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101 Nichols House, Appian Way
Cambridge, MA 02138

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Preface

Rutgers University Graduate School of Education hosted *Toward Defining and Improving Quality in Adult Basic Education: Issues and Challenges*, on October 23-24, 2003. Co-sponsored by the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) and Pennsylvania State University's Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy and the Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy, this research conference focused on the challenges of defining what constitutes a quality adult basic and literacy education system. It also examined the ways in which research can inform the development and implementation of quality policy and practice. Recognizing that adult basic education seeks to meet the needs of a wide variety of stakeholders who learn in different contexts, the conference engaged researchers and practitioners with questions related to goals, accountability, and efficacy and efficiency in policy, practice, and research. Seventeen papers and several panel discussions were given by top researchers from around the country.

An edited volume of the conference papers is in preparation, but the book will not be available until 2006. Many individuals, both conference participants and non-attendees, expressed a strong interest in having the information presented in the papers available sooner. Accordingly, NCSALL agreed to provide summaries of 14 of the papers and make them available on their Web site. To see the conference brochure, click <http://www.gse.rutgers.edu/conted/20thRise.pdf>.

These summaries were written by Lisa Soricone, for NCSALL.

Filling in the “Black Box” of Family Literacy: Implications of Research for Practice and Policy

Eunice N. Askov, Cathy Kassab, Elisabeth L. Grinder, Ladislaus M. Semali, Drucilla Weirauch,
Eugenio Longoria Saenz, and Barbara Van Horn

Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy, Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy,
The Pennsylvania State University

As Askov et al. point out, family literacy has been described as a “black box,” since the field lacks research-based exemplary practices for the components of family literacy, and no true program model exists. The authors describe challenges in building a research-based model for improving quality in family literacy and report on research aimed at identifying exemplary practices.

As the authors point out, certain aspects of the adult education component of family literacy are not well understood; specifically, the factors that lead to greater participation, as well as the impact of participation in the adult education component on children and parents. To address this gap, research was conducted on the database of the Pennsylvania Statewide Evaluation of Family Literacy in order to examine the effects of participation in adult education and parenting education. Results from these analyses indicate that adult learners who accumulate between 50 and 99 hours of adult education within a single 12-month period perform better on the TABE reading test, while at least 75 hours are needed to perform better on the TABE mathematics post-test. At least 50 hours of adult education instruction appear to be needed for ESL participants, at least for those continuing in the next program year. Intensity of instruction was consistently more important than total number of hours accumulated in adult education. Results suggest that “greater efforts, such as through distance education, are needed to increase duration and intensity of participation for groups with competing demands, such as those who are employed or single parents or have greater number of children in the program.” With respect to the impact of participation in adult education on children, researchers found that intensity of participation in adult education had a significant effect on most of the development skills measured by standardized tests, though results did not indicate the pathway by which these improvements occur.

The next inquiry discussed concerned dynamics in the classroom that might encourage or discourage continued participation. The authors employed an observational instrument based on Beder and Medina’s (2001) typology of classroom instruction as being of two basic types: discrete skills (decontextualized, contextualized, or disjointed) and making-meaning. The authors describe contrasting classrooms to demonstrate how the typology can be used as a framework for assessing quality of classroom instruction, leading to more meaningful instruction as a way to encourage more sustained participation by adult learners.

As the authors note, parent-child interaction time is “the heart and soul” of family literacy programs, yet its impact is difficult to quantify since it is implemented differently across programs. Through interviews and written program descriptions, researchers conducted a qualitative study in 24 sites of 19 programs in Pennsylvania on the purpose of interactive literacy. Program comments focused primarily on enhancing parenting skills, increasing parents’ understanding of child development and learning, and modeling appropriate behavior for their children. Programs could connect their activities to an area of literacy development (e.g. vocabulary), but specific connections to reading research were seldom made by programs. Researchers concluded that programs would benefit from a universal definition of interactive

literacy and examples of research-based exemplary practices, which would lead to better integration of language and literacy in this component of family literacy. Researchers also noted the need to improve collaboration with elementary schools to better address the interactive literacy needs of school-age children.

The final research project discussed by Askov et al. examined the Family and Child Education (FACE) program. Initiated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs and Office of Indian Education Programs and implemented in 14 states, the FACE is frequently referenced as a successful program in the integration of services for parents and children. Developing a framework based on previous research, researchers identified five key variables that might serve as predictors of critical success factors of high performance: 1) having an established curriculum (e.g., Equipped for the Future); 2) following a well known implementation structure; 3) establishing quality control measures; 4) providing a strong funding support; and 5) having efficient organizational communication. These factors will be tested in a field experimental study to see if they qualify empirically as predictors of critical success factors of high performance.

The authors conclude that model building will advance the field of family literacy so it is less *ad hoc* and more defined. Providers must be sensitive to the needs of their communities but they also need implementation “guideposts” and research-based exemplary practices in order to deliver high quality programs.

Quality Instruction in Adult Literacy Education

Hal Beder

Rutgers University

According to Beder, before we think about how quality is measured, we should consider the values that determine how we define quality and how these values differ for different approaches to adult literacy education. In this paper, he examines conceptions of quality in three different approaches to adult literacy education: basic skills literacy, emancipatory literacy, and functional literacy.

A basic skills approach to literacy focuses on teaching a set of discrete reading, writing, and numeracy skills (e.g., phonics, reading comprehension, vocabulary, spelling, and grammar) that “become progressively more advanced as the learner progresses.” Once students have mastered these skills, it is assumed that they will be “literate” and that their literacy will generalize across contexts. The prevalence of basic skills instruction is supported by the socialization of teachers and students in their respective roles and by the U.S. adult education system that emphasizes the acquisition of basic skills and mandates accountability standards that include tested learning gain, most commonly through the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE). As Beder points out, “quality” in this approach is defined as “learning the skills that constitute basic skills as quickly and efficiently as possible.” Efficiency is important since many learners can take part in only a limited number of hours of classes to help them meet their goals. Moreover, the learning gain accountability requirement mandated by the Workforce Investment Act is measured by the number of levels that learners progress in a year. Thus, programs score better on accountability measures if learners progress more quickly.

The second approach discussed by Beder is emancipatory literacy, or critical pedagogy, advocated by the Brazilian theorist, Paulo Freire. In this approach, literacy acquisition encompasses exploration of the social and political dimensions of learners’ experience. The objective in this approach is “conscientization” or becoming critically aware of social, political, economic, and historical forces that shape oppression and, ultimately, social transformation. Quality in this approach requires meeting four standards. First, learners must learn to code and decode print. Second, the processes involved in learning must be collective and democratic. Third, the problems that serve as the basis for discussion and literacy learning must come from the group and it must “own” the process. Fourth, conscientization and social action must result from the learning experience. Emancipatory literacy is relatively rare in the U.S., in part because most programs are publicly funded and the government is resistant to funding programs with a strong political agenda. Moreover, according to its proponents, emancipatory literacy should be carried out by the oppressed themselves and the community-based agencies that represent them—not the government. In this approach, outcomes cannot be determined before the learning process begins, so programs using it cannot be accountable in the ways typically required by the government.

The third approach discussed is functional literacy, which “broadens the concept of basic skills literacy to include instruction in the competencies that are deemed necessary for adults’ success in American society.” Beder briefly describes three major functional literacy movements in the U.S. since the 1970s: the Adult Performance Level Project (APL), the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS), and Equipped for the Future (EFF). The APL project aimed at development of general knowledge areas: consumer economics, occupational knowledge, community resources, health, and government and law. CASAS focuses on nine

competency areas: basic communication, consumer economics, community resources, health, employment, government and law, computation, learning to learn, and independent living. EFF is centered on four purposes for learning: access, voice, action and a bridge to the future. While the three systems differ somewhat in their definitions of functional competency, all aim beyond the development of reading, writing, and math skills toward the goal of adults' capacity to function more effectively within society.

Beder concludes that each of the three approaches to adult literacy education presented here has its strengths and weaknesses. The choice of approach may not be so important in our current accountability context, as long as learners make gains on tests, complete high school, further their education, and experience employment gains, as legislation now demands.

Volunteer One-to-One Tutoring: Critical Factors in Providing Quality Instruction

Alisa Belzer

Rutgers University

In this paper, Belzer draws attention to several areas of volunteer tutoring that are useful in defining quality in this aspect of adult basic education. As Belzer points out, there is a wide range of program contexts and approaches to service provision in volunteer-based programs. Programs vary widely on their perspectives pertaining to theories of literacy, reading and writing instructional theory, and adult learning theory.

As Belzer notes, research has tended to focus on dialogue patterns between tutors and learners, ways in which tutors scaffold and learners construct knowledge through self-explanation, and the range of “moves” made by tutors. Critiques of volunteer tutors have often blamed tutors’ inadequacies on tutor training, with the assumption that if tutor training were better, tutoring would be better. Yet, as Belzer points out, we don’t really know what tutors should be trained to do, since there may be multiple ways to achieve the same results in training. Belzer adds that the “complex interrelationship between a...knowledge base for teaching, the training and experience of teachers, educational contexts, and the expectations and experiences of learners is not well understood in ABE.”

Belzer next describes the findings of research designed to address this gap in understanding. Four tutoring programs were selected and analyzed through participant observations in tutor training; interviews with staff and tutor-learner pairs; and analysis of tutoring session transcripts. The research focused on four elements: program features, tutor training, what gets done in tutoring sessions, and what reading instruction looks like. Researchers noted differences among programs, such as whether program staff were located at the same site where tutoring took place, which could impact the support that staff could provide to tutors. In addition, programs differed on when tutors and students were matched, either during or after training, and the types of materials used in training. While differences in tutor training content tended to be subtle, Belzer does call attention to elements not consistently covered in training: why some adult do not learn to read, the writing process, the qualities of a good tutor, comprehension, using authentic materials, oral reading strategies, learning logs and portfolios, what to do at the first meeting, and problem solving. The topics of math, the use of technology for instruction, and what to do when students encounter words they do not recognize or cannot spell were not covered in any of the programs. Choices about what to cover reflect program beliefs about how adults learn, the purposes of literacy, and best practices for tutoring. With respect to what actually happens in tutoring, Belzer found that almost all pairs were reading connected texts and that students often read aloud to their tutors. There was little isolated skills practice on word attack and recognition. Reading materials were chosen by the tutor, generally with the interests and needs of the students in mind, and authentic materials were used frequently. She also found several things lacking in tutoring sessions: work on comprehension, discussion, writing, and math instruction. Tutors depended on their own ideas and experience more than their training to help students progress and meet their goals.

Belzer concludes that these data reflect great successes and highlight concerns about the feasibility of effective volunteer-based instruction. While more research is needed to understand these issues, the study provides a good point for launching discussions about quality in volunteer tutor-based literacy instruction.

Professional Development and Evidence-Based Practice in Adult Education

Mary Beth Bingman

Center for Literacy Studies – University of Tennessee

and

Cristine Smith

World Education/NCSALL

In this (draft) paper, Bingman and Smith explore the relationship of professional development to evidence-based practice in adult education. The authors begin by discussing the meaning of evidence-based practice, defining it as the integration of professional wisdom and empirical evidence in decision-making about the delivery of instruction. One way of achieving such integration involves building the capacity of teachers to access, understand, judge, and adapt research findings to instruction in their classes. As the authors point out, teachers may have several different orientations toward research, depending on their particular situation. Teachers may thus be “questioners” (asking why a particular strategy should be adopted and what evidence supports it), “adopters” (accessing, understanding, judging and using research to change their practice), “proactive consumers” (proactively seeking research evidence and generating new knowledge to share with others), and “producers” (becoming researchers in their own classroom).

Bingman and Smith note the importance of professional development, especially in-service, for promoting evidence-based practice in adult education. They then outline what current research, largely from K–12, indicates are important aspects of effective professional development. Research indicates that teachers who attend more hours of professional development are more likely to show change in their practice. In addition to being of longer duration, professional development should make a strong connection between what teachers learn and what happens in their own work context. Professional development should include a strong emphasis on analysis and reflection, rather than just the demonstration of techniques. It should help teachers make their implicit knowledge about teaching explicit and focus on helping teachers to study their students’ thinking, not just try new techniques. Professional development should include a variety of activities, such as presentation of theory, demonstration, practice, feedback, and classroom application. Professional development should encourage teachers from the same workplace to participate together and ensure that what teachers learn coincides with program and district priorities. Finally, the authors note that research suggests that “higher quality professional development (characterized by good facilitation and group dynamics, and by flexible adaptation of the...design to the needs of participants)” may contribute to more change among participating teachers.

Although there is relatively little research on professional development that helps teachers to become consumers of research, Bingman and Smith note some evidence that indicates that collaboration between teachers and researchers both improves the utilization of research and allows teachers to become better consumers of research. The authors also point out that professional development models in which teachers read research and conduct their own research projects lead to greater understanding of research. Examples of professional development that promote teachers’ use of research include study circles, teaching materials that involve students in learning about research findings, practitioner research, and mentor teacher groups.

Bingman and Smith close by noting a number of working and program conditions, as well as policies, that support teachers' application of evidence-based practice. The authors note research that indicates that teachers were more likely to change as a result of participation in professional development if they: worked more hours in their teaching jobs; received benefits, paid release time for professional development, and paid prep time in their jobs; had more opportunities for sharing ideas with their colleagues; had flexibility to change curricula; and had a voice in decision-making in their programs. Policies that can support evidence-based practice include supporting teachers with adequate pay and benefits to maintain stability in the teaching force; on-going access to professional development that focuses on research and evidence; and an emphasis at the state and program levels on a culture of research consumerism and continuous improvement. Finally, the authors call for future research to understand what contributes to teacher quality in adult basic education and to address the need for reducing turnover among adult educators.

Supporting the Persistence of Adult Basic Education Students

John P. Comings

Harvard Graduate School of Education

and

Sondra Cuban

Seattle University

This (draft) paper discusses research undertaken by the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) aimed at understanding the issue of persistence in adult basic education. The authors define persistence as “adults staying in programs for as long as they can, engaging in self-directed study or distance education when they must stop attending program services, and returning to program services as soon as the demands of their lives allow.”

As background for their work, NCSALL researchers drew from a series of literature reviews that define persistence as being supported by motivation and constrained by a number of barriers, including personal, situational, and institutional factors. The first phase of NCSALL’s study involved interviews with 150 adult learners in pre-GED classes and used a “force-field analysis” to understand the factors that promote and inhibit persistence. Findings suggested that immigrants, those over the age of 30, and parents of teenage or grown children are more likely to persist. In addition, prior nonschool learning experience, especially self-study around basic skills or GED preparation, may be related to persistence. The study also found that a number of factors (gender, ethnicity, employment status, number of children, educational background of parents or guardians, and even prior schooling experiences) did not influence persistence.

As influences on their persistence, students interviewed noted four types of positive forces (relationships, goals, teacher and students, and self-determination), as well as three types of negative forces (life demands, relationships, and poor self-determination).

While these forces did not actually predict persistence, they did provide insight to the NCSALL researchers, leading them to suggest four supports to persistence: 1) the establishment of a goal by the student; 2) self-efficacy (a feeling that students could achieve their goals); 3) management of the positive and negative forces that help and hinder persistence; and 4) progress toward reaching a goal.

In the second phase of NCSALL’s persistence study, researchers observed ten library literacy programs in New York, North Carolina and California that were making efforts to improve persistence. The study found that most students’ persistence was affected by factors that were personal (related to the student) or environmental (related to the student’s life). Researchers acknowledged that ABE programs do not have the resources to address these factors but identified five different pathways for program participation that are determined by personal and environmental factors. Individual students may change pathways over time, depending on their circumstances. These pathways, described below, can serve as guidelines to help programs broaden the ways they help students to persist.

Long-term students participate regularly over a long period and see education as an end in itself. Improvements in formal instruction and greater opportunities for informal instruction might improve this group’s persistence. *Mandatory* students must attend a program because they are required to do so by public assistance or a law enforcement agency. Their persistence might

improve if intake and orientation can help these students to see learning as something they choose to do. *Short-term* students participate intensively for a short period in order to accomplish a specific goal. These learners may stay long enough to meet their goal or move on to a more suitable program. ABE programs might help to prepare these students for such transitions. *Try-out* students have barriers to persistence that are insurmountable and goals not yet clear enough to sustain motivation. Consequently, they leave neither achieving their goals nor transferring to another program. To help this group, programs would need to develop a way to identify them, counsel them to delay entry and help them design a plan to facilitate their participation at a later point in time. *Intermittent* students move in and out of programs. They may have broad or specific goals that require a longer period of engagement to be achieved, but personal and environmental factors limit their ability to attend programs regularly. To help this group, programs would need to redefine participation as a connection to a program and redesign services to provide connected episodes of participation that use a multiplicity of learning resources.

Based on the literature reviews and their research, Comings and Cuban offer suggestions on ways programs can help students address barriers. These include counseling to identify barriers and supports and connect with appropriate resources, offering a range of learning opportunities that can accommodate different pathways of persistence, and changes in accountability measures to account for outcomes corresponding to the five pathways. The authors conclude with suggestions pertaining to three phases of program participation—entering, participation and re-engaging in learning: intake and orientation processes that help students clarify a goal(s) and develop a learning plan for instruction and support services; instruction that fits with participation patterns and support services that meet individual needs (e.g., classes, tutoring, peer learning groups, self-study); and procedures for staying in contact with students not attending classes and re-engaging them in services. Finally, the authors note the need for the third phase of their research to test the impact of their suggested strategies on learner persistence and attainment of goals.

Accountability and Program Quality: The Third Wave

Larry Condelli

American Institutes for Research

This paper explores the relationship between program quality and accountability in the context of federal efforts to promote accountability in adult education programs. Condelli focuses on three waves of such efforts that have occurred over the last decade. He notes the approach toward accountability of each wave, evaluates the effects on program quality, and concludes with observations on how the accountability process can be improved to strengthen the link between accountability and quality.

To begin, Condelli draws on research to offer a framework for evaluating accountability systems. All accountability systems, he points out, have four essential characteristics: an underlying set of *goals*; a common set of *measures* that reflect goals and that are reported and aggregated; *performance* standards tied to measures, which set a target level of performance to be achieved by programs; and *sanctions or rewards* that are tied to performance. For successful implementation, accountability systems require sufficient resources to support data collection, “buy-in” and acceptance from local programs, and technical assistance to local programs on meeting requirements.

As Condelli notes, accountability can focus on outcomes and/or processes. Outcome-based systems, such as those of recent trends in the U.S., pay little attention to *how* programs achieve outcomes and may thus only indirectly affect quality. Whether good outcomes actually reflect program quality depends on how the four characteristics of an accountability system are implemented. Condelli points out that accountability systems are most likely to affect program quality positively if: 1) stakeholders agree on goals that accurately articulate program purposes; 2) measures reflect these goals and are closely tied to the services programs provide; 3) performance standards are realistic; and 4) sanctions and rewards for performance are not excessive.

Condelli then goes on to discuss three recent waves in federal policy related to accountability in adult education. The first such wave was reflected in the National Literacy Act of 1991, which required that states develop “indicators of program quality” and use them “to judge the success of [local] programs” to assess program quality. The indicators covered student outcomes and program processes in seven areas: educational gains, recruitment, retention, support services, staff development, curriculum and instruction, and program planning. While this approach included goals, measures and performance standards were not universally set and the approach lacked a system of rewards and sanctions. Measures were not consistently collected and implementation was voluntary. Positive aspects of this approach included its “emphasis on program processes, state and local flexibility, wide acceptance and lack of excessive sanctions.”

It is difficult to determine, however, whether the approach was successful in improving adult education program quality. The approach ultimately failed because of its voluntary nature, lack of a uniform set of measures or standards, lack of rewards or sanctions and insufficient attention paid on measuring outcomes in a climate of increasing accountability.

The second accountability wave was created by the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA), which established the first true accountability system for adult education programs. WIA required a set of measures and performance standards in the areas of educational gain, attainment of a secondary credential or equivalent certification, advancement to further education and

training, and employment. WIA tied rewards and incentives to the standards, through monetary awards to states exceeding standards and by requiring states to consider program performance in awarding grants. Through WIA, the National Reporting System (NRS) was established “to implement the accountability requirements by defining measures, methods and reporting procedures and to establish a system of training and technical assistance to states to implement the system.”

The NRS included clear goals and outcome-based, quantitative measures that had a direct relationship to goals, and were likely to reflect program performance, provide information to help inform decisions, and be easily understood. In addition it offered rewards for meeting standards, but no sanctioning. The system was designed to affect program quality but, as an outcome-based system, could only do so indirectly, since it included no direct measures of program processes or procedures to examine quality directly. The system has had a number of effects on the adult education system, such as a greater focus on individual student needs and achievements, and the creation of data that can be used by states to demonstrate the effects and value of adult education. This data can also be used by programs for management and improvement. However, as the author notes, it is very difficult to determine what impact these changes have had on program quality.

With respect to the “third wave,” or the reauthorization of adult education programs under WIA, Condelli points out a number of changes that might impact the field. Among these changes is the requirement that states set performance standards for all local programs and establish performance-based rewards and sanctions. In addition, states will be required to conduct annual reviews of programs, in part to ensure that they are providing quality instruction in reading, writing, speaking, and math, based on “scientific research.” Such a focus will likely have a more direct influence on program quality.

In closing, Condelli offers a number of suggestions for the accountability system to have a greater impact on program quality. First, state performance standards should be set appropriately, neither too high nor too low. Second, states should use their opportunity to incorporate additional measures to reflect program and policy goals, and to allow for expansion of the purposes of adult education. As states will need to set criteria for what constitutes a quality program, they may consider adopting an accreditation program, as is used in higher education, which would establish a uniform, more efficient system of judging program quality. Regarding assessment, and as an alternative to developing new assessments aligned with standards, Condelli suggests adoption of learner accreditation, whereby “learners can obtain credit and a credential for work completed, based on a set of performance indicators and accepted standards of learning.” Such innovative approaches, as well as continued provision of resources and support, will be necessary if accountability in adult education is to lead to improvements in program quality.

Learning to Read as a Discourse Process

James Paul Gee

University of Wisconsin-Madison

In this paper, Gee discusses learning to read as a cultural process. The author points out that some things, like our native language, can be learned through a “natural” process that is biologically supported, whereas other things, such as physics or math, are best learned through overt instruction. To such natural and instructed learning processes, Gee adds a third type, “cultural processes.” Through such processes, learning often takes place as “masters” within a cultural group model behavior and then provide feedback to learners. Texts or other artifacts that provide useful information are made available to the learner, and learners recognize that masters have a “certain socially significant identity” that learners seek to acquire as members of the larger cultural group.

This type of learning takes place among groups, such as people who play computer and video games, who do not constitute a “culture” but do constitute what Gee refers to as a “Discourse.” Gee explains that a Discourse consists of “ways of acting, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, and using various sorts of objects, tools, artifacts, and technologies that allow a group of people to enact and recognize specific socially significant identities.” As an example, Gee refers to computer game players who learn the Discourse of gaming, learning how to act like a gamer and recognize other gamers.

Gee contends that, while learning to read may be turned into an instructed process, it works best as a Discourse or cultural process. To explain this, he points to research on reading difficulties in young children that shows a connection between early language abilities and later success in reading in school. Gee argues that almost all children have “impressive language abilities,” but that what differentiates those who succeed from those who fail in school is possession, or lack of, “specific verbal abilities tied to specific school-based practices and school-based genres of oral and written language.” It is not that poor readers do poorly because they received poor instruction but that they were not inducted at home or at school into the types of practices that allow people to acquire academic or school-based forms of language. As Gee points out, “school requires...forms or styles of language that are different from, and in some respects, more complex than, everyday vernacular oral language used in informal face-to-face conversations.” Just as the text accompanying a computer game makes little sense if one has no experience with the game, academic language is neither clear nor meaningful if one has no experience to which it can be attached. Thus, for Gee, the debate should not be about using phonics to teach reading but should instead be focused on how every learner can learn to read by way of a Discourse process.

Similarly, Gee contends, when adults learn to read “the learning process must be connected to some literate Discourse (culture) that they want or need to become a member of.” The key with adults is to find the Discourses that they really can and want to enter and within which they will function well and be able to fulfill their interests and desires. Gee concludes that focusing on instruction that does not allow for connections to identities and Discourses ultimately cuts off “the engine that drives learning.”

The Forgotten R: Why Adult Educators Should Care about Writing Instruction

Marilyn K. Gillespie

SRI International

In adult literacy, the focus has been on reading, while writing has remained much less visible. In this paper, Gillespie discusses why the adult education system should pay more attention to the teaching of writing and suggests ways through which the field can improve the quality of writing instruction within the adult education system.

To begin, Gillespie points out a number of reasons why educators should care about teaching writing in adult education classrooms. First, she notes the importance of writing as a tool to facilitate learning to read, specifically phonemic awareness, understanding phonics and vocabulary development, as well as comprehension and recall of texts. Second, writing serves as a tool for thinking and lifelong learning, since the permanence of written text allows writers to step back and read their ideas and to rethink and revise them over time. Third, writing is a tool that we use frequently in everyday life (in making lists, sketching out plans, writing letters and e-mails, and writing poetry or keeping journals), and technological change has only increased the demand for writing. Fourth, writing is important to the success of learners who move into post-secondary education, which may impact adult learners' potential to qualify for jobs that pay a living wage. Moreover, once learners are on the job, writing skills may help them to move into better jobs, as the amount and types of writing used in the workplace keep growing. Finally, for many adult learners, writing and sharing their writing play a role in shaping their sense of themselves as actors in the world and as lifelong learners. As one learner, quoted on what she learned from a writing class, put it, "I learned that I matter."

Gillespie offers a number of suggestions for practice and policy to help improve the quality of writing instruction. First, she recommends supporting "knowledge-centered learning environments by basing instruction on research about how people learn to write and develop as writers." Second, Gillespie suggests creating "learner-centered classroom environments by basing instruction on learners' real world purposes for writing and by building on what students already know." Third, Gillespie recommends developing "community centered writing environments that acknowledge that writing is influenced in fundamental ways by the context in which it takes place." Thus, teachers should be encouraged to involve learners in a "collaborative writing process that brings students' lived experiences into the classroom." Fourth, she recommends encouraging "assessment-centered learning environments where students as well as teachers monitor and evaluate their own progress."

With respect to policy, Gillespie calls on the field to advocate for assessments linked to strong research-based content standards and curriculum frameworks and notes the need for better assessments of writing that go beyond multiple choice tests that measure "language arts" development. Second, she advocates developing and refining content standards or curriculum frameworks for writing to help ensure that the content of writing instruction takes into account both the latest research on writing instruction and a set of purposes for writing agreed upon by key stakeholders. Third, she recommends helping teachers to gain access to research and examples of what good writing instruction looks like in practice. Finally, she calls for funding research on how writing develops in adulthood to better understand how adult education learners are different from other learners and to clarify the kinds of writing challenges faced by learners who move on to postsecondary education, as well as how best to prepare them.

Tales from the Field: The Struggles and Challenges of Conducting Ethical and Quality Research in the Field of Adult Literacy

Daphne Greenberg
Georgia State University

Drawing on her own experience of conducting research on word reading and adults with low word reading skills, Greenberg discusses the realities and challenges of conducting empirical research in the field of adult literacy. To begin, the author notes several issues to be considered prior to conducting empirical studies. First, she points out the importance of choosing appropriate measures, calling into question the use of grade levels as classifications for adult readers, since the levels are based on child development. Second, she notes a number of challenges related to testing, including selection of tests that can provide useful information to both researchers and practitioners and the importance of looking at multiple test scores before making decisions about adult learners. In addition, she notes the necessity to examine all test questions before administering tests to students, since some test items may be inappropriate for adult learners. Greenberg also notes the difficulty of describing ESL learners' English reading skills without knowing their literacy skills in their native language—a situation that is especially difficult when no tests exist for students' native languages. Finally, Greenberg notes the need to obtain truly informed consent, pointing out that special efforts must be made to ensure that adult literacy learners actually do understand what they are agreeing to when taking part in studies.

Next, Greenberg addresses a number of implementation issues related to conducting research in adult literacy. She notes the importance of involving multiple stakeholders in decision-making about research projects; that is, including teachers, as well as administrators in order to avoid problems such as a program making unrealistic promises or program staff feeling threatened by research activities. Another issue that researchers may confront is space. Mediocre space that is deemed acceptable for a program may impede the research process, and a researcher's refusal to use a particular space can be misinterpreted and create a rift between researcher and practitioner.

In her discussion, Greenberg raises a number of other ethical issues and challenges that can arise in the context of adult literacy programs. These include questions over book selection and whether, for example, teachers should avoid choosing texts that contain curses or scenes of rape/incest/abuse for class activities. She also points out the importance of making clear what learner participation in a study means and addressing any unspoken assumptions learners might have about a university administered class.

Greenberg discusses how dilemmas can arise when researchers balance, as they must, their need to collect data with the complexities of adult realities, such as the need to bring children to class because of a lack of daycare, or students openly contemplating suicide. Greenberg poses an interesting question: when students raise such sensitive issues is it moral not to discuss them? How, she asks, can researchers balance morality and empiricism?

Greenberg closes by calling for researchers to recognize that they may have more “power” than teachers do and to therefore take responsibility for creating good relations between themselves and teachers. In addition, researchers need to take learners' voices into account to ensure that information gleaned from research is pertinent to the day-to-day classroom life of an adult literacy learner. Finally, she notes the need for valuing different approaches to research that are suited to answering different types of specific research questions.

Reconceptualizing Adult Basic Education and the Digital Divide

Elisabeth Hayes

University of Wisconsin-Madison

In this paper, Hayes looks at the integration of digital technologies into adult basic education. She notes that the use of technology in ABE has typically occurred within existing instructional practices, addressing only limited forms of digital literacies, such as computerized workbooks, plus development of skills in word processing and spreadsheet applications. Hayes argues that “to enhance the quality of ABE, literacy educators and scholars should begin to think more expansively about the nature of new technologies, the kinds of literacies inherent in such technologies, and their implications for literacy learning and teaching.”

As Hayes points out, access to technologies does not guarantee that they will be used in meaningful or empowering ways. Drawing on relevant research, she calls for a shift toward the goal of social inclusion through technology, moving from the acquisition of technical skills to “address how digital technologies enable people and groups to engage in particular social practices.” With an emphasis on individualized instruction and frequent limitations of outdated and inadequate technological tools, Hayes contends, ABE instruction tends to reinforce, rather than bridge, a digital divide.

Drawing on sociocultural perspectives on literacy, Hayes explores the multiple skills and types of digital literacies that can be developed through computer gaming. Using specific examples from *The Rise of Nations (RoN)*, a game in which players build civilizations, Hayes highlights processes that demonstrate the potential of technology to develop literacies among ABE students that go beyond basic computer use. For instance, she points out how games such as *RoN* combine modes of images and text that require a player to make sense of what they see and proactively navigate the game. The game experience can thus develop abilities to identify patterns and relationships among elements, to move in nonlinear fashion within and across texts, and to understand the strengths and limitations of diverse modes of meaning. Moreover, gaming requires a player to develop an understanding of the context in which they must make sense of the “texts” they encounter, a process which is achieved through instruction embedded within the game. In addition, games such as *RoN* encourage the development of critical literacies as players come to understand and reflect on design principles underlying the game and how they relate to play. As Hayes points out, such a reflective process can help learners to analyze broader social and political forces that affect common practices and communities. Finally, playing *RoN* involves social practices, not just individual play, as players play multiplayer games, share strategies and experiences, and take on identities within the gaming community. A similar process to extend learning beyond the classroom could be developed in ABE through opportunities for learners to explore and connect with groups around issues of interest.

In conclusion, Hayes offers three recommendations for policy and practice. First, she suggests more expansive goals for digital literacy learning in ABE, moving beyond the mere use of word processing or spreadsheets to higher order knowledge and abilities. Second, she calls for a reallocation of resources to increase investments in professional development around the use of digital technologies in order to promote more creative and sophisticated ways of using technological resources. Finally, Hayes recommends a greater emphasis on learning by engagement in social practices, both in and out of school. Such an approach requires a move away from individualized “skill and drill” in the classroom and would enable learners to use digital technologies “to engage in actual social practices that help them achieve meaningful goals.”

Giving Literacy Away, Again: New Concepts of Promising Practice

Stephen Reder

Portland State University

In this paper, Reder contrasts the two major routes to adult literacy development: “bringing people to literacy” or “bringing literacy to people.” He stresses that, while much attention has been given to doing the former, new program development is needed to better achieve the latter. Bringing literacy to people, or “giving literacy away,” refers to an approach that attempts to “support literacy development directly within the settings and contexts and with the materials of the learners as opposed to the settings, context and materials of program providers or ‘sponsors.’” This approach can offer new modes of supporting adult literacy development, in addition to new ways to expand and increase the quality of existing programs. Reder notes three ways of “giving literacy away”: 1) using authentic literacy materials and practices in the adult education classroom; 2) adding the use of written materials and the learning of literacy to existing social practices; and 3) building the capacity of “ethnopedagogical practices” for literacy; that is, pedagogical practices that are embedded in particular cultural and belief systems.

As Reder points out, ethnopedagogy may be reflected in self-directed learning, through which adults work on their own to improve their literacy proficiencies. He describes significant findings of the Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning (LSAL) related to self-study. Self-study emerged as an important means for adults to work on their own to prepare for the GED or improve reading, writing, or math skills. Findings suggest that it occurs widely among adults who participate in programs, as well as those who do not. Use of self-study does not appear to be related to literacy proficiency, as individuals with relatively weak skills are just as likely to engage in self-study as those with stronger skills. For some adults, self-study precedes instruction, while for others it follows, or occurs simultaneously, with instruction. Generally, self-study appears to bridge between periods of program participation and to facilitate persistence in learning. Self-study appears to be at least as strongly related to GED attainment as program participation. Among the population included in the study, more individuals engage in self-study than in programs, and the GED acquisition rate is higher for self-study than for program participation.

Reder’s findings have several implications for adult literacy education. The apparent prevalence of self-study suggests a broadening of the conception and design of adult literacy programs to support self study as well as provide classes. Doing so would allow adult literacy programs to serve more learners, attract new learners to classes, and increase the overall persistence of adult literacy learning. The LSAL findings also imply the need for a broader conception of the adult literacy learner to one who chooses among a range of literacy development strategies and resources, including self-study, attending classes, working with a tutor or mentor, etc. Differing modes of learning, life circumstances and accessibility of learning resources all shape learner choices. Programs need to expand services to support learning among adults engaged in self-study as well as classes. An expanded focus on self-study will require new program designs but, as Reder points out, many existing materials and services (e.g., tutors, mentors) may be used with the new purpose of supporting self-study. He further notes that an important step in supporting self-study is mapping of types of learners (based on learning goals and life circumstance, for example), skill development needs, and individually appropriate resources for supporting learning. Moreover, self-study should be seen as a continuum rather than a “polarized alternative” to attending classes.

An increased emphasis on self-study will require collaboration among adult literacy education providers, tutoring programs, libraries, and community-based organizations. Collaboration must be “learner centered,” mapping learning resources to the individual learners’ characteristics, goals, skill needs, and desired modes of learning. This approach would promote continuity and persistence of learning from the learners’ perspective and increase program retention from the perspective of the broadened adult literacy education system. As an example, Reder describes the Learner Web, currently being developed and studied as a model of such learner-centered collaboration in Oregon. As Reder concludes, “efforts to facilitate self-study, when appropriately implemented, will be leveraging important ethnopedagogical practices in adult literacy and thereby giving literacy away and increasing the capacity and quality of the adult literacy education system.”

The EMPower Project: Connecting Curriculum Development and Research

Mary Jane Schmitt and Martha Merson

Technical Education Research Centers (TERC) (Cambridge, MA)

This (draft) paper describes Extending Mathematical Power (EMPower), an instructional materials development project that aims to extend recent K–12 mathematics reform to adult basic education programs. The EMPower team has, the authors explain, created a curriculum that “fosters a pedagogy of learning for understanding; embeds teacher support throughout; and has a structure that is transformative yet realistic for existing adult education classrooms.” As Schmitt and Merson point out, EMPower was conceived as a multi-dimensional intervention, combining curriculum development, research, and professional development.

The authors describe the role that research has played in EMPower, beginning during the lesson drafting stage. For instance, prior research suggested categories of algebraic reasoning activity that were used in the design of curriculum units, such as “Seeking Patterns, Building Rules” in which students build models and use various representations to express a generalized pattern. During this phase of the development process, the authors noted the paucity of research pertaining specifically to adults’ acquisition of new mathematical concepts. Thus, the piloting and field-testing stages of the project involved research, not only on teachers’ and students’ reactions to the curriculum to guide revisions, but also on adults’ mathematical understandings and skills.

Next, the authors discuss how professional development was integrated into the project. The team began by assessing the current state of practice in mathematics instruction, which they found was largely based on individualized instruction and repeated practice of procedures outlined in workbooks, which, the authors and others cited contend, discourages intuitive approaches and the development of a personal mathematics that can be applied across contexts. The EMPower curriculum thus requires a number of changes from current practice. The first is a shift in classroom culture “from individualized silence to math talk,” or communication about problem solving and strategies. A second change is that skills in geometry, measurement, data, and algebra are infused in all books and taught to students at all skill levels. To illustrate the EMPower approach, the authors include some examples of activities and student work in a unit on algebraic thinking that encourages students to seek patterns and articulate relationships between quantities. Third, the curriculum itself is a vehicle for professional development. As Schmitt and Merson phrase it, “when curriculum supports teacher development, it assumes that teachers will benefit from ideas for how to lead mathematics discussions, how to respond to learners’ questions, and what to look for when students are working in small groups on investigations.”

In conclusion, the authors provide recommendations for policy and research. First, they call for leaders to bring numeracy to the forefront of legislation and include numeracy as part of what is needed for adults to succeed. Second, while acknowledging the lack of research on adults’ mathematics development, Schmitt and Merson recommend that research on mathematics be undertaken simultaneously with curriculum development and testing by teachers. This approach allows teachers to be partners in research and the curriculum to serve as a tool for sharing research among teachers. Finally, the authors note the essential role of professional development in reform curricula such as EMPower since it requires profound change that challenges our thinking about what math we teach, as well as when and how we teach it.

Equipped for the Future and Standards-Based Educational Improvement: Keeping Our Eyes on the Prize

Sondra G. Stein

National Institute for Literacy

In this paper, Stein draws on the experience of developing Equipped for the Future (EFF) to examine the premise behind standards-based reform as an approach to educational improvement, and the conditions under which standards-based reform can be a “vehicle for focusing educational institutions on achieving higher levels of learning for students rather than a vehicle for simply reengineering schools for greater efficiency.” As an organizing framework, the author focuses on three key aspects of standards-based reform that determine whether such reforms can help support sustained improvement in practice: the standards themselves, and the extent to which they focus on results that matter to adult learners; professional development for teachers, and the extent to which professional development policies and practices engage teachers in an active process of standards-based improvement; and institutional environments, and the extent to which they support standards-based reform.

In defining EFF standards, developers recognized the need for consensus around the standards. Building on the national goal of universal literacy, EFF designers turned to adult learners to help define adult roles and purposes for engaging in adult education. Adults indicated four types of reasons: 1) gain access to information; 2) find and express voice, with the confidence that others will listen; 3) make decisions independently, without having to depend on others to mediate the world; and 4) build a “bridge to the future” by learning how to learn. EFF staff then circulated these purposes within the field and found consensus around them and their relationship to adults’ roles as parents and family members, citizens, and workers. The proposed framework of roles and purposes offered a way to think about adult literacy education that was consistent with educators’ view of themselves and their students. Over the course of a year, NIFL built consensus on broad areas of responsibility and key activities for the three roles. Ultimately, the project came up with a set of standards, the achievement of which would matter to adult learners and other stakeholders in the system.

As Stein points out, standards that define results that matter can provide motivation for change; however, results require systemic long-term investment in the process of standards-based reform, including professional development to build the capacity of teachers to improve instruction and actually achieve desired results. She describes EFF’s effort to engage practitioners in reform through an organized program of practitioner research. Drawing on research on standards-based reform in K–12, staff designed a large-scale multi-year professional development effort to determine if the standards were specific enough to guide instruction and assessment. The project established a model for practitioner research as professional development, articulated through a series of formal agreements with practitioners, program administrators, and state administrators. Participating teachers were required to follow a new approach to planning and instruction and to document the process and provide feedback on the usefulness of the tools EFF developed for teachers and on the ways in which using them changed what occurred in their classrooms. The documentation process gave a clear view into how teachers were making change in their classrooms and where they needed additional support, and the project led to noticeable changes in practice, as well as increases in student involvement and persistence.

As Stein points out, reform cannot take place without a supportive institutional environment. Designers of the EFF field research effort put in place requirements to actively involve state and program leaders and to enable collaborative practice. This involvement was critical to creating an environment within the state and program that supported teacher innovation and change. Stein points to both financial support from the state and state administrators' willingness to participate in the process as critical elements. As she notes, program administrators saw how regular teacher meetings were helping to "transform their programs into learning organizations, making a difference in the ability of the program to deliver high-quality services," yet most felt it would be difficult to maintain such practices once the research project ended, without a policy mandate at the state level and resources particularly focused on implementation of such mandates.

Beyond the Life Boat: Improving Literacy and Training Services for Immigrants and Refugees

Heide Spruck Wrigley

In this paper, Wrigley focuses on English language and literacy services for adults who are not yet proficient in English. She begins by outlining a number of important demographic trends, such as the high poverty rates and low education levels of many immigrants. Consequently, as Wrigley points out, many ESL students require additional support services and would benefit from development of skills and knowledge that translate into the jobs that can help move a family out of poverty. The author also points out that, while all states offer ESL services, the impact of immigration varies by region, and some states (such as Iowa, Georgia, Kentucky, and North Carolina) have not traditionally been home to immigrants, but are increasingly becoming so. In such states, federal funding and technical assistance is necessary to help create an infrastructure of services to address the language and job skill needs of immigrants and local employers in need of skilled workers.

Wrigley next describes a number of subgroups among immigrants, including lawful immigrants, refugees, native born, and undocumented immigrants. As she points out, the differing characteristics of these groups have implications for program design and services. In addition, she notes a range of factors that should be considered in creating services, including age, length of stay in the U.S., employment, needs for use of English in daily life, newcomer status, linguistic environment (i.e., opportunities to use English), psychological factors (especially relevant for refugees), proficiency in English, and native language literacy skills. Wrigley points out the particular challenge of serving students who have limited schooling in their home countries and the need for them to engage in basic literacy to create a foundation in reading and writing.

Noting the relative paucity of research on adult ESL instructional practices, Wrigley draws on existing research on K–12 and adult populations to reveal a number of valuable lessons. First she notes evidence of the benefits of contextualized learning, particularly in language teaching, with a focus on communicative interactions and task-based learning. Next, she notes the importance of using real-life materials and activities in the adult ESL literacy classroom, pointing to a study that found that connections to real-life materials and situations were related to increases in basic reading skills, reading comprehension, and oral English skills. Wrigley next describes a research review that noted positive effects of cooperative learning, as well as a study that indicated that adults and adolescents make rapid progress in acquiring language proficiency when they have opportunities to make use of the target language in daily life interactions. As the author concludes, “an approach that connects classroom learning with the community and encourages language and literacy use outside of school shows a great deal of promise.”

Wrigley also discusses research focusing on the role of native language literacy in English skill acquisition. She points to evidence that suggests that a threshold level of native language literacy may be required before underlying skills related to text processing will transfer to the target language. As Wrigley points out, however, questions about how much literacy is enough to permit transfer, as well as the nature of the threshold level, have not yet been answered. She also cites studies that examine the role of first language literacy among low-literate groups trying to acquire English. In one, students acquired English literacy skills faster when given literacy instruction in their native language. Further, she refers to a study that found benefits in using native language for purposes such as clarifying concepts, introducing new ideas, or

providing explanation. Finally, Wrigley discusses research that shows the positive effects of strategy-based teaching in reading and extended reading on general reading skills and vocabulary acquisition.

With respect to systemic issues, Wrigley calls for a language policy that specifically addresses the needs of immigrants and refugees and a system of immigrant services that spans the federal Departments of Labor, Education, and Health and Human Services. Further, she notes the challenge of providing differentiated services for various subgroups of immigrants and refugees and calls for better articulation of services to ensure appropriate types of instruction and facilitate transitions across services. She also points out the need for better integration of language education and skills training, including bilingual vocational training, as a means toward improving the economic situations of adults with limited English skills. She adds that research on how to effectively combine English instruction, literacy education, and job training would benefit the educational community. Finally, Wrigley calls for efforts to render the ESOL system more transparent to learners to help them understand what services will best meet their needs and more easily make transitions from one program to another.



National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy

NCSALL's Mission

The National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) provides information used to improve practice in programs that offer adult basic education, English for speakers of other languages, and adult secondary education. In pursuit of this goal, NCSALL has undertaken research in four areas: learner motivation, classroom practice and the teaching/learning interaction, staff development, and assessment.

NCSALL conducts basic and applied research; builds partnerships between researchers and practitioners; disseminates research and best practices to practitioners, scholars, and policymakers; and works with the field of adult literacy education to develop a comprehensive research agenda.

NCSALL is a partnership of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, World Education, Rutgers University, Portland State University in Oregon, and the Center for Literacy Studies at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. NCSALL is primarily funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement.

NCSALL's Dissemination Initiative

NCSALL's dissemination initiative focuses on ensuring that the research results reach practitioners, administrators, policymakers, and scholars of adult education through print, electronic, and face-to-face communication. NCSALL publishes research reports, occasional papers, research briefs, and teaching and training materials; a semi-annual policy brief *Focus on Policy*, a quarterly journal *Focus on Basics*; and *The Review of Adult Learning and Literacy*, a scholarly review of major issues, current research, and best practices.

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