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The journal's mission is to publish research on adult basic and secondary education and transitions to college and career programs. It informs practitioners, researchers, policy makers, and funders about best practices in adult literacy, numeracy, and English language education in publicly funded, community and volunteer-based programs in a wide range of contexts. Each issue will consist of research articles focused on a particular theme plus other content of interest to readers (e.g., resource reviews, opinion pieces, and debates and discussions on timely topics of interest to the field).

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Research Article

The Lessons of the Churn: Adult Basic Education and Disciplining the Adult Learner

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Abstract

Each year in the United States, hundreds of thousands of people enroll in adult basic education (ABE) classes but leave before completing a level or accomplishing their goals. The persistence of this phenomenon may indicate that it is a feature of the system, rather than an unforeseen outcome. Research on other types of social service provision (e.g., welfare) suggests that seemingly inefficient systems are actually intentionally constructed to discipline the population in need of assistance. From this perspective, learners' experience of the churn within the ABE system may be just as important as their time in the classroom.

Keywords: welfare, homelessness, participation, access, supports

Each year in the United States, hundreds of thousands of people enroll in adult basic education (ABE) classes funded by the federal government only to leave before completing a level or accomplishing the goals that they had set for themselves. This creates an educational churn, a disruptive and disorienting process by which large numbers of people move in and out of a system to what seems like no productive end. In fact, levels of adult literacy in the United States have not changed in decades despite the work of adult education teachers, tutors and program administrators. Moreover, the persistence of this churn may indicate that it is a feature of the system, rather than an unfortunate or unforeseen outcome. Indeed, research on other types of social service provision (e.g., welfare, housing) suggests that seemingly counterproductive or inefficient systems are actually intentionally constructed to discipline and regulate the behavior of the

populations in need of assistance (Piven & Cloward, 1993; Willse, 2015). If that is also the case with regards to ABE, attempts to improve literacy outcomes by continuing to focus on learner or classroom-level factors will necessarily have a limited impact. If our goal is to improve literacy levels at the societal level, the nature and functioning of the ABE system itself needs to be evaluated, rather than the efforts of individual learners and their teachers.

Re-Examining the Performance of the ABE System in the United States

Assessments of the impact of the ABE system in the United States have been conceptualized in a number of different ways. Currently, the most prominent accountability measure is the National Reporting System (NRS) for Adult Education which requires states to report the performance

of programs that receive funding as part of the Workforce Improvement and Opportunity Act (WIOA). Programs and states must provide data regarding students' ability to meet certain goals. These include educational gain, high school completion, entry into post-secondary education or training, gaining employment and retaining employment (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education [OCTAE], 2015). The data is collected and made available in annual reports that contain state by state results and cumulative statistics for the country. These reports note what percentage of students achieved their stated goals and whether or not that constitutes an improvement from previous years. Within the last five reports available (e.g., OCTAE, 2015, 2016, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c) results vary by no more than a few percentage points. For example, in 2015-2016, 41% of students whose goal was to complete at least one ABE/ASE functioning level did so, compared to 42% in 2013-2014. A narrative summary reviews the outcomes for each of the designated goals and suggests what the results mean about the performance of the system and the programs that it funds.

Smaller attempts to evaluate the impact of the ABE system in the United States have been conducted since the 1970s. Rather than focusing on the five set goals of the NRS, these studies have looked for a variety of outcomes. In Beder's (1999) survey of these assessments, potentially relevant outcome measurements included self-esteem (Merrifield, Smith, Rea, & Shriver, 1994), involvement in children's education (St. Pierre, 1993) and community participation (Becker, Wesselius, & Fallon, 1976). These early studies have been followed by ones that look for changes in learners' literacy practices rather than changes in academic level or test results (Purcell-Gates,

et al., 2002; Reder, 2009), suggesting that the potential value of ABE can be measured by looking at the ways that adults use literacy in their lives. Reder (2009) in particular argues that the impact of program participation may be seen over longer durations, and thus the short-term measurements that the NRS relies upon may not be appropriate.

Despite their differences, these varying approaches all attempt to measure the potential impact of ABE by examining outcomes for students in programs. In the case of the NRS, the focus is on what types of outcomes individuals typically experience. In the case of studies that examine individual learning trajectories, the focus is what types of literacy practices may be associated with program participation (either in the short or long term). Rather than looking to outcomes for the average learner, a different approach to the question of the performance of the ABE system would be to look more closely at the structure itself. For example, what is the broader impact on society at large? Whose needs are being met? How efficiently and equitably are resources being allocated? What do participation patterns suggest about the nature of program access and support?

The NRS reports themselves provide evidence that participation patterns are indeed an issue. In addition to sharing data on what percentage of students met the prioritized goals, there is data about the following: the number of students who stayed in the program and advanced to the next level, the number of students who remained in the program at the same level, the number that completed a level and left the program and those that left the program without advancing a level. Unlike the other outcome goals, there is no discussion of these statistics in the narrative summary, and the federal totals are only provided at the end of

the document, after the individual state reports. The table below summarizes data from 2010 to 2016 (e.g., OCTAE, 2015, 2016, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c). Reports prior to 2010-2011 represented this data with bar charts and did not provide raw numbers. The data from 2015-2016 comes from the latest full report. The percentages are not provided in the report itself.

National Level NRS Outcomes – 2010 – 2016

Year	Advanced to Next Level	Remained in Same Level	Completed Level and Separated	Separated Without Advancing	Total	%Adv. to Next Level	%Rem. in the Same Level	%Complete and Leave	%Separate Without Advancing
2010-2011	517,298	491,035	343,972	659,858	2,012,163	25.71%	24.40%	17.09%	32.79%
2011-2012	487,639	431,568	309,807	589,792	1,818,806	26.81%	23.73%	17.03%	32.43%
2012-2013	453,017	382,824	295,705	576,559	1,708,105	26.52%	22.41%	17.31%	33.75%
2013-2014	436,374	365,115	255,250	542,017	1,598,756	27.29%	22.84%	15.97%	33.90%
2014-2015	421,001	373,146	228,854	492,091	1,515,092	27.79%	24.63%	15.10%	32.48%
2015-2016	403,780	378,989	251,018	492,091	1,525,878	26.46%	24.84%	16.45%	32.25%

In each of the years covered, more than 32% of students who enrolled in programs separated without advancing a level, a yearly average of nearly 559,000 people. This means more individuals left their program without advancing a level than stayed in the program and advanced, and nearly twice as many left without advancing compared to those who separated after advancing. In addition, students who completed a level and left might actually represent a mixed result. While advancing a level is positive, many students enroll in adult education program needing to advance through multiple levels to reach their goals (Comings, 2009). Separating after a single level change may leave a learner well-short of their final desired location.

Looking at the percentage of students who leave programs without advancing a level at the individual state level suggests that students in some locations experience more of a churn than others. Over the same six-year period, states (along with DC) can be grouped in the following way according to their average percentage of students leaving without advancing a level.

Avg. % Separate Without Level Change 2010-2015

More than 50% - 10

HI (65%), SC (62%), NM (59%), OK (58%), NJ (57%), DC (54%), MT (54%), NV (54%), FL (52%), OR (50%

More than 40% - 16

PA (49%), WY (49%), AR (48%), SD (48%), ND (48%), WI (48%), MI (47%), ID (47%), NE (46%), IN (45%), AL (45%), MD (44%), TN (43%), MN (42%), LA (41%), LA (41%), GA (40%)

More than 30% - 19

WV (39%), CT (38%), (UT 37%), CO (37%), ME (37%), AK (37%), KY (37%), RI (36%), NC (35%), KS (35%), WA (35%), IL (34%), MS (33%), MO (32%), AZ (31%), DE (31%), VT (30%), VA (30%), IA (30%)

Less than 30% - 6

MA (21%), OH (21%), NY (17%), NH (16%), CA (15%), TX (8%)

As can be seen, it is not the case that there are several large outlier states where such a large percentage leave without advancing that it skews the national average. Rather, there are only six states that are below the national average of 33%. In over half the states, at least 40% of those who enroll in programs do not advance before separating and in 10, more than 50% of students do the same. Future research should examine how Texas manages to only have 8% of students leave without advancing, roughly 1/4 of the national average and almost half as much as the nearest state in terms of this outcome (CA, 15%).

Although it is true that you don't have to be in a formal program to learn or develop new literacy practices (Reder, 2009), that is the stated goal of the ABE system itself and why it funds programs across the country. To be clear, programs do show evidence of helping a certain percentage of people attain their goals, but as presently constituted the system is not working for large numbers of people who looked to formal education as a means to increase their literacy skills or educational level. Adult literacy activists have long suggested that the system needs to expand since it only serves a small fraction (possibly less than 2%) of the 93 million adults who would benefit from instruction (e.g., National Coalition for Literacy, 2009). Given both this gap in services and churn in participation, it is not surprising that across three large assessments of adult literacy skills (International Adult Literacy Survey, 1994-1998; National Assessment of Adult Literacy, 2003-2008, Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, 2012-2014), average scores in the United States have barely changed. What is the purpose of a system that does not seem to be making progress?

The Nature of the Churn

Of course, one reason that a learner may leave

a program before completing a level is that they decide that it is the best course of action at the time. Comings (2009) refers to this as "stopping out" (in contrast to "dropping out") to highlight the fact that adults make informed decisions about what to do with their time and resources. This approach recognizes that students may cycle in and out of programs according to whether or not their educational goals and life circumstances are aligned. For example, a student may decide to stop-out of their studies in order to spend time on a family issue, they may experience changes in work status or schedule that make attending class difficult or they may develop a serious health issue that prevents them from studying in a program. Although this this type of analysis emphasizes students' choices, for many stopping-out might be final, rather than temporary. In fact, learners who leave their programs often think they cannot return (Comings, 2009).

Studies of learner persistence have identified structures that programs can put in place to reduce the number of students stopping-out and to support their re-entry into programs when they want to come back. Tracy-Mumford (as cited in Comings, 2009) notes that in addition to doing a better job of connecting content and instruction to learners' goals and preferences, programs should address the barriers noted above (e.g., child care, transportation) and need to have adequate counseling services. However, most programs are not equipped to deal with these kinds of situational barriers (Mezirow, Darkenwald & Knox, 1975; Quigley, 1997) and funds to address them are not included in federal grants. In fact, although the federal budget for adult education has increased across the decades, the amount of per student support has not seen a concomitant increase due to inflation and a larger number of students going through programs.

For example, the $67 per student spent in 1969 (United States Department of Education, 2103) was actually worth more than the $370 spent per student in 2015 - only $56 in 1969 dollars. Recent cuts in both the federal and state funding (Foster & McClendon, 2012) make the introduction of supports that reduce or remove situational barriers even harder for programs to take on.

Although lack of child care, transportation or heath care may indeed lead a student to *stop-out*, the term may unintentionally obscure how the lack of support made the decision nearly inevitable. The difficulty of removing situational barriers should not mean that the adult learner is asked to bear the full responsibility for staying, leaving or cycling in and out of a program. For example, researchers looking at racial disparities in high school disciplinary actions have suggested that Black and Latinx students who discontinue their schooling should be thought of as being "pushed out" rather than "dropping out" (Foster, 2015). These students are the target of policies that make their lived experience of school untenable, so while they may ultimately be the ones making the decision to leave, in some crucial ways their hand was forced. Describing these students as being pushed out helps shift the focus to the system that created the conditions for the decision to leave. Although most adult education programs do not directly participate in the same school to prison pipeline (one reason that high school students are pushed out), by not providing the type of support learners need to continue their studies the system is creating conditions that lead learners to conclude that leaving their program is their best current option.

In addition to limited funding for essential support services, the churn may exist because there are incentives for programs to anticipate and benefit from a certain number of students

separating before they have advanced a level. Given the fact that many adult learners do not stay in their classes, programs are faced with a dilemma. They can enroll the number of students called for in whatever contract they have and then worry about how many will be left when it comes time to post-test (an NRS requirement), or overenroll the class with the understanding that not all of the students will make it. Directors of several large adult literacy programs in New Jersey informed me that from their perspective, the overenrolling strategy is the only logical one because if they began with the numbers of students they agreed to provide services to they would never meet their contractual expectations. Each class thus begins with the understanding that many students will not complete it. Treating this expected drop-off as standard operation procedure reduces the pressure on programs to identify ways to help all students who enroll to remain in their classes.

Furthermore, programs may actually benefit financially from a student who stops out after they have spent enough time in their course to count towards NRS reporting. Once funds are encumbered, they do not have to be returned if the student is no longer enrolled. These funds continue to support program infrastructure, keeping the per student cost manageable. Of course, this does not mean the ABE programs do not take their educational commitments seriously. Rather, their funding structure militates against them taking consistent and effective action to prevent stopping or dropping out. As part of an analysis of the adult literacy system in New Jersey, multiple programs reported that because of the way reimbursements for services are structured, it is fiscally impossible for them to retain students for very long. They suggested that at a certain point their program is compelled to ask a given student to leave (or go

back on the waiting list) so that they can enroll a new student and encumber new funds (Jacobson, 2013). If and when the individual who was forcibly exited returns to the program, they will technically be a new student and have new funds associated with them. In this way, enrollment is managed with an eye on the bottom-line rather than on educational progress. Most other programs may not be as open or explicit about their process of pushing out students, but they also participate in, and rely on, the churn these enrollment and funding policies create. It is difficult to estimate how widespread this practice is because programs who volunteer this kind of information put themselves at risk of additional scrutiny. However, without transparency in the ways that funding works in practice, it is likely that there will continue to be both official and unofficial means of program maintenance. This triage-like approach to funding means administrators need to be able to finesse the system, which is not efficient or sustainable, and makes programs themselves vulnerable to closure.

What is the purpose of a system in which a disruptive churn appears to be standard operating procedure? In their study of welfare provision in the United States, Piven and Cloward (1993) detail how people looking for support are faced with long waiting lists that lead them to give up trying to get assistance. They also report that it is common for eligible applicants to be denied, forcing them reapply and face those same long waiting lists. Piven and Cloward (1993) suggest that the ways in which welfare is provided or withheld during certain periods of time and for certain populations functions as a means of regulating the behavior and expectations of the poor. They suggest that this churning process is made intentionally difficult and capricious in order to make any job, regardless of the pay, attractive. The key message - better a bad job

than having to deal with the welfare system. In this way, the provision of support operates in conjunction with the needs of capital for compliant workers. The structure of the system is designed to teach recipients their place and to limit the type of support they can expect. How long can ABE students be expected to stay on a waiting list hoping to get a spot in a classroom? How would it feel to finally be in a class only to then need to stop-out because barriers arise?

A similar disempowering churn has been identified in the functioning of employment agencies. Arsdale (2016) notes that people who find work through these agencies are often shuffled in and out of various positions, consistently vulnerable to the actions of others who may not have their best interests in mind. He describes one common scheme as follows. Because agencies collect fees from the workers for the job placement, some unscrupulous agencies scheme with employers to have these new workers fired after a certain point, necessitating the placement of a new worker who will also have to pay a placement fee. The original worker must then go back to the agency to start the exploitative process all over again. A student who has been pushed out of an ABE program to make room for a new student who will bring newly encumbered funds will recognize the steps of this cycle, even if the motivation is less nefarious.

Additional insights can be gathered by examining how the crisis in housing vulnerability has been addressed. Willse (2015) notes that because the mental health and behavior of individuals who experience housing vulnerability has dominated discussions, "what to do about the homeless, rather than what to do about housing, has become the obsession of government policy, social service practice, and social scientific inquiry" (pg. 54). In this way, structural questions about housing

vulnerability are not examined, and the ways in which the distribution of resources creates the possibility of homelessness is ignored (e.g., the fact that there are vast number of homes and apartments that sit unoccupied). For this reason, Willse (2015) suggest that the real goal is "the management of homelessness, rather than the eradication of housing vulnerability" (p. 55). Individuals cycle in and out of temporary housing, facing the same daunting barrier to getting and keeping services that Piven and Cloward (1993) describe. In addition, Willse (2015) goes on to detail how the job of managing this cycle of vulnerability can be a lucrative one for large non-profits who "serve" the homeless but don't reduce housing vulnerability. The potential parallels here to adult literacy are striking. As noted above, over multiple decades in which the federal government has allocated funds for adult literacy provision, the average skills of the population have not changed. Rather than easing at all towards eradication, literacy issues would appear to be managed, at best, by the federal government and numerous non-profit organizations.

It is not surprising that there are profits to be made from creating and sustaining the churns noted above. In recent times, the process by which eligible people are denied aid (Piven a& Cloward, 1993) has been modernized and monetized for the digital age. In her examination of the use of automated systems to determine eligibility for welfare and health care, Eubanks (2017) explains that these systems continue to generate incorrect determinations that prevent people in need from getting necessary support. These "mistakes" are difficulty for individuals to rectify, so incorrect determinations of ineligibility help reduce the welfare rolls and keep the state's health care expenses down. The companies that create and manage these automated systems are paid well

by states, and Piven and Cloward (1993) suggest there has long been money available to investigate if the poor are paying their taxes or receiving the "appropriate" amount of welfare (Ulrich, 2019).

With regards to adult literacy, the churn in participation is in part created by programs straining to meet the demands of such investigation in the form of the NRS. This elaborate and expensive accountability system, created and managed by contractors, has staff at multiple levels of government who are paid to track how that $370 per student funding is being spent. Contrast this to Defense Department procurement procedures that have allowed the Pentagon to accrue $21 trillion worth of financial transactions for which it has no documentation (Lindorff, 2018). It is unclear how the NRS data is being used to improve outcomes data is being used to increase outcomes or to reduce the number of people who move through the system without making progress. For that reason, the real point appears to be the act of publicly tracking adult learners.

Implications

As a means of increasing positive outcomes, ABE research and advocacy has typically focused on identifying best practices in instruction. These "what works" studies look at classroom level issues and are useful for tailoring instruction to meet the needs of students and to maximize the benefit of their time in programs. However, studies hoping to find whether "this method works better than that" (Reder, personal communication, 2017) are likely to have limited effectiveness in the face of a system that has hundreds of thousands of students leave their programs before they complete a level. A full revisioning of ABE is necessary and below are three suggestions for moving forward.

Examine the Current System

The present study is preliminary in nature and requires additional work to provide necessary nuance and complexity. A key issue is the variety of program types within the ABE system.

It is likely that different types of programs experience distinct types of educational churn. For example, the policies in place at a community-based adult literacy organization might contrast sharply with those at a community college offering English as a Second Language. Should read: Another issue is the nature of federal and state ABE bureaucracies. Future research should identify patterns in official and unofficial resource allocation and their impact on the functioning of the system. For example, what amount of money is spent at each level of the system on administration and accountability procedures? Without a more detailed accounting of how the system is currently working it will be difficult to suggest specific changes in policy to prevent students from being pushed out to keep the funding process running smoothly.

In addition, the connection between the ABE system and other social welfare programs must be better understood. In general, within the field of ABE research detailed examinations of the situational barriers facing learners have been bracketed off and left to those working in other areas, such as mental health, housing, or domestic violence prevention. Although those have traditionally been topics of ABE lessons in programs with a social justice orientation, it often stops there. Explicit and sustained alliances between diverse groups of activists and engaged researchers could more productively address unequal distribution of resources at the systemic level.

Expand the Critique

Similar to concerns about the role of K-12 education plays in perpetuating inequality (Bowles & Gintis, 2011; Graff,1991), there have been long-standing critiques of the nature of adult literacy and basic education. Learner leader Calvin Miles suggested that, "The adult education system is like a large plantation where the students are kept in place by gatekeepers who believe they are doing the right thing" (as cited in Green, 2015, p. 43). Formal education here is understood as potentially reigning in or domesticating learners' desire for freedom and justice and reducing their ability to critique their conditions (Macedo, 2006). For example, Sandlin (2004) suggests that the key message of most workforce development programs is that hard work is what determines one's status and economic outcomes ("It's Up to You!") rather than micro or macro-economic forces. As ever, working class students are taught that they get what they deserve.

In addition to critiquing the role that curriculum and instruction play in disciplining adult learners, students and teachers should collaboratively investigate the messages the ABE system sends by having a consistent churn at its heart. Teachers can invite discussion of the ways resource allocation, accountability regimes, and funding policy serve to push students out of the very programs they waited patiently to enroll in. Consistent with the experiences of those looking for other types of support, the whole process of enrolling in and leaving programs may be structured to regulate the behavior of those wanting to access education. Students are simultaneously told "it is up to you!" while having their agency circumscribed by structural inequalities. Building on productive experiences of discussing issues like mental health, classwork can include identifying the ways the ABE system perpetuates discourses about merit, expectations and personal responsibility that seek to naturalize economic hierarchies.

Although it is common for activists to speak on

behalf of the "marginalized," this terminology is often problematic. In fact, though some communities may exist on the periphery spatially, functionally they are at the heart of oppressive and exploitative networks (Freire & Macedo, 1987). For example, those laboring for below life-sustaining wages may not have a voice when economic policy is being determined, but the capitalist system they work in would not function without them. In the same way, those who decide to participate in the adult education system but then separate before reaching their goals need to be understood as central to the functioning of the system, and any assessments of the impact of the system should include their experience.

Explore Other Models

Activists are understandably concerned about the fact that federal funding for the ABE in the United Sates is vulnerable to shifts in political orientation and will, and they often need to rally students, teachers and their allies to lobby their representatives to push back against proposed cuts. When cuts are avoided, the field celebrates. Likewise, when minor increases in funding are offered, the field also celebrates. This pattern has repeated itself for decades. In this way, supporters of adult literacy and basic education are kept busy treading water. The perpetual push back against funding cuts and calls for piecemeal increases leads to the nature of the system being unquestioned - a system that does not provide the necessary resources for students to succeed, that does not enable most ABE students to successfully transition into higher education (Jacobson, 2016), that does not move people beyond poverty wages (Jacobson, 2016) and that has massive amounts of people cycling in and out of it. Given the size of the problem and the current structure of the system, requests for increases of $10 million or so are unlikely to have much of an impact at

the broader level. Increasing the ABE student population by tens of thousands would only be working on the margins and do little to stop the larger churn or increase the literacy skills of large segments of the population.

Instead of providing triage to a system that is providing benefits to only a select segment of adult learners, a total rethinking of the structure is necessary. For example, in the short term, to reduce the likelihood that learners will feel compelled to stop out because of situational barriers, adequate support services (e.g., child care, transportation, counseling) must be understood to be a required part of any ABE system. States are currently expected to create integrated workforce development systems that bring together ABE providers, One Stop Centers, community colleges and local employers to ease the transition from one step to the next. That same level of coordinated services should be provided to all learners, not just those looking for work or career training. For this to be effective, rather than being tracked as part of disciplinary accountability schemes, students need to be consulted. Their educational programs should be built with them instead of for them. The level of funding necessary would be far beyond the modest requests put forth by adult literacy activists. Rather than via piecemeal requests for modifications, systemic improvement requires a holistic educational and social services project along the lines of the proposed Green New Deal.

Finally, to move forward the field might have to take a look backward. Re-examining the type of large-scale adult literacy mobilizations that took place in countries like Cuba, Nicaragua, and Guinea Bissau may provide lessons for the contemporary United States. Rather than offering examples of specific classroom methodologies, such as generative codes (Freire, 1970), these

national adult literacy campaigns could provide insight into how best to assess the impact of educational programing at the societal level. Similarly, it will be helpful to revisit the history of labor colleges established in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s (Altenbaugh, 1990). These projects were an attempt to provide the education seen as necessary for successful labor struggles. Rather than working within an existing system developed and funded by the government in coordination with capital, workers created their own educational institutions. These labor colleges, like the national literacy campaigns noted above, can be understood as "a political project with pedagogical implications, not a pedagogical project with political implications" (Brookfield & Holst, 2011, pg. 78). Given the vulnerable and exploited conditions of adult learners stuck in coalescing churns, it is just such a political project that is required.

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Research Article

A Framework for Capacity Building in Adult and Workforce Education Programming

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Abstract

Recent Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act legislation in the United States has initiated increasingly complex and multi-tiered systems for program implementation in the adult learning, career training, and workforce development sectors. The paper presents a conceptual framework to assist in understanding capacity building for implementation of adult and workforce education programming. The framework synthesizes a number of policy models, dimensions, and definitions for program delivery and capacity building. A capacity building framework can be applied for conducting policy analysis, needs assessment, and evaluation to underscore how the execution of ambitious policy initiatives and the sustained use of effective practices in communities and institutions, is more likely to be effective if the implementation process begins with a clear understanding of the program model and policies themselves. It also assists in building an active investment in and intentional cultivation of systemic capacity for implementation. Efforts at executing new initiatives without attending to system-level development and scaffolding support structures are prone to ineffective realization and poor program sustainability.

Keywords: adult education, workforce education, WIOA, policy analysis, Career Pathways, implementation, capacity building

The 2014 Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) legislation carries with it many implications for the trajectory of adult and workforce education (AWE) in the United States (Brown & Holcomb, 2018). The intent of the progressive development of federal legislation and the national Career Pathways (CP) model has been to integrate workforce development and training with adult learning and literacy programs through partnerships and by streamlining policy aims and outcomes. The impact of the WIOA and CP models on state-level workforce education policy, adult learning program implementation, and adult education practice in general cannot be understated (Uvin, 2018). The continued alignment of reporting and assessment requirements has also assigned additional responsibilities to program directors and adult

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educators requiring new professional skillsets and knowledge for effective program and curriculum implementation. However, such AWE mandates and requirements often have not been matched with the additional resources and professional development necessary for effectively carrying them out (Ladinsky, 2017).

Given the complexity of the AWE policy arena, where multiple federal agencies and state-level agencies are involved in developing and implementing educational policy for adult learners, and that the CP model is currently guiding a significant amount of program reform, we argue that a clear capacity building framework is necessary for conducting strategic policy and implementation analyses. A clear framework can be an important tool for both understanding AWE policy, as well as for identifying avenues of action and influence in practice and within the policy arena. We aim to accomplish two things in this article. First, we present a policy analysis framework centered on the notion of capacity building that can be used as a tool for making better sense of policy and its implementation. Second, we argue that a capacity building framework is critical when it comes to implementing adult-centered education programming in our current policy climate and context. We acknowledge that AWE programming varies dramatically from state to state, so our intent in presenting this framework is to offer a point of departure for more intentional policy analysis and to suggest a capacity building approach toward improved delivery of AWE programming.

To accomplish this, we offer an historical overview of the development of the current AWE legislation and CP model to provide context. Then, we articulate a conceptual framework for AWE policy implementation that synthesizes conceptual models, policy domains, and definitions for capacity building. We follow the presentation of the capacity-building framework by presenting an example case of an initiative implemented in Texas to illustrate the importance of capacity building for implementation. Finally, we argue that efforts to carry out AWE initiatives and programming without attending to system-level development and support structures may result in both ineffective implementation and poor program maintainability.

Policy Pathways: How We Got Here

In order to know where we are going, it helps to know where we have been. A brief sketch of more recent AWE policy developments helps contextualize the current policyscape and present why we believe a capacity-building policy analysis framework is critical for educational programming and the carrying out of new initiatives. In the late 1990s, U.S. legislators, the U.S. Department of Education (ED), and adult education leaders communicated a need to pair adult literacy programs with postsecondary education and job training. Policy makers posited that an expanded scope was necessary in order for adult learners to not only improve literacy skills, but also obtain postsecondary education, work skills certification, and other industry recognized credentials (ED, 2013). Consequently, the 1998 Workforce Investment Act (WIA) began an incremental reformation of the diversified and complex AWE delivery system. The stated WIA (1998) purpose was "To consolidate, coordinate, and improve employment, training, literacy, and vocational rehabilitation programs in the United States." The integration of adult education within a workforce framework reflected a growing emphasis on linking literacy, education, and employment services (Uvin, 2018). Similarly,

the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) replaced the 1982 Job Training and Partnership Act, and statewide and local workforce investment systems were established. The initiative aimed to provide workforce investment activities, through statewide and local workforce investment systems, to improve the quality of the workforce, reduce welfare dependency, and enhance national productivity and competitiveness (ED, 2013). From a federal policy standpoint, this is where adult education and workforce training programs were initially wed together.

U.S. federal legislation provided states the opportunity to submit a single unified plan that would address coordination of activities for employment and training, adult basic education, and Perkins Career and Technical Education programs. Of nearly equal importance was the mandate that adult education programs partner with the local workforce development systems. WIA legislation also required the creation of a performance accountability system to assess the effectiveness of AWE programs, holding states accountable to the ED in a systematic way (Roumell, Salajan, & Todoran, 2020). The layers of the AWE system were gradually being formalized through these legislative initiatives, creating a structure connecting local programming to regions, to the state, and finally to the federal level. This formalization carries with it myriad implications for programs and practitioners alike (Brown & Holcomb, 2018).

The federal government further integrated the AWE infrastructure through the outlined CP model which initially appeared in the 2006 Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act (Perkins Act), serving as the precursor of the policy template for the 2014 Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). In 2007, an Interagency Adult Education Working Group was created

within the ED and ordered to identify and review federal programs related to adult education with the purpose of improving the integration of the systems for the delivery of AWE programming. In April 2012, a joint letter was issued by the U.S. Departments of Education, Labor, and Health and Human Services to form a federal partnership articulating a joint commitment in promoting the use of "career pathways" to strengthen the workforce development system through alignment and improvement of employment, training, and education programs (DOL, 2012). This multiagency commitment to coordinate programming across several areas further accelerated reform in AWE policy and programming.

WIOA (2014) consolidated job-training programs under 1998 WIA and further streamlined the process. WIOA (2014) ushered in increased reporting and accountability requirements, the alignment of content and standards between various levels and kind of education, the requirement for workforce development and education partnerships, and diversified stakeholders and providers in both the private and non-profit sectors. The intent of the reform was to establish more uniformity, increase oversight for quality, and improve the effectiveness of AWE for both individuals and for employers who need skilled workers to compete (Uvin, 2018). Needless to say, while most AWE programming across the spectrum is still primarily the responsibility of individual states and programming is locally driven, the current CP model and WIOA federal requirements for funding continue to proliferate and oblige greater centralization of standards, accountability, evidence-based programming and practices, and enhance overall federal oversight (Roumell, Salajan, & Todoran, 2019). These policy initiatives at the federal level, and the multi-agency approach to the CP model, has

established an unprecedented effort at reforming educational programming for adults at all levels and far reaching implications for practice (Brown & Holcomb, 2018).

A Framework to Map Where We are Going

With the renewed (2016) commitment to the CP working group, the six key elements for developing comprehensive CP systems that were included in the April 2012 Joint Letter (DOL, 2012) have been carried forward and are meant to provide a model for states to follow in building an infrastructure for integrated CP systems. The six main elements that comprise the CP model include: building cross-agency partnerships and clarifying roles; identifying industry sectors and engaging employers in business and industry; designing education and training programs; identifying funding needs and sources for implementation; aligning policies and programs between federal, state, and community agencies; and measuring system change and performance (DOL, 2016).

The driving impetus behind this strategic process model and the federal legislation is to develop infrastructure and build systems that have improved capacity for implementing high impact educational programming throughout the ongoing, outlined structured strategic CP process (Mortrude, 2017). Recent research has begun to highlight the need for continued capacity building for implementing meaningful programs and interventions in the field of adult education (Cincinnato, De Wever, Van Keer, & Valcke, 2016; Ladinsky, 2017; McIntyre, 2008; Morgan, 2016). The model bears a striking resemblance to other federal-level capacity building initiatives since the 1990s in areas like community development and health education programming (Lauzon, 2013). For example, Lauzon (2013) describes

the evolution of a capacity building approach in agricultural extension, which emerged in the 1980s and proliferated throughout the 1990s and into the new millennium. In his description, he argues that capacity development requires more than efforts focused on strengthening the economy, emphasizing an approach that requires communities and all levels of stakeholders to become more involved in the planning and implementation of their own policy initiatives and programming. Lauzon highlights the value of stakeholder participation and building capabilities at all levels of implementation.

Much can be learned from capacity development initiatives and other educational and social services programming that have been following capacity building models (similar to the new WIOA framework) for years. Scholars in the area of implementation science have also been developing frameworks for improving the implementation and scaling of evidence-based programming across a variety of disciplines. Horner, Sugai, and Fixsen (2017) point out that the upscaling of evidence-based initiatives depends on a number of factors, and that, "Too often effective practices are proposed without attention to the breadth of systems variables and implementation tools needed to facilitate adoption, reliable use, and sustainability over time, and generalization across settings, and staff" (p. 26).

Struyk, Damon, and Haddaway (2011) offer a basic definition of capacity building for the purpose of evaluation: "Capacity building consists of activities designed to increase the competence and effectiveness of individuals and organizations" (p. 50). Morgan's (2006) description of capacity building refers to "collective abilities," implying that it is the aggregation of skills, knowledge and abilities that enable a system to perform, deliver value, build collaborations, and to continue to

renew itself. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) defines capacity building as,

> The process through which individuals, organizations, and societies obtain and maintain the capabilities to set and achieve their own development objectives over time. Capacity development is not a one-off intervention but an iterative process of design-application-learning-adjustment... Approaching capacity development through this process lens makes for a rigorous and systematic way of supporting it... It also helps promote a common frame of reference for a programmatic response for capacity development. (2008, p. 4)

In order to support capacity building, a framework is helpful in identifying what key capacities already exist, and what additional capacities need to be further developed to reach the outlined program objectives more effectively. In developing and applying a framework for examining current policies and implementation processes, we are better able to compare current existing capacities to the desired capacities necessary for success. A framework for analysis can help generate a more nuanced understanding of how to optimize existing capacities, what capacities are still needed for successful implementation, and how to develop strategies for strengthening overall system and organizational capacity (UNDP, 2008).

One of the stated overarching WIOA aims is the alignment of policies, standards, and goals between federal agencies, as well as with state and local level agencies toward the improvement of infrastructure and organizational capacity to provide evidence-based initiatives (EBIs) and programming that are in alignment with federal and state legislation. The CP process model, however, does not more specifically elaborate on the critical elements and planning practices for building sustainability and maintainability, which we argue are critical components in building infrastructure and community capacity for implementing CP evidence-based strategies and

programming (Foman et al., 2013).

Here, we briefly introduce and articulate seven key elements within a capacity-building framework that can be leveraged for needs assessment, program implementation processes, evaluation design, or policy analysis (at the community, or state level) (UNDP, 2008). The model is a synthesis of the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL, 2008) policy-analysis framework, Roumell's (2017) community-capacity-building dimensions, and the Plested, Edwards, and Jumper-Thurman (2006) community-readiness model employed in community public health programming. The additional policy dimension of cultural congruence addresses the concerns about culture-specific interventions as outlined by Nastasi and Hitchcock (2016).

The CAEL (2008) Adult Learning Policy Review Framework included the following nine areas for policy analysis: governance, strategic plans, performance measures, state agency programs, postsecondary education programs, finance, student financial assistance, consumer information, and stakeholder involvement. In the framework outlined here, the components of capacity building closely mirror the key elements of the CAEL framework, but we also integrated elements that are in alignment with the Federal CP model, as well as elements that help in assessing a system's capacity for the strategic implementation process. This framework includes perspectives regarding contextual implementation considerations, as well as elements to determine the system's capacity to carry out changes in policy and to implement new policies and programming.

The framework we present adds to Horner et al.'s (2017) more formal definition of *community/ organizational implementation capacity,* which

they define as the ability to address the following elements in program implementation:

1. Formal mission or policies that indicate the primary objectives for skills enhancement and individual development.

2. Human resources procedures that recruit and hire individuals with documented competence in multi-tiered systems implementation and orient all new personnel to the aspects of multi-systemic support, and establish accountability measures.

3. Data systems that allow the leadership team, vital administrators, and implementing staff to assess the progress and quality program implementation.

4. Training and coaching capacity that allows improved adoption and consistent use of policies and programs.

5. Technical expertise in the systemic support that assist key personnel in implementing multi-tiered practices with the precision and sophistication needed for the establishment and operation of sustainable programming.

6. Relevant examples of policy and program implementation that are used to develop processes for documenting the feasibility and demonstrating the value of new practices. (Horner et al., 2017, adaptation of their list on page 32).

The success of CP and AWE programming will hinge on the ability of states, regions and

Table 1: Adult and Workforce Education Capacity Building Analysis Framework

CAPACITY BUILDING DIMENSION	QUESTIONS TO GUIDE CB ANALYSIS
Framing and Community Climate	• What are the *prevailing attitudes* of the community regarding the issue? Are stakeholders and the community interested and willing to take initiative and ownership of issue? • How knowledgeable are the stakeholders and community about *key factors* that influence the issue the intervention is intended to address? • How knowledgeable are the stakeholders and community about *current local efforts* to address the issues, their (non)effectiveness? (i.e. current efforts, programs, and policies to address identified issue)
Leadership & Stakeholders	• Is there *leadership buy-in* to the proposed initiative, as well as among the varying levels of stakeholders? • Are the necessary *social-cognitive resources* (*potentials*—beliefs and values) available to help those involved in implementation to carry out the initiative? • Are those involved in implementation, individually and collectively, ready and willing to implement the intervention (*contributions)* both cognitively (e.g. sense making, reflexive monitoring) and behaviorally (collective action/learning)?

Table 1: Adult and Workforce Education Capacity Building Analysis Framework *(continued)*

CAPACITY BUILDING DIMENSION	QUESTIONS TO GUIDE CB ANALYSIS
Evaluation and Data Use	• Are those involved in implementation familiar with conducting evaluation through regular collection and use of data to continually guide decision-making? • Which data are needed, and what data are available? How are data currently used in planning? How are data collected, analyzed, and reported for strategic planning purposes? • To what extent have the intended outcomes of the initiative been achieved *(program impact)*? What were both the intended and unintended outcomes? • To what extent have the somewhat immediate outcomes (*proximal outcomes)* been achieved (community level and participant level data)? • To what extent have the more indirect and long-term (*distal outcomes*) been achieved (state or broader level measures)? • How well are the outcome measures suited to the setting (*consequential validity*)? What are the real consequences of poorly aligned measurement? (poor social validity can undermine program effectiveness)
Planning & Maintainability	• Are the decision-making groups actively collaborating (including planning groups, advisory boards, and all agencies and stakeholders) and is regular cross-system coordinated planning occurring to ensure long-term sustainability? Are any key groups being left out or overlooked? • Is there *coordinated decision-making* between government, funding agencies, private sector, not-for-profit, or other sectors? • To what extent will the initiative be able to continue without external conditional support (grants) and able to maintain current efforts long-term (*maintainability*)? • Are *local resources available* to support ongoing efforts, including people, expertise, time, money, space, information/data, media/dissemination? • What are the social-structural resources (*infrastructure/ capacity*) available for implementation (i.e. social norms, roles, materials, and cognitive resources within the system)?
Evidence-Based Practices	• Is the importance *evidence-based practices* recognized, encouraged, and consistently performed at all levels? • Do individuals have access to the necessary training and professional development for evidence-based practices? • To what extent are the programs/policies being implemented as designed (*program integrity*— fidelity/adherence) paying attention not only to surface level but also deep structural level elements?

Table 1: Adult and Workforce Education Capacity Building Analysis Framework *(continued)*

CAPACITY BUILDING DIMENSION	QUESTIONS TO GUIDE CB ANALYSIS
Cultural Competence & Congruence	• Is the importance of audience appropriate practices that are congruent with the needs of the participants and needs of the community recognized, encouraged, and promoted at all levels? • Are the perspectives of stakeholders regarding the feasibility, importance, probability of success in alignment and congruent (*program acceptability*) with shared worldviews of the communities and participating demographic groups?
Implementer Capabilities	• What is the likelihood that those who are responsible for implementation can operationalize the intervention based on feasibility and actual contextual fit (*capability*)? • Do the people who have to execute the initiative/policies have the necessary knowledge, attitudes, and skills to successfully implement the program with integrity, and to adapt to program needs in a way that is responsive to and meets contextual and cultural needs of the recipients? • Are there sufficient, well-trained personnel, resources, and encouragement of multi-disciplinary training? What is the context of the stakeholders and qualified specialists responsible for carrying out the initiative?

Note: Derived from Plested, Edwards, & Jumper-Thurman (2006); Roumell (2017); and Nastasi & Hitchcock (2016)

providers to build systemic capacity for *inter-organizational learning* (Mariotti, 2012) and knowledge and process management. Examining the seven categories within the framework can help identify needed areas of capacity building for implementation. The framework provides concepts and language to help program leadership develop capacity-building objectives and better communicate the professional and capacity development needs to implementation partners, stakeholders, and policy makers. Developing systemic capacity for implementation requires knowledge about what sources and kinds of data

are available, an understanding of how various kinds of data can be used as indicators for the desired outcomes, personnel who are capable of performing the appropriate data collection, maintenance, and analyses, and leadership who can interpret and effectively use the information to further guide the implementation process (Horner et al., 2017).

The requirements of the new WIOA and CP initiatives demand greater process management and data use capabilities at all levels (Roumell et al., 2019). These added programming requirements put further strains on programs

and providers who are already under-staffed and under-resourced. Several recent studies indicate that these areas of capacity building may be major barriers to CP implementation, due to lack of resources, high staff turnover rates, and lack of continuity at all levels (Couch, Ross, & Vavrek, 2018; McDonnell & Sricone, 2018; Ladinsky, 2017; Prins & Clymer, 2018; Smith, Dillahunt-Aspillaga, & Kenney, 2017). Using such a framework can help leadership and providers identify key areas for professional development, but also help craft the necessary language and baseline assessments to more successfully argue for necessary implementation resources.

Building community and state capacity for systematic data use and evaluation cannot be overemphasized, as the entire federal WIOA and CP implementation model hinges on how well organizations and agencies will be able to use information throughout the entire implementation process (Ladinsky, 2017). Couch et al.'s (2018) findings from their national program review of I-BEST programs emphasized that programs where data collection and evaluation were built into their program implementation were better able to adapt and measure implementation, offering evidence of the crucial role of data and evaluation management in filling important program knowledge gaps. They submit that,

> One potential opportunity for individual states and localities interested in exploring innovative methods for workforce development is to similarly conduct convincing analyses that can help understand what works and why. Data-driven pilot programs offer an opportunity for understanding the mechanisms that help enhance workforce outcomes and increase program retention. (Couch et al., 2018, p. 119)

The capacity of the leadership to effectively utilize data, but also the community/ organization's capacity to generate, collect, maintain, and contribute useful data throughout the process

are instrumental. This is particularly critical for CP, as the efforts are multi-agency collaborations and are dependent on establishing partnerships that require the integration of multiple goals and outcomes. All things considered, Jacobson (2017) foresees substantial challenges when it comes to adopting and implementing common standards and reporting, stating that "states will need to build and sustain robust professional development systems to support their implementation in practice" (p. 23).

Learning From Those Who Have Gone Before Us

As a brief case in point, we will discuss the idea of capacity building and the need for a more nuanced understanding of policy implementation as was experienced within the context of the State of Texas regarding new laws impacting developmental education (DE). While Developmental Education primarily lies within the purview of higher education and the remediation of incoming students, the specialization area has already undergone similar shifts in policy initiatives, standards alignment, changes in assessment practices, and increased data reporting requirements. Much can be learned from the experiences of these educators in their similar plight, without making a negative case or example of any of our current CP programs. That is to say, we can examine a related policy implementation nettle, and learn valuable lessons from those who have implemented such system-wide changes in the past.

Womack's (2018) policy study investigated the planning, implementation, and assessment of the Texas Success Initiative (TSI) which inculcated sweeping changes in DE and was carried out in postsecondary Texas institutions starting in 2010. The purpose of the TSI was to

improve the academic success of underprepared students as they entered postsecondary education institutions across the state (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board [THECB], 2014). The initiative represented a sweeping legislative effort at addressing the low completion rate of transitioning college students in Texas through the promotion of basic remediation and developmental education programming in English reading and writing and math courses.

The definition of DE put forth by the National Association for Developmental Education (NADE, 2017) reads, "Developmental education is a comprehensive process that focuses on the intellectual, social, and emotional growth and development of all students. Developmental education includes, but is not limited to, tutoring, personal/career counseling, academic advisement, and coursework" (n.p.). DE offers remediation for students who are moving from adult basic education to GED, to further postsecondary education programming. The TSI established score requirements on statewide standard Texas assessments for college entrance and established uniform cut-off scores for various levels of DE to be used state-wide. In this sense, the aim of TSI was to establish more consistent entrance and test score requirements across postsecondary institutions, and more uniformity in the DE provisions to improve academic success rates and transfer of DE units—aims not dissimilar to WIOA legislation and CP initiatives.

For brevity, we will use some of the capacity building concepts to summarize Womack's (2018) analysis of the TSI legislation and implementation process. First, the purpose of the policy was to formalize and create common measures and expectations across systems in the area of DE. The primary objective was to improve the basic academic skills individuals need to be successful

in completing postsecondary programs of study. While the population indicated by the policy was limited to students within a defined range of assessment scoring and academic need (which previously had been different between institutions and from system to system), nearly all postsecondary and higher education institutions were implicated in the execution of the new policy. Even though the policy changes seemed straightforward and were intended to affect a defined subset of students, the extent of the required systemic changes were, in actuality, far more extensive than anticipated. Even though the intent of the policy was to provide more clarity in academic expectations, uniformity between educational institutions statewide, and to facilitate DE and smooth transitions for learners into their postsecondary education to improve success rates, Womack's (2018) study clearly demonstrated that the state system and the affected postsecondary institutions were not adequately prepared to carry out the new requirements. The policy intent was clear, but the pathway for integrating the new requirements and implementing the policy was underdeveloped. We have also recently identified similar observations and critiques in the literature pertaining to the WIOA and CP initiatives (Cushing, Therriault, & English, 2017).

While the new law may have seemed reasonable from a policymaker's standpoint, the changes affected many of the basic operations within educational institutions, and the impact of the requirements and the intricacies of making major systemic adjustments were underestimated. Implementation concerns included the processes related to the human resources procedures within institutions (admissions, enrollment, staffing, curriculum), and the competencies and ability of staff responsible for the changes across the multi-tiered systems. In this particular

case, little was done to prepare and orient all personnel and educators to the relevant aspects of the policy or build multi-systemic support that would be needed to carry out the TSI measures. The new requirements were disseminated, but a blueprint for successful implementation was not provided, nor were a support structure or technical assistance developed to help institutions align their own policies, assessments, admissions procedures, student advising, or DE curriculum. Each institution was left to their own devices in figuring out how to integrate the new requirements into their operational structure, and little guidance was provided in terms of how to transition from their individual institution procedures to the new state requirements (Womack, 2018).

The excitement from the supporters of the TSI agenda that spurred the legislation had strong public support, but the initiative did not seem to garner similar levels of support from program directors or practitioners (Womack, 2018). The new standardized tests that were utilized for admission and for placement, for instance, had not been validated and were not viewed favorably by practitioners. The policy recommendations included some strategies for change that had been piloted elsewhere, but were not based on replications or longitudinal data, and so many institutions did not consider the approaches to be evidence-based. For example, acceleration programs and classes to shorten adult students' time-to-graduation were implemented, even though the empirical evidence for their effectiveness was highly contested. Institutions, providers, and educators also received minimal training or guidance on how they were supposed to integrate the new programming.

Little structure was provided in terms of data systems and guidance to allow administrators and implementing staff to assess the progress of how well institutions were doing in carrying out the new DE requirements. Training and coaching were also not provided for those who were responsible for making the necessary adjustments, diminishing their capacity to successfully adopt the new policies in a way that would significantly impact student success. Therefore, the process was largely left up to the DE practitioners to experiment with implementation of the many dimensions of the TSI legislation, as well as to find ways to assess the outcomes and share what they were learning with their colleagues across the state. Womak (2018) argued that an execution strategy was left largely on the shoulders of the existing DE practitioners. Overall, the systemic support necessary in developing the technical expertise and assisting key personnel in implementing multi-tiered practices with the precision needed had not been adequately addressed within the various systems and institutions.

Hoogervorst (2011) asserts that the common failures of education initiatives are most often the result of inadequate strategy execution. In the Texas case, the state tried to carry out several major changes simultaneously but did not fully consider the complexity of the systems that would have to carry out the changes. This particular initiative involved the system of higher education in the state of Texas, which includes 105 institutions, 50 of which are community colleges with multiple campuses (THECB, 2014). Additionally, the implementing agents were comprised of the academic and student services leadership within the structure of each educational institution. Despite the magnitude of change required by the statute, the legislature enacted the TSI without financial support to meet the additional administrative and staffing

needs required for fully implementing the many requirements of the statute (Womack, 2018). Similar concerns have been noted regarding WIOA and CP implementation (Jacobson, 2017; Prins & Clymer, 2018; Smith et al., 2017).

The alignment of authority and system accountability was also a concern. In this case, technically, the TSI is the responsibility of the THECB, but the initiative falls under the purview the Director of Adult and Developmental Education (DADE). This also indicated possible misalignment of authority and responsibility, where DADE actually had no authority to affect the DE decisions, and was only able to furnish explanations, interpretations, and to provide encouragement and limited resources for implementation, and could not compel institutions or practitioners to perform specific actions. As a result, most institutions responded by making bare minimum adjustments merely to be in compliance with the new law, but little more, rendering the overall purpose of the legislation fairly impotent. Most DE faculty and support staff have continued to provide the same services and curriculum as before, meaning that the new requirements aimed at improving DE services have actually had limited potential for improving remediation classes or impacting the overall success rates of adult learners in any meaningful way. Similar questions persist regarding CP implementation, and whether various aspects (career training or other support services) have been merely "tacked on" to already present programs, or only superficially addressed in programs (McDonnell & Soricone, 2018; Smith et al., 2017).

The TSI legislation was not developed in consultation with DE experts, and relevant exemplars of evidence-based initiatives were not used as foundational examples for the design and implementation of the DE initiatives. The new laws were well intended, and the notion of providing some uniformity and improving transitions and flow for students in the wider Texas system of postsecondary education was not lost on the DE practitioners. Nevertheless, the lack of attention to systemic implementation capacity and the magnitude of institutional change required to implement the policies diminished the policy focus: focus on getting students into credit level courses; focus on getting students onto pathways where they can be successful; focus on student progress; focus on a variety of education programs as good career options; and focus on transferable credentials. This may be a case where well-intended policy may have inadvertently over-burdened the personnel implementing the changes, detracting from their overall ability to successfully serve their target population.

Many of the aims and purposes of the TSI were very similar to those of WIOA and the CP initiatives. The TSI legislation and the complexity of the Texas postsecondary education systems bear some resemblance to the federal-level CP efforts with similar policy volition and complexity of implementation. The Texas system is complex, and mirrors AWE policies in that multiple agencies and institutions are involved in decision-making and implementation. The TSI is a case study, a microcosm perhaps, of what WIOA and CP implementation may look like. The example of TSI is a relevant illustration of the importance of a more nuanced analysis of educational policy initiatives and system implementation capacity. As states, systems, and institutions continue to implement WIOA mandates and the CP model, they will need to address similar implementation barriers as those faced in Texas. In fact, Jacobson (2017) recently articulated similar concerns about the complexity of WIOA and CP, specifically

noting issues related to: curriculum and testing standards; disconnections between local and state level planning; concerns about of alignment of authority and oversight (i.e. workforce boards' authority over educational institutions and processes); alignment of metrics and measurement processes; unintended causes of employment driven metrics; and finally issues related to resources and capacity to successfully implement the initiatives. Somehow, it feels as though we've already read this story before. As AWE policy continues to shift within the CP framework, it is in the best interest of practitioners, directors, and institutions to pursue and promote more systematic, structured and cogent policy analyses to identify and more effectively communicate capacity development needs.

Discussion

The TSI is instructive, and Womak's (2018) implementation study offers an example of the kind of policy and implementation analysis such a capacity-building framework can engender. A framework for analyzing AWE initiatives can provide a structure for identifying and understanding implementation dynamics and emphasis, as well as a departure point to develop interview and/or survey protocol for talking to stakeholders and policy makers. A capacity-building conceptual framework can also be used to help structure assessments of infrastructure and implementation analyses at institutional, community, or the state levels. Not only can a capacity-development framework be used to guide data collection and building assessment tools, but it can also be leveraged to identify possible data sources and indicators to for the purpose of evaluation (Ampelrese, 2016; Struyk, Damon, & Haddaway, 2011; UNDP, 2008). These practical applications give practitioners and leadership tools

so they can better communicate their capacity needs as well as their successes.

At the intersection of policy steering in targeted domains and creating commonplace approaches in AWE practice, it is advantageous to utilize a solid conceptual framework to help identify some of the more fundamental capacity-building needs as they come to the fore, namely access to reliable infrastructure, data resources, and the professional development required to carry out the initiatives (McIntyre, 2008). Building capacity helps develop education systems and providers into more nimble conduits for the provision of flexible skills and competencies tailored to the demands, competitive pressures, and uncertainties of a rapidly changing economy (Campbell & Love, 2016). Capacity building is an essential part of upgrading to a long-term perspective for shoring up educational systems to face the imminent transformations in society (Lauzon, 2013). AWE and CP initiatives cannot thrive in a strategic void. Merely mainstreaming standards, data requirements, and procedures will not necessarily equate to meaningful pedagogical implications for adult learner success, or automatically solve the issues of interoperability or sustainability. Creating interoperable systems and establishing common metrics may lead to compliance, but to achieve the kinds of systems integration and transformation that have been outlined, strategic capacity building and active participation are required at all levels. Viable educational reforms will need to go beyond top-down mandates. In order to succeed they will also require participation and meaningful capacity building (especially at local community and state levels). The WIOA and the CP model make the most sense when they are embedded within a participatory and capacity building framework, where the systems feedback loops built into the

policy design are cooperative and active, enabling an dynamic practice-to-policy movement of knowledge back into the designed system.

WIOA has embarked on an ambitious mission to define transecting sets of adult learning competencies and workforce skills applicable in adjoining sectors. These efforts aim to promote a convergence in standards and expectations in adult and postsecondary learning, with an intent of increased cross-recognition of degrees and credentials. However, the desired AWE parity and coordination may not emerge without implementation guidance and continued capacity building. The initiatives require a coherent framework and improved policy incentives, more robust policy scaffolding, and attention to adequate capacity building for implementation.

Unfortunately, it cannot be assumed that capacity building efforts will be initiated at the higher levels of governance. Local leadership and program providers can use the conceptual framework to develop language and make arguments for the necessary capacity building, professional development, and streamlining of resources. Engaging in such a process at the local level, utilizing a capacity-building framework, helps create a reverse path for the mainstreaming of successful AWE and CP initiatives. When successful programs are designed and built locally—for example Washington state's I-BEST or Minnesota's Fast TRAC initiatives—they can then influence other state and eventually federal-level policies, ultimately improving the national uptake of effective programming (practice-to-policy). In developing local capacity and promoting this policy feedback-loop—which is activated by reinforcing the interdependencies between consortia, partnerships, and networks—local and regional level stakeholders can participate in purposefully building the needed capacity to improve the implementation and sustainability of AWE and CP initiatives. Practitioners need the necessary tools to increase the flow of information from practice back up to policy.

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Report from the Field

Hawa Learns to Write: Strategies for Handwriting Instruction

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Abstract

I teach the beginning level English as a Second Language classes at the Don Bosco School for Adults in Kansas City, Missouri. We service refugees and immigrants from all over the world. In the beginning level classroom, many refugee students require guidance and instruction when they use writing utensils. They do not know how to draw basic shapes, and format letters by hand. I have developed a methodology for instructors who encounter the same unique challenge of teaching adults how to write. A series of steps for helping adults develop handwriting skills is presented in the following article. This article is written for adult basic education instructors who hope to improve their students' handwriting ability and proficiency.

Keywords: refugee, writing apprehension, demonstrated effectiveness, proficiency

Hawa was about 5' 8" tall and wore an African print scarf around her head. She had a contagious smile and said, "Teacher" when I met her. As she entered the classroom for the first time, I attempted to hand her a pen for the classroom sign-in sheet. She put her hands up and shook her head saying, "No, Teacher." I quickly realized she did not want to write her name. I took her student identification card and wrote her name for her. I spelled her name aloud as I wrote, showing her how to write the letters correctly, "H-A-W-A." She grinned, and slowly took a seat.

This was not the first time one of my refugee students had apprehensions about writing. When an adult does not know how to write their name in their native language, they seem embarrassed and display overwhelming anxiety. Their facial

expression is unidentifiable: a mix of fear and guilt. After teaching a beginning level English as a Second Language (ESL) class for refugee and immigrant adults for 4 years, I have come to recognize the unique, non-verbal cues that indicates a person is reluctant to write. I have learned the appropriate response and have become very aware of my facial expressions. I communicate with my students through non-verbal gestures and picture dictionaries. It is important that I am perceived by my students as positive and constantly supportive. I develop trusting relationships with my students so that they may learn in a safe environment and I witness authentic success stories.

I have developed a series of instructional strategies that help my students write English

letters coherently. I know other ESL teachers have encountered this challenge in their classrooms and have voiced their concerns about refugee adult students not writing legibly. Therefore, I would like to share my observations, tactics, and conclusions with the adult education community. Hopefully, others will gain insight into this unique writing issue and use lessons I have created which show demonstrated effectiveness in improving writing skills.

Listen Carefully

I begin each class with a listening exercise to determine my students' writing ability. The first three words my students learn are: white board, eraser, and marker. We listen to a series of 12 English letters, and I ask students to write the upper- and lower-case letters on individual whiteboards with dry erase markers. I use an internet website called, "Learning Chocolate," which randomly selects the letters, and I write each letter on a large classroom whiteboard as students listen and write. The website, www.learningchocolate.org, provides a variety of vocabulary activities in several different languages.

I ask the students to listen by cupping my hand and putting it behind my ear while I say "Listen." Then, I motion my hand in pantomime as if I am writing on the white board as I say "Write." We listen to the letters and write each one slowly. This exercise helps them listen for the pronunciation and identify the English alphabet. This "drill" or "warm-up" also prepares students for their formal evaluation test where they are expected to match upper- and lower-case letters.

On Hawa's first day at class, after listening to a few letters, I glanced at her writing. I was shocked to see she was literally scribbling. When given a pencil, Hawa's writing looked similar to that of a 3-year-old. She looked at me with a sarcastic smile on her face again, and I nodded kindly. I honestly believed she had never written before. It has been my experience that students who write in their own language will attempt the English letters with success. I have also had students who could write but could not shape the letters correctly. Hawa was not even forming a line or circle. I knew I had a unique, and special, challenge ahead of me. I was going to teach an adult, who might be challenged with learning disabilities and personal trauma with no formal education, how to hold a pencil correctly and eventually write her own name.

Questions About Students

Several questions arise as I work with refugee students who do not write or write with distinction. My first thought to ponder is, does the student have a learning challenge of which I am not aware? Secondly, has the student attended school in the past? Third, has the student experienced a physical, neurological, or emotional trauma that is affecting their handwriting? Unfortunately, my ability to answer these questions cannot be answered. When students enroll they do not reveal their past educational experiences. I have to evaluate their abilities immediately and instruct them based on their individual needs.

Research regarding adult handwriting is limited. One study by Drempt, McCluskey, and Lannin (2011) helped me evaluate why an adult might not write legibly by summarizing previous research about adult handwriting performance for therapists working with physically impaired patients. According to their research, there are seven areas that affect adult handwriting: legibility, speed, pen grip, pen pressure, handwriting movements, style, and error corrections (Drempt

et al., 2011). Instructors of adults learning to write should be aware that "pen pressure" and "upper limb movements" make a difference when a person is learning to write. Handwriting students might be gripping a pencil incorrectly. The article also reminds the reader, when writing by hand, a writing surface should be positioned parallel to the forearm. Students should be instructed how to create space in between letters to create words, and how to adjust the size of their letters to distinguish between uppercase and lowercase.

Research on how malnourishment or emotional trauma affects handwriting in adulthood is also difficult to find. There are several different aspects of handwriting that can be addressed so students do not repeat the same mistakes. Not all seven factors that affect a person's handwriting is applicable for adult students learning to write by hand. Style and error corrections do not apply to a person who is learning to write for the first time.

 In a modern educated society, we grow up with crayons, pencils, and markers to help us develop writing skills early in life. In contrast, refugees or immigrants with limited writing utensils or resources available throughout childhood could miss the opportunity to learn how to write legibly. This is shocking, and maybe even appalling to people of western society. I have come to learn, even in the year 2019, there are adults who do not know how to write.

Right- or Left-Handed?

When Hawa wrote on the whiteboard for the first time she used her right hand. Adult students might not be aware if they are right- or left-handed for writing purposes. I observe students who are learning to write closely. I pay attention to see what hand they use to lift a cup to drink, or we might play a bean bag toss game so I can observe what hand a student is choosing to use. Simple tactics like this can clarify for me what hand a student should use to write. Deciding if a student is right- or left-handed is the first step in developing handwriting skills. This might seem arbitrary, although it is important because it will take longer for a student to learn how to write if they are forcing themselves to use the wrong hand.

Write a Straight Line

The next step in teaching writing skills is guiding students to write a straight line. I use lined paper and model tracing lines using a pencil. I like to use pencils because students can erase, and a pencil is the primary writing utensil they will use in school. The lines cannot be too close together, so I use a black marker to trace the lines creating adequate space. Then, I take another thin sheet of paper (tracing paper works best) and cover my black lines. Hawa always appreciated when I would deliberately help her write straight lines. She started to develop a vocabulary quickly saying, "Good Hawa." This was a phrase I used often, and students would laugh in class when she would repeat my encouraging words.

Draw Shapes

The English alphabet is a series of lines, curves, and circles. If a person cannot draw a straight line, a half circle, and a full circle, they cannot write an English letter. Therefore, after a student becomes comfortable drawing straight lines, I introduce the vocabulary for shapes and colors. I will display three shapes in different colors: a red circle, blue square, and yellow triangle. I ask students to practice writing the shapes and then have them identify the shapes and colors. Hawa, like other students, enjoyed this activity because they use crayons and learn what it is like to create an art piece. I might say, "Write three red circles."

The students are allowed to draw the circles anywhere on their construction paper. Then I might say, "Write four blue squares." The squares are placed all over the paper, and the art that is created is fascinating and lovely. Instructors will be surprised how difficult it is for people to draw shapes for the first time.

Writing Letters

After Hawa began to create shapes with distinction, I decided to use an alphabet tracing book. I think adults can learn the upper- and lower-case letters simultaneously. They learn the letters faster and can identify them more easily. Specifically, there is a tracing letters sheet published by the Ventures textbook series that has uppercase and lowercase letters along with the numbers one through nine. Plastic sleeves can be placed over the page so a thin white board marker can be used for practice. Again, blackened letters with tracing paper also works well.

Spell Your Name, Please

The first word adults want to write is their own name. Students want to feel a sense of independence for practical reasons. They want to write their name when they enter the classroom, fill out a form when they go to the doctor, or sign a money order. Our name is a part of who we are and indicates from where we came. Therefore, the first phrase my students learn is, "Write your name, please." I recite this phrase often in class, and my students consistently practice writing their names on assignments, whiteboards, and forms. The second phrase my students learn is, "Spell your name, please." The word, "spell," is important

because English speaking people will be asking my students to spell their foreign names each time they state their name.

Conclusion

In my morning beginning level ESL class, I had 21 students who are described by the state as having a low level of literacy and cultural barriers during the 2018-2019 year. Students take the state mandated standardized post-test after 40 hours of instruction. Each year, the overall class statistics are evaluated. The state expects 63% of my students should show improvement. Hawa's class demonstrated a 67% increase in test scores. Without conducting a proper observable qualitative study, I cannot attribute my instructional practices directly to the increase of proficiency. Although, I witnessed the individual improvements of students handwriting and letter identification. By the end of the school year, Hawa was signing her name on the classroom sign-in sheet without assistance.

Developing handwriting skills is an act that helps people gain independence and self-esteem. After attending weeks of class, the expressions on my students' faces became more positive as they learned how use a pencil and improve their handwriting. Writing is a skill that is essential to improving literacy. It should not come as a shock to ESL teachers that they may have students who cannot write. Instead, we should think of non-writing students as a blessing. Their desire to learn is intense and their success directly impacts their quality of life. Students are coming to us for guidance and help, and it is our duty to respond with gratitude, respect, and enthusiasm.

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> **Forum: Building a Better Adult Basic Skills Development System**
>
> *(Part 1 of 3)*

Ten Actions to Build an Adult Basic Skills Development System That Is More Inclusive, Relevant, Efficient, and Sustained

Paul J. Jurmo, Independent Consultant, Basic Skills for Development

Author's Note: This article was written before recent major events (e.g., COVID-19, economic downturn, increased social justice activism, and a presidential campaign) impacted our field and nation. While time limitations don't allow me to update this document to reflect those new realities, the overall message is essentially the same: Adult learners, their families and communities, and our nation can benefit from an expanded and improved system of basic skills development opportunities. If adult educators and other stakeholders work together in thoughtful, creative ways, we can create such a system.

Since the 1980s, work-related adult basic skills programs in the United States have helped learners achieve personal goals, responded to policy requirements, and served other stakeholders including learners' families and communities, employers and labor unions, and diverse service providers. The field has also generated valuable expertise adaptable for future efforts (Bergson-Shilcock, 2019; Bragg, 2019; Mortrude, 2017). However, as a field, we are also faced with significant challenges:

- **Inclusiveness:** We need to more adequately reach diverse populations and other stakeholders impacted by limited basic skills (Bernstein & Vilter, 2018; Hilliard & Dann-Messier, 2015; McHugh & Morawski, 2017; Patterson & Song, 2018; Pleasants McDonnell & Collins, 2017).

- **Relevance:** We need to better respond to the basic skills-related strengths, motivations, and needs of learners and other stakeholders (McHugh & Doxsee, 2018).

- **Efficiency:** We need to more consistently use effective strategies customized to serve learners, manage programs, and build support (Nash & Hewlett, 2017).

- **Sustainability:** Effective services must be learned from and sustained over time (Bragg, 2019; National Commission on Adult Literacy, 2008).

Observers have been raising such concerns about program quality and sustainability since the 1980s (Jurmo, 2020). Sometimes the field has adjusted policy and practice in response. However, these concerns have grown recently as poverty and other challenges (i.e., the changing world of work, declines in union membership, obstacles to integration of immigrants and former inmates into the workforce) have increased for basic-skills-limited adults.

In one example, in response to the nationwide growth in poverty, the Open Door Collective (ODC) has made the economic security of adults with basic skills limitations a primary focus. Since its founding as a national network of adult educators and other stakeholders in 2014, ODC has produced position papers, "Can-Do Guides," and conference presentations[1] showing why and how basic skills programs can collaborate with diverse stakeholders to help diverse adult learner populations (e.g., incumbent workers and job-seekers, refugees and immigrants, current and former inmates) strengthen their economic security and tackle other problems. The Migration Policy Institute and Jobs for the Future are among other organizations calling for similar supports for historically hard-to-employ individuals.

Building on this and other similar work, I propose that adult educators – in partnership with adult learners and other stakeholders – re-think the why's and how's of current adult basic skills efforts and take the following actions to make basic skills education more inclusive, relevant, efficient, and sustained.

Ten Actions

1. Think "high-quality systems."

The idea of building better-coordinated systems of services rather than collections of assorted (and often duplicative, confusing, or inconsistent) programs is not new. "Systems thinking" has underlain efforts to integrate basic skills education with workforce investment boards, career pathways, and other multi-service initiatives for hard-to-employ populations.

Aiming for high quality in our work has likewise been integral to systems-reform efforts like Equipped for the Future (Spangenberg & Watson, 2003).[2] Recognizing the above-described gaps in current efforts, we should now revisit how we define "quality" and emphasize inclusiveness, relevance, efficiency, and sustainability as criteria for adult basic skills systems.

2. Re-define those we serve and how basic skills limitations can impact them.

Discussions of "the adult basic skills problem" often focus on the limitations that adults bring with them and the personal, economic, and social costs of skills gaps. They typically overlook the rich assets that a diverse learner population brings to basic skills education: positive motivations, skills, and knowledge; support systems; and the contributions they make to their own well-being and that of their families, workplaces, and communities. While recognizing and building on these learner strengths, we should – respectfully and accurately – also acknowledge that basic skills limitations can reduce adults' capacity to:

- perform employment-related tasks (e.g., find, apply for, and secure jobs; perform workplace duties and participate in training; understand and protect their rights as workers; transition to retirement);

- manage family responsibilities (e.g., family health and safety, housing, financial and legal tasks, childcare);

- participate in civic roles (e.g., voting, citizenship attainment, community improvement); and,

- attain educational and occupational credentials.

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1 Visit www.opendoorcollective.org for "ODC Papers" and "Resources."

2 For more about Equipped for the Future, visit https://eff.clee.utk.edu/products_services/online_publications.htm .

While adult basic education has historically focused on individuals with basic skill gaps, we should intentionally also consider other stakeholders as potential "secondary" beneficiaries. These are groups who can both benefit from and be actively involved in basic skills efforts. They include learners' families and communities, employers and labor unions, diverse service providers, retailers, and K-12 schools (whose students need support from adult caregivers at home). In sum, a broad definition of the potential beneficiaries and purposes of adult basic education can expand the numbers of individuals and stakeholders served, broaden and deepen the relevance of services, and attract increased resources to the field.

3. Focus on multiple, interwoven purposes for adult education.

Job attainment can be a very worthy goal. However, an overly-narrow focus on gaining employment ignores the facts that adults must perform many other tasks to succeed in the world of work, two-thirds of those with basic skills limitations are already employed;[3] and many potential learners are motivated to improve their basic skills for reasons that are not directly employment-related (e.g., helping their children succeed in school, advancing to post-secondary education, attaining citizenship).

If we want adult basic education to support the well-being (economic and otherwise) of individuals, families, communities, and the nation as a whole, we should advocate for a multi-purpose system in which adult educators and other stakeholders collaborate to help learners perform the multiple responsibilities described above.

4. Plan with an understanding of the contexts in which learners and adult basic education practitioners operate.

To ensure the relevance of our work, avoid obstacles, and take advantage of opportunities, we must understand the social, economic, bureaucratic, and political contexts in which we operate. For example, if we want to help learners succeed in jobs, we must know the jobs available in local industries: their advantages, limitations, and requirements; and other factors (e.g., discrimination, health, safety, transportation, housing) that can support or inhibit workplace success for workers. We should then use our understanding of these factors when planning with workforce investment boards and other entities that track such information. We should continuously monitor program impacts through classroom discussions with learners, interactions with partner agencies, and professional development activities to ensure our efforts' relevance and effectiveness.

5. Take a comprehensive view of "basic skills."

Our field has largely moved beyond focusing solely on "reading instruction," a holdover from when literacy was equated simply with ability to read. Since the 1970s, we have used broader terms like "basic skills" when discussing written and oral language, numeracy, digital literacy, problem-solving, collaboration, and other essential skills adults need in their varied roles. This wider focus allows us to respond to the multiple tasks learners face. But it also challenges us to integrate multiple learning objectives and services into our programs.

To more efficiently define and teach this broader mix of basic skills, we might return to the skills standards of Equipped for the Future (EFF)

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3 See Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) "Skills to Pay the Bills," retrieved October 3, 2019 from http://piaacgateway.com/infographics

(Spangenberg & Watson, 2003), a research-based initiative of the National Institute for Literacy. EFF identified the basic skills adults need to function in work, family, and civic roles and developed practices that adult educators can use to help various learner populations meet their full potential in these areas. The particular skills that programs focus on would vary across learners, the roles they play, the contexts they operate in, and the skills and knowledge they need to strengthen.

6. Creatively customize and efficiently maximize services.

Customizing services to the range of diverse learner populations, learning needs, and other stakeholders is both very important and very challenging. The good news is that our field has already developed resources we can adapt to maximize the impact and efficiency of our efforts.

For example, if we help parents develop basic skills and other assets needed to help their children succeed in school (and thereby prepare our future workforce), we will be helping two generations of learners in a cost-effective way. If we help former inmates earn a high school credential and move into post-secondary education and employment, we also support their children, who are at higher risk of poor academic performance and incarceration, and their communities by reducing the likelihood that former inmates will re-engage in crime (Peterson, Cramer, Kurs, & Fontain, 2015). If we not only help individuals get a job but continue learning after they do so, they are more likely to retain their jobs and continue growing in their careers.

Though instruction will need to be customized to particular learners and their needs, there are many common themes that can be addressed across curricula (e.g., communicating clearly with co-workers and supervisors; managing one's finances; engaging in healthy, safe, and environmentally-

friendly behaviors). Relevant teaching and learning resources and credentials can be organized in a resource collection by topics and applications, adaptable for particular learners and their needs. A candidate for a truck driver position might thus not only develop technical skills specific to operating a vehicle but also learn skills that are transferable to many jobs and life roles such as how to engage in healthy behaviors, manage personal finances, interact with customers and co-workers, and pursue further training and education.

7. Strengthen and expand partnerships that can support programs and learners.

Basic skills programs and learners can benefit from well-planned partnerships with a broad range of stakeholders. For example, health care professionals can provide health education and health care career training to basic skills learners and help make learning facilities more health-friendly. Adult education and health partners can also carry out joint research and advocacy activities. Employers, labor unions, environmental programs, legal services, K-12 schools, libraries, universities, and other institutions can likewise work with adult educators in productive partnerships. Those institutions, in turn, can benefit from having better access to adult learners (to enable health care providers to provide educational and other health services to individuals with limited English proficiency, for example). While establishing and maintaining collaborations require extra work for partners, such collaborations can be a win-win-win for education programs, learners, and other stakeholders.

8. Expand when, where, and how learners can develop basic skills.

While face-to-face instruction in learning centers will remain an important way for adults to develop

basic skills, learners can face many barriers to using learning centers: multiple responsibilities; lack of safe, reliable transportation; remoteness from a center; long program waiting lists; curricular mismatch with learning needs; instructors whom learners are not comfortable with. Many adults might also have had negative experiences in school and be reluctant to repeat such experiences. Even when programs meet learners' needs, learners typically need more "time on task" than many centers can offer.

Adult educators should therefore consider strategies for expanding the learning opportunities available to learners. I propose adopting "learning eco-system" models already being developed in health (Ministry of Health, 2015) and workplace education (Folinsbee & Jurmo, 1994; Hall & Lansbury, 2006)[4] in the United States and other countries, to provide learners with three learning venues:

- Learning centers: These can provide useful face-to-face supports including assessment, instruction, counseling, and referrals to other services. Centers can be based in a variety of locations to maximize convenience. Center staff can also encourage and facilitate learning outside the classroom.

- Self-directed learning: Many learners engage in self-directed (or self-study) activities to enhance their skills and/or achieve other learning goals, using various tools (e.g., print materials, video or audio recordings, informal tutoring from family or friends) (Reder & Strawn, 2006; Sharma, Vanek, & Ascher Webber, 2019).

- Situated learning: Basic skills learners can develop their basic skills, other forms of

knowledge, and self-confidence through authentic practice in real-life contexts such as the workplace, the market or doctor's office, watching television, or reviewing their children's homework. Practicing and fine-tuning skills introduced in programs or in self-directed learning are vital for further building those skills and self-confidence. Though situated learning is often unconscious and unplanned, learners can be taught how to engage in authentic practice in more efficient, reflective ways. Other stakeholders (e.g., employers, health care providers, libraries, retailers) can also be shown how to make their facilities, procedures, products, and services more user-friendly for basic-skills-challenged adults.

Learners can engage in one or more of these forms of learning, moving from one to the other as time, interest, logistics, and other factors allow. Using all three formats in an intentional, organized way can enable learners to accelerate learning and get reflective practice required for mastery of basic skills. Our field already possesses many elements (e.g., formal programs, digital technologies, workplace and health literacy learning models) of this multi-venue model.

9. Recognize adult basic skills education as a profession.

Ironically, while adult educators are often called on to help learners move into family-sustaining jobs, there are relatively few full-time, professional positions in our own field. This contributes to high turnover, reduced program quality and quantity, and a heavy reliance on part-time and/or volunteer staff. We should advocate for more professional staff who are given training in the demanding work of program management and

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4 The EdTechCenter is developing a "21st Century Learning Ecosystem" model (https://edtech.worlded.org/our-work/projects/21learning/).

customizing instructional and other services for varied skill areas and learner populations, career advancement opportunities, and other supports such as professional-level salaries, full-time positions, and benefits. These professionals could come from a wide range of backgrounds and provide leadership, continuity, mentoring, and other supports to learners, staff, and partners, to ensure sustained, high-quality services.[5]

10. Sustain effective services.

High-quality adult basic skills programs require supports from within their respective institutions and community, state, and national levels. These supports include policy guidelines, financial and in-kind resources, professional development, demonstration projects, resource centers, adaptable curricula and assessments, research and evaluation, and peer networks.

Many of these supports already exist (or formerly existed) through federal and state agencies; national and state associations; community-level workforce boards and health coalitions; research institutions; business and labor groups; and entities dealing with special populations or issues. These should be evaluated, learned from, built on, and better coordinated.

Conclusion: Strengthened and New Leadership Needed

I have outlined 10 actions we can take to better serve adult learners through what we might call "a work-family-community integrated adult basic skills development system." But for any of this to happen, we will continue to need strong and sustained leadership – at all levels, across stakeholders, for every system component. Leaders for this demanding but vital work need vision, technical expertise, and the ability to think and work creatively with others. Past and current effective leaders should be recognized, supported, and learned from. At the same time, new leaders should be recruited, nurtured, and sustained with the supports described above, to fill the ranks as services expand and veteran professionals move on. The case for a sustained, well-conceived investment in the development of our field has been made for decades (Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy, 2002). To keep us on track, all involved should remember that this important work can produce tremendous rewards for millions of individuals and for our country's future.

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5 The June 2002 issue of *Focus on Basics* contains useful articles on the theme of "staff development" (http://ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/fob/2002/fob_5d.pdf).

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Response to Paul J. Jurmo

Esther Prins, Pennsylvania State University

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 is has a responsibility to

assist them in redressing these inequalities.

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Response to Paul J. Jurmo

Art Ellison, Former N.H. State Director of Adult Education, Member of the N.H. House Education Committee

Paul Jurmo's "Ten Actions to Build an Adult Basic Skills Development System That is More Inclusive, Relevant, Efficient and Sustained" reviews the recent history of the adult education field and then sets out 10 actions that would substantially improve the delivery system for adult education services in this country.

My reactions to the Paul's action steps are informed by 38 years as the New Hampshire State Director of Adult Education and 2 years as a member of the New Hampshire House serving on the Education Committee.

As Paul says the "idea of building better-coordinated systems of services" is not new. Adult educators have struggled with that concept for much of the last 40 years. This issue has come into even more focus in the last six years with the emphasis in federal adult education legislation (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act [WIOA] of 2014) focusing adult education funding on workforce training. This change left some in the adult education community fighting for a concept of adult education that is much broader than that contained in the new federal law.

An example of this movement can be seen in the Integrated Education and Training portion of WIOA. This title replaced the English Language Civics title in the earlier legislation (Workforce Investment Act of 1994). This section of the law was funded with about 12% of the adult education yearly appropriation. Under the English Language Civics portion of WIA adult education programs developed high quality civic literacy programs (as Paul notes in 2. Re-define those we serve and how basic skills limitations can impact them) that helped students become involved in their communities by understanding how policies were made in their local community and how they could participate in that process. Under WIOA that aspect of the English Language Civics program was greatly reduced in favor of workforce training.

The excellent Equipped for the Future (EFF) (Spangenberg & Watson, 2003) project that Paul mentions as part of expanding how learners can develop basic skills is a prime example of how the adult education field can conceptualize a major turning point for instruction. However, the reluctance of the field to integrate even separate elements of that work speaks to the difficulty that arises with institutions/funding sources and the field as a whole to what would be a huge expansion of the goals and practice of adult education. In fact, as I noted above with the example of EL Civics and Integrated Education and Training (IET) programs the mission of the field tends to be narrowing rather than expanding.

Paul's focus on the need to recognize the strengths of adult education students should be a guiding principle for all adult educators. While students

come to programs with some very specific learning needs we must understand their strengths and provide the setting for them to grow as well.

Many of Paul's well thought out actions would call for a significant increase in adult education funding (i.e., recognize adult basic skills education as a profession, expand when, where and how learners can develop basic skills, take a comprehensive view of basic skills, recognizing adult basic skills education as a profession) which brings us to the age old elephant in the room for adult educators: there is not enough money in the system to carry out the work that would move adult education into a much more prominent place in the education universe of our country.

That is not to say that we have not made some progress (New Hampshire is considering a law to open up its state funded Job Training Fund to adult education programs and other states have been successful in working with job training partner organizations) but the very real needs that Paul lays out will require an unprecedented movement by the entire adult education community that focuses on the policy-making institutions on the state and federal levels.

Given the resources that will be needed to implement Paul's Ten Actions, I have listed some major recommendations relating to advocacy that could be used to carry out that work.

The Power of Student Advocates

State advocacy campaigns for adult education funding that focus on student involvement have been very successful in some states and cities. Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Arizona, Los Angeles, New York City, Minnesota, and Pennsylvania have done some excellent work in this regard. Student led advocacy campaigns are almost always more successful than those conceived and

carried out by adult educators alone.

Student focused advocacy campaigns not only develop and amplify student voices for the ongoing campaign but their participation gives them tools and skills that will be used throughout their lives as they strive to take control of the institutions with which they will interact.

The Impact of Student Voices on Policy Makers

State and federal policy makers, particularly those in political office, respond to their constituents, which in this case are adult students. While research studies and statistical reports may have some place in an advocacy campaign they will always pale when compared to the power of constituent voices.

Student voices are always communicated to policy makers through personal stories. The format for student communications has always been: a description of why the student enrolled in the program, what they will do when they finish and a request (the ask) of "support adult education," or "support more funding for adult education."

As a state legislator, I receive thousands of letters/emails asking me to support a particular action. Over 98% of them are form letters from lobbying groups that are sent by their members. On the opening day of the New Hampshire House Education Committee last year, the Chair informed all of the members that the "only individualize communications that you receive will be from adult education students and there will be lots of them."

Adult Educators as Advocates

In general adult educators are uncomfortable with the concept of advocacy, particularly when it takes

on a political focus, as it almost always does. Some of this hesitancy may be linked to the federal adult education policy makers, who take a negative view of even voter registration activities, but it is also related to the lack of political awareness of many staff. In this regard we must all be encouraged by the number of states where recently teachers have risen up to confront policy makers over issues of pay, classroom teaching conditions and overall funding for schools, indicating that they understand they are willing to advocate for their needs and the needs of their students.

The Focus of Advocacy Campaigns

Advocacy efforts should be focused on the state level since 75% of funding for adult education programs comes from the states. An additional benefit of this funding pattern is that state adult education funds do not need to follow WIOA regulations. A number of states have begun disconnecting their state adult education funded programs from those funded with WIOA money. This allows them much more flexibility in program design and practice. New York state is a good example.

The roadmap that Paul has laid out is comprehensive and if followed would move adult education into the forefront of adult learning in our country. In order to make that happen there is a need for a massive campaign, led by inspired adult educators and hundreds of thousands of students that will focus on the institutions that could provide the resources to make Paul's vision come true.

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Resource Review

Review of *Narratives of Adult English Learners and Teachers: Practical Applications*

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Both current adult English as a Second Language (ESL) practitioners and those who aspire to work in the field of adult ESL will benefit from reading Clarena Larrotta's book. The book summarizes interviews and observations of adult learners and ESL instructors in central Texas as well as graduate students preparing to become teachers. Through case studies, Clarena Larrotta honors the voices and experiences of adult English learners and their teachers. Drawing from the narratives featured in these case studies, the author underscores effective instructional practices. She also offers words of critique to highlight some of the challenges she sees and to offer suggestions for supporting immigrants who are seeking to learn English.

Larrotta's qualitative research is framed around the concept of "engaged scholarship" which seeks to support a meaningful, collaborative, and reciprocal relationship between the university and the community for the benefit of all those involved. This work seeks to emulate, validate, and promote Barkhuizen's (2007, 2014) narrative approach to research and teaching practice which engages teachers and learners in reflecting upon their personal stories as a means to deepen the learning of the adult students and their instructors as well as the researcher. These stories will resonate with practitioners working in the field of adult ESL.

Larrotta appreciates the importance of second language acquisition theory and emphasizes the value of a learner-centered pedagogy based on the principles of Paolo Freire. Her approach begins with the assumption that every adult learner has prior knowledge, strengths, and talents, i.e., "funds of knowledge," that should be drawn upon for learning. In addition, she explains that language instruction should engage learners in meaningful, authentic language experiences.
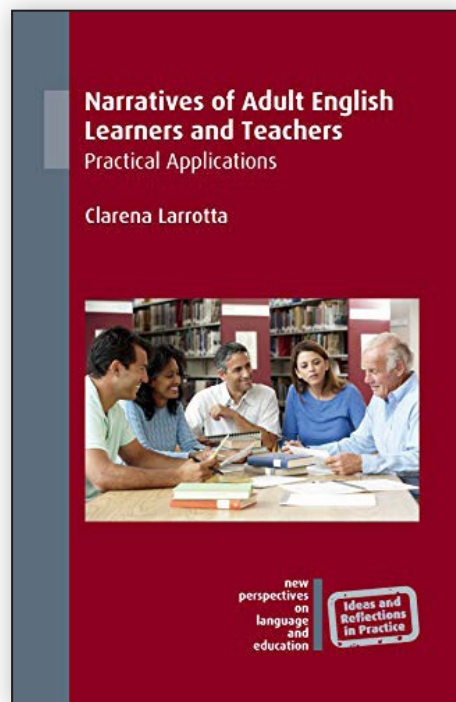
Larrotta, C. (2019). *Narratives of Adult English Learners and Teachers: Practical Applications.* Blue Ridge Summit, PA: Multilingual Matters. 133 pages. $34.95 Paperback. ISBN: 978-1788923170

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Dialogue between learner and teacher are at the heart of the matter for the purpose of discovering what is important to learners. The stories from adult learners and teachers illustrate how building on learners' strengths supports them to achieve their personal goals.

The chapters in the first section of the book highlight learners' voices related to reading, transitioning from oral language to print, building confidence through family literacy, and exploring adult learner motivations. The chapters in the second section feature the voices of practitioners who teach in religious organizations as well as libraries. There is also a chapter in this section devoted to training teachers as well as one on negotiating an adult ESL curriculum in collaboration with adult learners.

Each chapter is organized in a similar fashion by first offering a word of explanation related to the content, followed by the stories of adult learners and teachers in their own voices. Larrotta adds valuable commentary to the narratives by expanding on theoretical principles as well as by offering concrete suggestions for programs serving immigrants. At the end of each chapter, readers will find specific recommendations for practice and a set of questions for discussion.

There are not many books that describe the world of adult ESL; for that reason alone, this book is a welcome contribution. Larrotta's text pays respect to the teachers, graduate students, and adult learners featured in the book and describes their context in some detail. In portraying the various settings, the author does so with candor, which acknowledges the challenges adult literacy practitioners often face including limited instructional resources and training opportunities available to teachers and volunteers.

While the book is certainly valuable overall, there are some minor issues that could be improved. The authorial voice in a few places in the text is unclear. Larrotta usually uses third person to refer to herself; however, there are also some first-person references that create a bit of confusion. For instance, it is unclear whether Larrotta is the teacher described in chapter 2 who worked with Alberto while he was reading the novel, *The Kingdom of the Golden Dragon,* by Isabel Allende. Later, in chapter 3 when describing an after-school literacy class, the author states, "I was the instructor …," but on the same page refers to "the instructor" in the third person.

The book weaves together practice and theory in a compelling way; however, the transitions between the two could, at times, be improved. In a few places, the lack of an appropriate transition makes the text somewhat unclear. In addition, while not essential to the overall value of this resource, the photos featured are of poor quality.

Putting the minor weaknesses aside, those serving adult English learners as well as anyone who wants to better understand the field of adult ESL will learn much from reading this book. By placing the voices of teachers and learners at the center, the text leaves the reader with a complex mosaic of the field as it exists today. The solid theoretical underpinnings of Larrotta's words, the concomitant examples of actual programming, and the author's concrete recommendations for ways to enhance the work being done make this text a worthwhile read.

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Technology Solutions for Adult Basic Skills Challenges

Engaging Technology

David J. Rosen, Newsome Associates

Each Technology Solutions for Adult Basic Skills Challenges column begins with a common challenge facing adult basic skills practitioners. Solutions offered for these challenges, at least in part through the use of technology, include hardware or software applications such as websites, course management systems, learning management systems, and apps for mobile devices. Each article begins with a description of a teaching challenge, and then examines solutions that involve the use of technology.

Description of the Challenge

When this column was written, most or all adult basic skills education as well as K-12 and higher education were being delivered remotely; many teachers who were new to remote or online teaching were faced with how to keep students engaged. Online courses have a reputation, sometimes but not always deserved, for being tedious, boring, or irrelevant to the challenges of adult learners' daily lives. Because so much of what else happens online is designed to be engaging or entertaining, such as movies, online gaming, social media, and instant messaging, online teachers have an especially difficult challenge to engage learners.

Some might argue that when students have difficulty getting online and maintaining the access and bandwidth needed for online learning, the technology itself is a reason that some learners do not get engaged. They also point out that the digital divide in the United States, which has received new attention as a result of the pandemic, may be exacerbated for low-income families because of the loss of their jobs that are needed to pay for internet hardware and access from home.

Nevertheless, some teachers and adult learners have managed to overcome these challenges and to have engaging online teaching and learning. In this *Technology Solutions* column, we will look at what technology they use, and what they do with it. If you are reading this when in-person learning is again possible, you may still find this column useful if you are thinking about what in the online part of your blended learning approach could engage your students.

Possible Solutions

1. **Find online equivalents to what engages students in your in-person classes.**

    Many adult basic skills educators, especially those who teach English language learners online, have found the free app called WhatsApp useful and engaging. Nearly all ESOL/ESL learners now have a smartphone and many of them use WhatsApp for communicating with family and friends in the United States and in their countries of origin. Although using WhatsApp for learning purposes is new to them, the app

itself is familiar and comfortable. There have been several good discussions in the LINCS English Language Acquisition and Integrating Technology groups about using WhatsApp. To find them, go to https://community.lincs.ed.gov/ and, using the Search feature, type in "WhatsApp." Especially pertinent to learner engagement is an effort in the LINCS English Language Acquisition group by five very experienced adult ESOL/ESL teachers and teacher educators from across the country to identify ways that WhatsApp could approximate what teachers have successfully done in in-person classes. https://community.lincs.ed.gov/group/20/discussion/whatsapp-online-equivalents-person-teaching-practices

2. **Find software, including apps, that are <u>designed</u> to engage students in an online learning environment.**

Flipgrid (free) is a video discussion platform that enables learners to share short, easily-made videos on a computer or smartphone in response to their teachers' specific assignment videos that have also been made using Flipgrid. Here are some examples: adult learners who are new to an online class could easily introduce themselves, and their families if they wish, in a relaxed way, in videos that range from 30 to 60 seconds. If you teach numeracy or math, you could ask students who have found a solution to a math problem to explain their thinking, in a 2-minute video shared with the class. If you teach immigrants learning English, you could ask them to make a short video – in English – in which they role-play introducing themselves to a new neighbor, to someone new at work, or to the parent of one of their children's new friends. You could give them a framework of sentence starters to complete, such as: "Hello, my name is

_____." "I am _____." "I am looking forward to _____." "I hope that we _____." If you teach reading, you could assign students stories or articles to read and then do a video review. You could provide points for them to address in their two- or three-minute review such as the title, author, theme(s), main idea(s), summary of the characters and plot, or what they especially liked or did not like about the story or article. If you teach high school equivalence exam preparation you could ask students to respond to questions about a critical current event as idea starters for an essay about the event. If you teach writing, you could ask students to review a book, movie, or television show in writing, and then summarize it in a succinct, one-minute Flipgrid video.

Created in 2012 by Dr. Charlie Miller, a professor of design at the University of Minnesota, to use with his doctoral students, Flipgrid has been used by millions of educators and learners from PreK to PhD. It's a website in which teachers/instructors create "grids" as prompts for video discussions. In each grid, a teacher can ask a question, called a "topic" and their students can post video responses that appear in a tiled grid display.

The name "Flipgrid" may refer to a "flipped classroom" model in which a teacher assigns a homework question for students to respond to with a short video. Then, in class, the students

watch and discuss their video responses. Flipgrid offers a collection called the Disco Library that has a wide range of topic videos shared by teachers around the world. A Flipgrid blog and Twitter feed also offer lots of helpful tips and ideas for using Flipgrid with students. Some teachers have found that Flipgrid helps students to practice and build their social skills and connect with one another, fostering an online and/or in-person learning community. Flipgrid can be accessed free through its website, and is available for download at the iOS App Store and the Google Play Store.

- How to get started with Flipgrid: http://blog.flipgrid.com/news/highered

- Ideas for using Flipgrid: https://blog.flipgrid.com/news/category/Ideas Check out the 11 "Tips for the Camera Shy" October 2, 2019.

PowToon is a cartoon video maker that has a free trial version and, from my experience, is easy to learn. With it, teachers can make short, engaging, animated videos that learners often say they like.

- English language professor Helaine Marshall, for example, has developed this engaging PowToon video to introduce her graduate students to English grammar.

Adult Literacy XPRIZE Finalist Apps. As you may know, the Adult Literacy XPRIZE was a multi-year international competition in which teams of software developers created apps for basic level adult English language learners and so-called "zero to three" level native speakers of English who wanted to acquire or improve reading and writing skills. To find descriptions of the finalists visit https://bit.ly/3lUQXQj. Some of these apps use game strategies, short entertaining videos, music and personal engagement strategies. Some users of at least one, Learning Upgrade, are so engaged that they "binge learn" late at night, after their children are in bed, when they have time for themselves. Instead of playing games on their smartphone, they do hours of engaging Learning Upgrade lessons.

3. **Use the capabilities of particular electronic or digital tools that enhance personalization, relationship-building, encouragement, and confidence-building.**

   Here is a short list of mostly familiar online communication tools that adult basic skills teachers have used to personalize their teaching-learning relationships with their students:

   - Telephone and telephone conferencing

   - Email

   - Instant messaging

   - One-on-one screen sharing software such as join.me

   - Nudge software to remind students of their goals, objectives, commitments, scheduled meetings, etc. One example of nudge software is SignalVine

   - Free workgroup software such as Google Groups or Slack.

4. **Re-design your instruction for a "new normal" in which you offer both online and in-person engaging choices for all your teaching that together meet the full range of students' learning needs under normal and emergency circumstances.**

Some adult learners want only in-person, real-time classes; some want only remote classes or asynchronous instruction; some want both; some start out with in-person but then want to (or must) shift to remote learning; some may start out online but miss real-time, in-person interaction; some, who prefer classes in-person but cannot attend them all, can mix modes. This way of blending learning, in which each mode includes a complete curriculum of lessons that address the same content standards, has come to be called "blendflex" or "hyflex" teaching and learning. For many adult learners it can mean not having to drop out of a class but, instead, to shift their mode of learning. This can also be a benefit to programs, increasing student retention, so this design may have appeal to both adult basic skills program administrators and adult learners. Its design, however, is complex, and its management, by a teacher, may be more than some teachers can or wish to do. The model can be built a step at a time, however, with the goal of a fully implemented project in several years. Visit https://bit.ly/3hXks1p for more information about these higher education Blendflex and HyFlex models.

Reflections

Technology may offer a broader range of solutions for designing engaging classes or tutorials, but it cannot, by itself, address learners' needs. With or without the help of technology, teachers' must ask about and listen to adult students' perceptions of their needs, and do this with each new group of students so that over time their program has a good sense of the range of students' needs, and of the patterns of widely-held needs such as scheduling flexibility, that may be stable from year to year. Engaging and effective teaching -- classes, tutorials, curricula or programs – whether in-person or online, is built from an understanding of students' needs and goals, and from knowledge about what is effective in addressing them.

There is much more to engagement than using technology, of course. Teaching styles play an important part, as does the opportunity for learners to actively engage in their learning, for example through learning projects, role playing, or other kinds of active, participatory learning. As should always be the case in a teaching and learning context, technology is a set of tools, in this case digital tools, in service of education goals and objectives, and of learners.

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