

Forum: Building a Better Adult Basic Skills Development System

(Part 2 of 3)

Response to Paul J. Jurmo

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Paul Jurmo proposes 10 actions to make “basic skills education more inclusive relevant, efficient, and sustained.” These recommendations are drawn from his decades of experience in the field, coupled with the expertise of researchers and professionals who understand the adult basic education (ABE) system and the needs of adult learners and educators. To further this conversation, I offer questions and observations as a “critical friend” (Forester, 1999). My comments focus on the following topics: (1) how Jurmo’s recommendations highlight learners’ capabilities and multi-faceted purposes, (2) areas for elaboration (diverse populations, efficiency, inclusiveness, and “learning eco-systems”), (3) the distance education and social support needs accentuated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and (4) why a critical approach to education is crucial for building the more inclusive, relevant ABE system that Jurmo envisions.

First, I appreciate Jurmo’s reminder that adults bring capabilities that we often fail to recognize *and* that their “unmet literacy needs” (Feeley, 2014) have real consequences in their daily lives. These two discourses are often in tension. Many policy makers, researchers, and educators view adult learners through a deficit lens, focusing on what they are lacking, as evidenced by terms like “basic skills deficient” in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. Others—especially New Literacy Studies scholars—

valorize, and sometimes romanticize, the creative ways learners use literacy, especially outside the classroom. Jurmo’s recognition of this tension recalls Deborah Brandt’s (2001) observation: “Just as illiteracy is rarely self-chosen and rarely self-created, the literacy that people practice is not the literacy they necessarily wish to practice” (p. 8). For instance, distributed literacy (people helping each other with literacy tasks) may not signal personal preferences and collective values so much as exclusion from education and literacy learning opportunities. ABE learners are creative and resourceful and have many kinds of knowledge to contribute *and* they can also enrich their lives by acquiring new or expanded capabilities for using literacy, numeracy, and language.

The reminder that adults bring purposes that are not directly related to employment is also crucial. Having a well-paying job matters, but it is not all that matters to many adult learners. Since the passage of the Workforce Investment Act (1998) and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (2014), many educators, scholars, and policy specialists have raised similar concerns about how a narrow focus on employment eclipses learners’ other roles and goals (e.g., Belzer, 2017; Jacobson, 2017; Park, McHugh, & Katsiaficas, 2016; Pickard, 2016; Shin & Ging, 2019). However, to date, these efforts seem to have had little discernible effect on policy. Often, I feel like we are voices calling in the wilderness. Indeed, the struggle

between human capital (economic-utilitarian) and humanistic (human rights) perspectives of adult education goes back decades—and the human capital view has prevailed (see Elfert’s [2018] analysis of these competing approaches at UNESCO). Given the prevailing economic logic, what needs to happen to convince powerholders—legislators, policy makers, funders—as Jurmo says, “focus on multiple, interwoven purposes for adult education”? Other models are possible, as shown by Scotland’s adult education policy, which emphasizes active citizenship and building “stronger, more resilient supportive, influential and inclusive communities” (European Commission, 2019).

I would welcome further elaboration on some of the points in the article. In his discussion of inclusiveness, Jurmo states, “We need to more adequately reach diverse populations and other stakeholders impacted by limited basic skills.” What are some examples of these groups, beyond those already served by ABE and ESL programs? Many programs do serve hard-to-reach populations, including immigrants (documented and undocumented), refugees, currently or formerly incarcerated adults, and families in poverty. For example, my colleagues and I conducted a survey of 147 adult education providers in Chicago, Houston, and Miami, finding that a majority of the programs served unemployed or underemployed persons, adults who struggle with basic skills, immigrant and non-native English speakers, out-of-school young adults, dislocated workers, and/or adults with disabilities (Prins et al., 2018). Other populations (served by 14% to 49% of programs) included homeless persons, ex-offenders, veterans, and adults in correctional facilities. Which of these populations (or other groups) are being overlooked or under-served, and how can we best reach them and ensure that they are benefitting from ABE services?

I also wondered what it means to make “efficiency” a criteria for the ABE system, and how efficiency is related to effectiveness and inclusiveness. When discussing efficiency, Jurmo writes, “We need to more consistently use effective strategies customized to serve learners, manage programs, and build support.” In policy discussions, efficiency is usually defined in economic terms. But *effective* teaching and program management practices are not necessarily the most cost *efficient*, especially in the short-term. For instance, the fixation on efficiency (read: cost savings) in the health care system has contributed to a severe shortage of hospital beds in hard-hit areas during the COVID-19 pandemic. Rooted in neoliberal economic policies, similar efficiency metrics have been applied to formal and non-formal educational systems, often with harmful results such as reduced services. Based on Jurmo’s essay and his prior work, there is no reason to believe he is using “efficiency” in this crude, short-sighted way. Efficiency could mean, for example, coordinating across provider systems to ensure that ABE and career pathways services are not duplicated in a given region (Prins et al., 2018). Alternatively, efficiency could entail helping learners meet their goals, and do so more quickly. Because “efficiency” carries ideological baggage, we need to discuss what efficiency means in ABE programs that already operate with bare-bones budgets and resources.

A related point is that inclusiveness and efficiency may be conflicting goals. Many adult educators and scholars worry that the pressure to meet narrowly defined performance measures (student gains in educational functioning levels, employment and earnings, high school equivalency, or transition to postsecondary education) has contributed to “creaming,” or serving higher-level adult learners who are more

likely to achieve positive outcomes (Jacobson, 2017; Pickard, 2016; Prins et al., 2018). More empirical research is needed to document whether, in fact, this is happening. Nonetheless, adults who have greater socio-economic and learning needs—for example, learners with disabilities, beginning-level readers, or immigrants who have limited native language literacy—require more educational and social services. ABE programs have an obligation to serve these adult learners, even if it is not economically efficient. In sum, we need to consider whether and how a focus on efficiency is compatible with inclusiveness.

The “learning eco-system” model is intriguing. It would be helpful to delineate what this would look like in practice. For example, how are “learning centers” different than adult education programs? Many programs already operate in multiple sites and provide counseling or referrals in addition to assessment and instruction. How would programs promote and organize self-directed learning and situated learning? How is self-directed learning different than the common practice of offering take-home activities, a list of learning resources for more in-depth study, or supplemental (online) distance learning activities? Regarding situated learning, many career pathways programs, for instance, already offer contextualized instruction or apprenticeships (Prins et al., 2018). In short, how does the recommendation to combine these three “learning venues” differ from what is already happening in the field?

In the conclusion, Jurmo calls for continued investment in our field. I want to underscore this point, since several of the recommendations are predicated on adequate funding. In particular, recognizing ABE as a profession would mean increasing salaries, benefits, and job security and providing opportunities for sustained, high-quality professional development, such

as subsidizing tuition for master’s degrees or postbaccalaureate certificates in adult education or related fields. Until state and federal governments provide more funding, adult educators will not receive the professional recognition they deserve—and learners won’t receive the high-quality instruction they deserve.

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, a few other comments have become apropos. The pandemic and accompanying shift to remote instruction have exposed the digital divide that continues to plague rural and lower-income Americans. ABE programs have been forced to use emergency remote instruction. However, adult learners who lack computers and high-speed internet access at home and who are digital novices have greater difficulty accessing, participating in, and benefiting from online education. These developments underscore the need to provide supports both for adult learners and for ABE professionals who are not accustomed to remote teaching. To build a stronger ABE system, we need state and federal investment in broadband, especially in rural areas (this argument is not new, but the pandemic has unveiled how dire and inequitable the situation is), and professional development to help adult educators learn effective teaching practices in distance education.

Many ABE programs already offer wraparound support services, including case management, and these will become even more important as adults cope with the economic aftermath of the pandemic. These services are hinted at in Jurmo’s statement that “learning centers” can provide counseling and service referrals. Social supports address problems that deter learners from enrolling and persisting in adult education programs and reaching their educational or employment goals, such as transportation and child care, as well as mental and physical health,

housing, food insecurity, and financial problems. Research suggests that social supports are associated with better employment and education outcomes (Hess, Mayayeva, Reichlin, & Thakur, 2016). In particular, “bundled” (coordinated) models that include financial coaching, employment coaching, and access to income supports (public benefits) are crucial for promoting learners’ financial stability. Based on our research with career pathways programs, my colleague and I posited that wraparound supports “help students cope with tangible problems, thereby decreasing the cognitive load of poverty and increasing their mental bandwidth for academic pursuits” (Prins & Clymer, 2018, p. 42). With skyrocketing unemployment, poverty, economic uncertainty, and psychological distress, ABE learners need these supports now more than ever.

I conclude this essay by arguing that a critical approach to education is the foundation for building a more inclusive, relevant ABE system. Jurmo argues that educators “must understand the social, economic, bureaucratic, and political contexts in which we operate;” for example, if we want learners to be successful in employment, we need to know about issues such as discrimination, housing, and labor markets. However, educators also have a responsibility to help *learners* understand these issues. For example, what jobs are available to someone with a high school equivalency degree? What do service-sector jobs pay, and why are the wages so low? Why are women concentrated in these jobs? What are service workers doing to advocate for higher wages? Embedding such topics in ABE instruction is what 19th century working-class movements in the UK called “really useful knowledge,” which at the time addressed problems such as democracy, community and cooperation, poverty, concentration of wealth, and exploitation

(Newman, 1993, p. 50). These problems still shape adult learners’ lives today.

ABE programs, then, should not only help adults to reach instrumental goals like passing high school equivalency exams, applying for jobs, or learning English, but also to understand and change the systemic conditions that limit their lives. That is, an inclusive, relevant ABE system should equip adult learners to exercise more control over decisions that affect them, both within and outside of their programs. The ability to shape ABE programs and community problems matters because “those denied participation—unable to engage actively with others in the determination of their own affairs—also might not develop political consciousness of their own situation or of broader political inequalities” (Gaventa, 1982, p. 18).

Organizations can pursue these citizenship goals while also providing basic skills and employment-related instruction, as illustrated by case studies in *Designing socially just learning communities* (Rogers, Mosley, & Kramer, 2009) and organizations such as CASA. The latter provides ABE and employment services for immigrants, coupled with community organizing and development. What distinguishes CASA from other ABE providers is its mission—“to create a more just society by building power and improving the quality of life in working class and immigrant communities” (<https://wearecasa.org/who-we-are/>). Jurmo cogently argues for focusing on multiple purposes for adult education. One of these purposes is citizenship. ABE programs must not neglect adults’ roles as citizens who need meaningful opportunities to build power within their communities and the organizations intended to serve them. Since the ABE system serves adults who experience multiple forms of social and economic exclusion, it has a responsibility to

assist them in redressing these inequalities.

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