girl, I knew that I was different from my sisters. I identified more with my brothers. I used to steal my brothers' shorts and wear them secretly, away from my mother. This secret battle inside me continued for years even after my family immigrated to Los Angeles, California. I was very sad and miserable. I was always asking myself, "Why is this happening to me?" My family was pressuring me to get married. Finally I told them I was a lesbian. It was a nightmare. The whole family went crazy. My older brother pulled a gun on me. My mother screamed that I was going to hell. She was mostly worried about what to tell people if they found out. I couldn't believe it. I asked them "What is stronger, your worries about other people, or your love for me?" They had no answer. Finally my oldest sister made my brother put down the gun. My family told me to leave the house and never come back. They said, "We don't have a sister named Azad anymore." We were so close and now I was alone. It hurt me a lot. I missed them so much.

This is one of the reasons I started the Armenian Gay & Lesbian Association in 1997. I didn't want others to be alone and suffering like I was. I try to help families deal with their gay and lesbian kids. After many years, I was able to educate my family about my sexuality and now they accept me. We are a close family again. It is very important to me. It makes all the difference in the world.

Working with words. Do you know these words from the story?

	I know it.	I've heard it before but I'm not sure what it means.	I don't know it.
identified	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
battle	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
lesbian	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
nightmare	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
pressuring	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
suffering	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

☞ Talk about the words you don't know with your classmates who know them.

Speaking up for yourself and others — handling discrimination — Suzanne Hovanesian



ments. In the fall of 2000, I became a project monitor for Project VOICE, a grant that focused on incorporating learning centered strategies to encourage civic engagement. I started to look actively for teachers to work on this project. I asked some of my ESOL friends which teachers they thought would be good candidates. A name kept coming up: Rick Kappra. "He's creative, dynamic, and caring." Even though I remember vividly the awkwardness of our first meeting, I was willing to take a chance.

Rick After Maria invited me to join the citizenship-civics grant, we really started a back and forth sharing with one another. I learned so much from her about teaching, being compassionate, service to the community, and just enjoying life.

Maria We were a group of teachers with different backgrounds but with a common love for our students. We began to train together, daydream and discuss openly about what our learning communities could be like. Rick was an integral part of that community. I found him to be as driven and committed as I was. Was I ready at that point to begin to explore LGBT issues in my own life, in my own teaching? No. But that community of teachers was helping me to gradually open myself without fear of ridicule.

In the summer of 2001, we named our work Project VOICE: Voice, Opportunity, Independence and Civic Engagement. Our community felt energized to tackle any issue in the classroom, and I felt a growing confidence that I could also begin to question my own paradigms.

Rick After working on Project VOICE for a few months, I received an e-mail from Maria, referring to the moment that we first

met. She thanked me for inspiring her to grow. Her message was an inspiration to me as well. I felt then that I had a new ally and friend.

Maria One night as I was reading my e-mails, I had an epiphany that indeed my stance had radically changed from that fall workshop on diversity. That was when I sent Rick the e-mail in which I admitted how fearful I felt that day. It was the most liberating feeling and ever since then I have come to openly talk about LGBT issues in my class.

Then 9/11 happened. I was in New York City for a wedding on September 8th; I was looking forward to my last day of sightseeing. On the subway, I

heard bits and pieces of information that something was happening at the World Trade Center. When I finally walked up the stairs towards the streets of New York City, I realized that something was terribly wrong. Panic, fear, sorrow permeated the air. I walked away from Ground Zero to safety. I stayed in New York until the 15th, and during those days, I cried, prayed, reflected, and discovered a tremendous peace amidst incredible pain.

Rick September 11 was something of a milestone in our relationship. Maria was in New York on the 11th. She asked me, after she got back, if we could talk about what it meant to be a pacifist and still be hurt, upset, angry about what happened.

Maria When I came home, I once again struggled with my inner core values. Rick was



Check your understanding: Answer the following questions about Azad's story.

1. What was Azad's problem when she was a little girl?
2. Why did Azad tell her family about being a lesbian?
3. What happened when she told them?
4. How did Azad feel?
5. What are some things Azad did to change the problems in her life?

Think about it: Do you understand what the people in Azad's story did and what they felt? Check the box that most closely matches your feeling.

	Strongly agree ----- Strongly disagree				
I understand Azad.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand Azad's mother.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand Azad's brother.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand Azad's sister.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Share your answers with a classmate. Are your answers the same or different? Talk about it.

Speaking up for yourself and others – handling discrimination – Suzanne Hovanesian

Reprinted with permission from Azad and Suzanne Hovanesian.

committed to peace and because of the trust we had began to foster, I was able to come to him openly to struggle with my questions concerning justice, war, retaliation, and our country's policy. It was then that my heart became fully open to exploring my own prejudices and fears.

Rick There was something about asking questions in the way she did, being willing to listen, yet also being willing to express her fears, doubts, and confusion over the whole issue, that really impressed me. I was so used to meeting people who were on one side or the other of an issue and who were not willing to even listen to those who didn't agree with them. I think that was the final step in building a bridge between our experiences.

In the spring of 2002, I initiated an ESOL class specifically for LGBT students at the newly opened LGBT Community Center. I was struggling with attendance, retention, outreach and a host of other issues. In spite of the difficulties, what was emerging was a group of stories that poignantly told the world what it was like to be queer, an immigrant, and studying ESOL in mainstream classes. I decided to have a public reading of the students' work, but found that most of them were too closeted or fearful to read their own writing. I began looking for allies to read for them, and Maria was my first choice. She agreed to read a story without hesitation.

Maria When Rick invited me to read one of his student's writings at a reading at the LGBT community center, I felt honored. Was I scared? Did I feel out of place? I must admit, yes. But when I walked up there and read Julia's story to everyone, I felt the fear and the joy of the narrator. It was there that I discovered that we are all one in this beautiful planet and that we love, laugh, and suffer in the same ways.

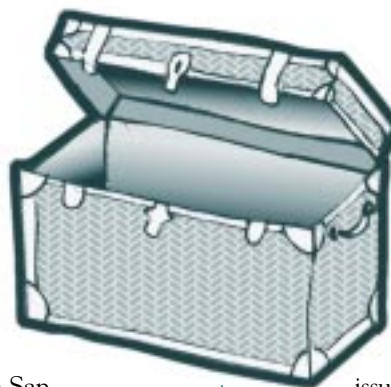


Rick I felt so proud to see her up there, reading the story of a woman who told of her excitement as she traveled from her native country to San Francisco so that she could be with the woman she loved. Julia, the student who had written the story, sat behind me with her arm around her girlfriend—both of them beaming as this beautiful story was retold by Maria.

Maria This coming semester I plan to do a lesson that one of other project teachers developed. Azad's story is about a brave young woman who found the strength to tell her parents about her sexual orientation regardless of the backlash (see pages 24 and 25). Her courage is a model to us. She teaches us to be true to ourselves, whatever that truth may be. The lesson I have learned is that as teachers we should deal with issues that our adult students face daily. Two weeks ago, a young transgender youth named Gwen was brutally killed in our Bay Area. If it had not been for my own transformation and openness to talk about sensitive issues in class, we would not have studied, reflected, and written on hate crimes.


Rick Being gay and struggling with my own internalized homophobia, I am very careful about whom I trust. My experience with Maria has made me realize that I am as guilty as anyone about stereotyping and making snap judgements. Had she not approached me to join Project VOICE, I never would have known how brave she was on that day that we first met. Nor would I have known how much we could learn from each other.

Maria One summer day, I asked my students if they ever had changed their mind about something. I then shared how I had decided to participate in the Gay Pride Parade in June. I openly discussed how this



was indeed something I had never in my life imagined I would do. I had never even been close to the parade. This was a turning point for me in my discussing LGBT issues openly in the classroom.

Rick It was a great source of pride for me to walk alongside Maria in her first gay pride parade. Seeing how much she had grown in the few years that I knew her enabled me to see the potential for my own growth as well. Our allies are out there, but sometimes due to our own fear and the unfair judgements we make about people, we may misunderstand their intentions and not see them for who they really are. I now realize that Maria's comment at that workshop reflected her own questioning on these issues. Rather than trying to answer her with compassion and understanding, I responded with fear and anger. Reflecting on all of this now, I see how wrong I was. As hindsight is always 20/20, the question remains as to what I will do the next time this happens to me.

As Maria so aptly points out, teachers need to deal with, rather than gloss over, issues students face daily. It often takes a close ally or a precipitating event to enable us to do so. 

About the Authors

Rick Kappra has been teaching English to speakers of other languages (ESOL) for nearly 20 years. He started as a volunteer teaching refugees and immigrants in Philadelphia. He taught for six years in Japan and briefly in Singapore and Taiwan. He is currently teaching adult ESL at City College of San Francisco, Mission Campus.

Maria Rosales-Urbe is a first generation Nicaraguan San Francisco native. She has been at the Community College of San Francisco for 24 years, where she has taught ESOL, citizenship, Spanish literacy, adult basic education, and GED. For the past three years, Rosales-Urbe has also been working at the Teacher's Resource Center as a resource instructor and as a project director for a grant funded by the Chancellor's Office California Community Colleges. ❖

Race, Class, Gender, and Sexual Orientation in ABE

by Deborah D'Amico

(Excerpted from NCSALL's *Annual Review of Adult Learning and Literacy*, Volume 4, to be published by Erlbaum Publishers this spring. See page 31 for more information.)

In an address to members of the national organization of adult learners, Voice for Adult Literacy United for Education (VALUE), Dr. Tom Sticht stated: "The Adult Education and Literacy System serves the powerless." Although estimates of the number of adults with low literacy in the United States vary, no one denies that these adults are primarily the working poor and public assistance recipients, and are disproportionately represented by people of color and immigrants. Moreover, the majority of adults enrolled in literacy programs are women. Thus, adult basic education (ABE) serves primarily those individuals likely to have had restricted access to opportunity and power, not only because of their socioeconomic class, but also because of the dynamics of racism and sexism in our society. No figures are available on the sexual orientation of literacy learners, but Kerka (2001) reports that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students also present issues that should be of concern to adult educators.

The socially constructed categories of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation not only locate individuals and groups within global, national, and local social structures, but also establish social identities that shape people's experiences and cultures.


The prevalence of poor people, people of color, immigrants, and women in ABE programs, along with growing concern about issues of sexual orientation, situate the work of the field within "interlocking systems of power and oppression" (Tisdell, quoted in Imel, 1995). Social inequality described and experienced along lines of race, gender, and class helps to determine who needs literacy instruction, who gets it, how these learners experience it, and what impact it has on their lives. Moreover, both individuals and policymakers in US society expect literacy to remedy the effects of and ultimately reduce social inequality. At the same time, educators may be mandated to teach in ways that reinforce, rather than transform, differences of class, race, gender, and sexual orientation that affect the life chances of learners. This social context of ABE — along with the identities and social locations of its teachers and learners, the political economy of funding for its programs, and the differential rewards its learners reap from educational achievement — raises concerns for adult educators in the areas of pedagogy, curriculum, and policy.

The Dynamics of Demography in ABE

The dynamics of racism, class inequality, sexism, and homophobia influence the lives of everyone in the United States. As Fine (1997) points out, educational research and popular discourse on inequality read as if racism affects only those in "minority groups." The racism experienced by people of color in US schools, she suggests,

could not exist without the simultaneous privileging and "advantaging" of whites and whiteness by the same educational institutions.

Race, class, and gender affect the power of individuals to successfully negotiate educational institutions and to reap the rewards for having done so. This is reflected in the relative poverty and predominance of people of color among those with low literacy. Gender presents a more complex picture. In k-12 and at the community college and college levels, women appear to do better than men, although sexism is apparent in the predominance of men at graduate levels, not only in such traditionally male fields as engineering, math, and science, but also in traditionally female fields such as adult education. The connections between sexual orientation and literacy, and between sexual orientation and education and employment, are not as well studied. Nor do we have data on the sexual orientation of those participating in literacy programs.

Finally, socioeconomic circumstances remain strong predictors of educational success across race and gender, and educational achievement is a strong predictor of employment success. The latter ensures that individuals with low literacy are more likely to be poor, and, in an economy moving away from industry and toward information, increasingly likely to be so. These dynamics of inequality affect every aspect of adult basic education, from program funding to student retention, to curriculum and pedagogy. 

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- Imel, S. (1995). *Inclusive Adult Learning Environments*. ERIC Digest 162.
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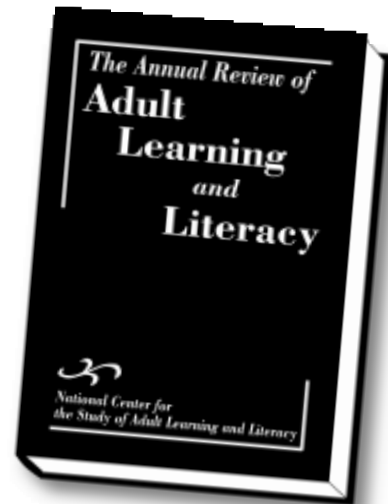
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<http://www.sabes.org/resources/brightideas/vol9/bi93.htm>

<http://www.sabes.org/resources/brightideas/vol9/bi93.pdf> (PDF, 28 p.)

Volume 9, Number 3, of *Bright Ideas*, the journal of the Massachusetts Adult Education Community, (now *Field Notes*), is on gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender issues in adult basic education. It provides a variety of resources for adult basic education educators and students. Included are articles on how to address bias in class, what it is like to be gay in an adult education class, and how to infuse a curriculum with diversity.

<http://www.nelrc.org/changeagent/pdf/issue8.pdf>

The mission of the *Change Agent*, the journal of the New England Literacy Resource Center, is to provide news, issues, ideas, and other teaching resources that inspire and enable adult educators to make civic participation and social justice part of their teaching and learning. Issue 8 is on working together across differences. It includes "articles and activities that

present ways of exploring our many differences along with a few that give examples of approaches to particular issues such as race, class, disabilities, and sexual orientation."

<http://ericacve.org/docgen.asp?tbl=digests&ID=116>

This ERIC digest, "Considering Culture in the Selection of Teaching Approaches for Adults," by Linda Ziegahn, 2001, examines the different dimensions of culture that are relevant to the adult learning context. It explores how cultural values permeate instruction and looks at several approaches that take culture into account.

<http://www.splcenter.org/teachingtolerance/tt-index.html>

Teaching Tolerance is a project of the Southern Poverty Law Foundation. It provides resources and materials for k-12 teachers interested in promoting diversity and equity. While not geared for adult basic education, its resources are well done.

<http://www.ascd.org/readingroom/edlead/0212/nieto.html>

This issue of *Educational Leadership*, Volume 60 Number 4, features an article by Sonia M. Nieto entitled "Profoundly Multicultural Questions." Nieto acknowledges that the "multicultural" aspects of multicultural education tend to overshadow the equity implied in multicultural education, as in "are they learning?" While this article focuses on k-12, the same can be said for adult basic education: How much are the learners worth? Who is teaching the learners? Which classes meet in the basement?

<http://glsen.org>

Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Educational Network is a national organization fighting to end anti-gay

bias in k-12 schools. Many of their resources materials can be adapted to fit adult basic education.

Books

The next volume of NCSALL's *Annual Review of Adult Learning and Literacy*, due out in the fall, 2003, features an article entitled "Race, Class, Gender, and Sexual Orientation in ABE: Power, Pedagogy, and Programs" by Deborah D'Amico. D'Amico presents and supports the argument that adult basic education primarily serves people with limited access to opportunities and power because of socioeconomic class and societal dynamics. She discusses how this raises concerns about pedagogy, curriculum, and policy, and offers adult educators recommendations about addressing these concerns. Look for notices in upcoming issues of *Focus on Basics* and on NCSALL's web site regarding its availability.

Take on the Challenge, by Elizabeth Morrish, Jenny Horsman, and Judy Hofer, is a source book from the Women, Violence, and Adult Education Project described in *Focus on Basics*, Volume 5C. Geared for teachers, it is a practical collection of ideas and activities on how to address the impact of violence on learning. It includes examples from teachers working in GED, native language literacy, ABE, ESOL, welfare-to-work, corrections, and shelter settings. To order it, contact Sabrina Kurtz-Rossi at World Education, 44 Farnsworth Street, Boston, MA 02210; telephone (617) 482-9485, e-mail skurtz@worlded.org. Each book is \$15.00, shipping is an additional \$2.00.



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Focus on Policy

NCSALL's new bi-annual publication that synthesizes and translates research findings related to adult education and literacy, and

explores their implications for policy. The first issue will focus on research on the General Educational Development (GED) credential.

Creating Authentic Materials for the Adult Literacy Classroom: A Handbook for Practitioners

By Erik Jacobson, Sophie Degener, & Victoria Purcell-Gates

Based on the findings of NCSALL's Literacy Practices of Adult Learners study, this book is an introduction to providing literacy instruction based upon the literacy needs and interests learners have outside of the classroom.

Expanding Access to Adult Literacy With Online Distance Education

By Eunice Askov, Jerome Johnston, Leslie Petty, Shannon J. Young

This monograph, funded by the US Department of Education's Office of Vocational and Adult Education, examines the potential of online learning to meet the educational needs of adult learners. It identifies a number of issues central to making distance education succeed in adult education.

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