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Contextualizing Adult Education: Learning from Six Decades of Experience and Research

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With roots extending back to at least the 1960s, the “contextualized” approach to adult basic skills education seeks to make learning relevant to and integrated with academic topics and/or real-world interests of learners. This approach also encourages practitioners to integrate (i.e., coordinate, combine, interweave, blend) instruction with other supports such as job training and placement or health services which they or other stakeholders provide. Diverse contextualized basic education models have been developed for children, youth, and adults, in formal and non-formal education settings, and inside and outside the United States. While recent contextualized programs in the U.S. have focused heavily on helping learners advance in careers and education, contextualized education can also focus on health, civic engagement, and other societal goals and areas of specific interest to learners.

Examples of Contextualization

In what were then called “developing” countries, contextualized adult literacy programs were developed in the 1960s through 1980s that taught reading and

other basic skills needed for work, community development, and public health (Anzalone & McLaughlin, 1983; United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, 1976). Some countries incorporated literacy education into efforts to transform socio-political systems from colonialism to more egalitarian and democratic societies. These “education for liberation” efforts often used a dialogical, problem-posing approach in which learners collaboratively analyzed social and other problems and planned actions to address them (Prieto, 1981; Freire, 1970). In some cases, these international initiatives informed and inspired adult basic skills work in the U.S.

In the 1960s American South, civil rights activists enacted contextualized education when they created Freedom Schools to help less-educated African Americans develop reading skills needed to pass the state-required literacy tests for voter registration (Adams & Horton, 1975). By the 1980s, an estimated 5,000 to 7,000 community-based organizations were providing basic skills instruction to help low-income residents deal with personal and community needs including employment, marital conflict, lead poisoning, health care, and pollution

(Merrifield, White, & Bingman, 1994; Jurmo 1987; Business Council for Effective Literacy, 1986).

Workplace basic education for incumbent workers became a major focus of U.S. adult literacy efforts from the mid-1980s to later 1990s (Jurmo, 2020). Educators in this arena were encouraged to take a “functional context” approach, focusing on the particular written and oral language, numeracy, and other basic skills (e.g., problem-solving) workers needed for current and future jobs.

Family literacy programs also featured contextualized curricula customized to the needs and interests of particular adult populations and their learning goals (Kerka, 1991; Nickse, 1990). One version helped parents develop skills and other abilities to help their young children succeed in school. Other programs were broader, helping parents and guardians carry out family tasks like preparing healthy foods and managing household finances.

In the later 1990s, federal policies promoted contextualized college and career pathway programs to help learners gain family-sustaining employment. From then until now, adult educators have also continued to help learners carry out tasks not so directly work-related. These include passing the U.S. citizenship test (Kallenbach et al, 2013), voting (New England Literacy Resource Center, 2008), managing personal and family health (Rudd, 2002; Hohn, 1997), dealing with environmental issues (Jurmo, 2019), and transitioning into communities from incarceration (Spangenberg, 2004) or other countries (Wrigley & Guth, 1992).

Research and Other Supports for Contextualized Education

Until the mid-1970s, adult literacy in the U.S. was typically defined by grade-completion data from the U.S. Census. This changed when, in 1977, the U.S. Department of Education issued the Adult Performance Level (APL) Study which measured

Americans’ abilities to perform literacy tasks related to work, health, financial, and consumer roles (University of Texas at Austin, 1977). By focusing on contextualized skills, the APL shaped the content and planning of U.S. adult literacy efforts for the subsequent two decades. This is especially true with regard to instructional resources.

To produce curricula contextualized to real-world uses of basic skills, adult educators drew on experience and research in cognitive science, sociolinguistics, job training, and other fields. They created new, contextualized models designed to help learners connect the learning process to their personal goals and build on their existing strengths. Learners were given opportunities—inside and outside the classroom—to incrementally develop those skills and related functional knowledge through systematic application, reflection, and self-correction. This approach was seen as consistent with how people naturally learn and as a more effective educational strategy (Gillespie, 2002; Sticht, 1997; Wrigley & Guth, 1992). This approach was further developed in major federal initiatives, described below.

■ Responding to Workforce Needs

Since the 1980s, employers and policy makers have questioned the readiness of U.S. workers to perform social and technical tasks in a changing workplace (Imel, 2003). In response, funding has supported work-related basic education, initially for incumbent workers and—since the later 1990s—for job-seekers. Multiple guidebooks (Philippi, 1991; Business Council for Effective Literacy, 1987; Mikulecky & Lloyd, 1985) described why contextualized curricula were important for workforce education, how to identify worker basic skills needs, and how to develop job-related curricula and other supports for workers.

Some involved in workplace education (Gillespie, 1996; Evaluation Research, 1992; Sarmiento

& Kay, 1990; Añorve, 1989; Soifer et al, 1990; Auerbach & Wallerstein, 1987) proposed worker-centered learning models emphasizing worker participation in setting learning objectives and in the learning process itself. Worker-centered programs were designed to help workers improve productivity, ensure workplace safety and health, advance in their careers, manage salaries and benefits, and/or understand their rights and responsibilities as workers. Curricula used participatory strategies like problem-solving teams and project-based learning in which learners analyzed workplace processes and conditions.

■ **Making Contextualization a Core Principle of Adult Basic Skills Systems**

Building on the previous decade's field-testing of contextualized curricula in workplaces and other settings, in the mid-1990s the National Institute for Literacy launched Equipped for the Future (EFF). This was a major adult literacy reform initiative that drew on research to clarify the basic skills that U.S. adults need to fulfill work, family, and civic roles. EFF team members then developed guidelines for effective curricula related to those role-based skills, prepared sample instructional and assessment tools, and identified program supports needed from policy makers and funders. EFF curricula emphasized contextualized instruction to ensure learning is meaningful, builds on learners' prior knowledge, and is applicable to real-world tasks outside the program context (Stein, 2000).

In addition to EFF, from the 1980s through early 2000s the contextualized approach was advanced by research and implementation literature, including the kinds of reports, research, curricula, and policy papers cited here and by a broad range of governmental and nongovernmental organizations. Of particular importance, a 2019 review of evaluations of U.S. career and

educational pathway programs indicated that carefully designed contextualized curricula can help adult learners advance in employment and education when supported with other relevant services such as counseling and links to employers (Bragg, 2019).

■ **Contextualized Education Now**

The concept of contextualized education is now widely accepted within the U.S. adult literacy field. However, implementation, formats, and quality of contextualized education vary. While robust examples exist, some programs struggle to fully enact this approach. For example, they may draw from workbooks focused on day-to-day uses of basic skills presumably relevant for learners, without doing a more in-depth assessment of learner needs or seeking more-authentic texts and tasks for instruction. This might be due to instructors' lack of professional training or prior experience, limited planning time, or inadequate budgets. Some instructors might also believe it is important to drill learners on basic skills in stand-alone activities before engaging them in real-life applications. Clearly, to be effective, contextualized programs require careful preparation and other supports.

Contextualizing Practice

The good news is that adult educators interested in adopting contextualized practices have many models and resources from which to learn. Both veteran and novice adult educators interested in implementing a contextualized approach should take the time to read the kinds of sources cited in this document. Such background research can help practitioners expand their understanding of the whys and hows of contextualized learning. Drawing on our own review of these resources, we offer the following suggestions for those wishing to design and implement high-quality contextualized education.

■ Organize Learning Around Adult Roles

Consider organizing learning activities around one or more of the four roles adults typically assume: worker, family member, community member, and lifelong learner. Instruction might focus on the basic skills associated with each role and its corresponding tasks listed below:

WORKER

Career exploration, work readiness, job tasks, safety and health, salary and benefits, worker rights, entrepreneurship, union participation, and retirement;

FAMILY MEMBER

Managing children's academic success, family health, childcare, eldercare, finances, housing, and transportation;

CIVIC/COMMUNITY MEMBER

Building positive community relations, addressing community problems, and participating in democratic institutions;

LIFELONG LEARNER

Preparing for post-secondary education and training for economic and social mobility.

Establish Partnerships

Learners come from many kinds of demographic groups and backgrounds, with multiple motivations and needs vis-à-vis learning. Depending on the learners and their goals, educators might create partnerships with health-service providers, employers or labor unions, workforce centers, community groups, or others who can support and enhance opportunities for contextualized learning. Also consider serving new learner populations and partnering with new stakeholder groups, as a way to respond to a broader range of learners and community stakeholders.

■ Adapt a Range of Planning Approaches

One planning strategy is to use an “off-the-shelf” curriculum with pre-written lesson plans designed to teach written or oral language commonly found in a particular context (e.g., at the store, workplace, hospital). Another approach is to work with a subject-matter expert to identify applications of basic skills required in a relevant situation (e.g., filling out forms used in a job or online store, communicating with healthcare providers) and then design curricula related to those skills. A third approach is for instructors to ask learners individually or in a group—prior to the start of the program, in initial sessions, and periodically thereafter—about their purposes for improving their basic skills, their skill strengths and limitations, and how they like to learn. Instructors and learners can then co-create learning activities specifically tailored to learners' needs and interests. These approaches can be used in various combinations. Each of them has advantages and disadvantages. This points to the importance of instructor reflection on which approaches work for their learners' purposes and situations, given the time and other assets available.

To be sustainable, educators should build replicable, adaptable program models that can be efficiently re-used and customized as needed. For example, a module on staying healthy could be adapted for use in a family literacy, job-readiness, workplace, or correctional education program.

■ Consider Delivery Approaches

Direct Instruction, Participatory Instruction, or a Combination. In *direct instruction*, instructors teach basic skills needed for a particular situation (e.g., vocabulary to pass a CNA licensing exam) and learners work to master them through memorization and other forms of practice. Instructors maintain much of the control of content and process.

In a *participatory* approach, learners actively engage in setting goals and carrying out activities in which they learn through hands-on practice via simulations, research, project-based learning (Wrigley, 1998), language experience writing (Auerbach, 1992), problem-solving, field trips, or using materials commonly found in relevant contexts (Wrigley & Guth, 1992).

Note that the direct and participatory approaches can be combined. For example, learners might initially memorize names of parts of the body or of equipment used by CNAs, then practice using that vocabulary in a role-play followed by individual and/or group analysis of what it was like to try to use that vocabulary. The point here is to not stop at rote memorization but to also engage learners in more authentic uses of skills followed by reflection and self-correction. In that way, learners think for themselves rather than depending on the teacher to do most of the thinking and correcting.

Delivery Modes and Venues. Instructors should take advantage of the many learning resources available to them and their learners, to enhance both the quality and the quantity of the learning that learners engage in. Instructors can use several media (e.g., hard copy and digital materials including various types of narrative and graphic presentations, computer programs and online resources, audio and video recordings, telephones and other modes of delivering content to learners) and performing and visual arts. Varied forms of authentic learning can help make learning fun and engaging, take advantage of learners' various

learning styles, and reinforce the idea that skills should be put to use in the real world. Depending on the learners and their goals, learning activities might take place at alternative locations including workplaces, union halls, community centers, public libraries, correctional facilities, and health centers. These venues should be convenient and welcoming and equipped with material and human resources for adult learning.

■ Advocate for Contextualized Education

Many successful contextualized programs have—after a rewarding period of development, learning by both students and staff, and publication of reports and resource materials—withered due to lack of material or political support. Joint advocacy by educators, learners, and partners is needed to create policies, funding, and accountability measures that can sustain contextualization.

Conclusion

Contextualized education is not one-size-fits-all, nor is it automatically successful when implemented. It requires time and resources, thoughtful planning, and continuous improvement by educators, learners, and other supporters. If done well and supported over time, it has great potential for helping adult learners and our society meet multiple important goals. By making programs relevant to family, community, and economic development, supporters of contextualized education can also raise the visibility of and support for adult basic education as a vital profession and a partner in creating stronger communities.

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