

Volume 5 | Issue 2 | 2023

ISSN 2642-3669

# ADULT LITERACY EDUCATION:

---

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF  
LITERACY, LANGUAGE, AND NUMERACY

# Adult Literacy Education:

## *The International Journal of Literacy, Language, and Numeracy*

*Adult Literacy Education* is published three a year by ProLiteracy in partnership with Rutgers University.

### CO-EDITORS:

**Alisa Belzer**

Rutgers University

**Amy D. Rose**

Northern Illinois University

**Heather A. Brown**

A.T. Still University

### EDITORIAL ASSISTANT:

**Xenia M. Cox**

Rutgers University

### BOOK REVIEW EDITOR

**Daphne Greenberg**

Georgia State University

### RESOURCE REVIEW EDITOR

**Susan Finn Miller**

LLIU13 Community Education

### LEVERAGING TECHNOLOGY TO PROMOTE ADULT LEARNING:

**Sarah Cacicio**

Adult Literacy & Learning  
Impact Network

### STAFF:

**Lauren Osowski**

Project Manager

**Cathi Miller**

Graphic Designer

Manuscripts should be submitted directly to the Journal through the online submission platform which can be found at: <https://proliteracy.org/ALE-Journal>. Full details, and author guidelines can be found online.

### Copyright Permission:

Permission request to photocopy or otherwise reproduce material published in this journal should be submitted to ProLiteracy at [ALEJournal@ProLiteracy.org](mailto:ALEJournal@ProLiteracy.org).

## MISSION STATEMENT

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).

## CONSULTING EDITORS:

**Sonya L. Armstrong**  
Texas State University

**Hal Beder**  
Rutgers University  
(Emeritus)

**Jim Berger**  
Georgia College

**Sondra Cuban**  
Western Washington  
University

**Sam Duncan**  
UCL Institute of  
Education, Department of  
Education, Practice and  
Society

**Aydin Yücesan  
Durgunoglu**  
University of Minnesota  
Duluth

**Susan Finn Miller**  
LLIU13 Community  
Education

**Elisabeth Gee**  
Arizona State University

**Gabrielle Gerhard**  
Seattle Central College  
& Curriculum Research  
Group

**Lynda Ginsburg**  
Rutgers University  
(retired)

**Daphne Greenberg**  
Georgia State University

**Anke Grotlüschen**  
Hamburg University

**Allan G. Harbaugh-  
Schattenkirk**  
Longwood University

**Tom Heaney**  
Rutgers University

**Bob Hughes**  
Seattle University

**Erik Jacobson**  
Montclair State University

**Anna Kaiper-Marquez**  
Pennsylvania State  
University

**Cathy Kozlowicz**  
Literacy for all, Inc.

**Clarena Larrotta**  
Texas State University

**Sasha V. Lotas**  
Academy of Hope Adult  
Public Charter School

**Larry G. Martin**  
University of Wisconsin-  
Milwaukee

**J. Ryan Monroe**  
US Peace Corps

**Ron Mottern**  
Ashford University

**Bill Muth**  
Virginia Commonwealth  
University

**Richard Orem**  
Northern Illinois  
University

**Margaret Becker  
Patterson**  
Research Allies for  
Lifelong Learning

**Dolores Perin**  
Teachers College,  
Columbia University

**Amy Pickard**  
Indiana University  
Bloomington

**Esther Prins**  
Pennsylvania State  
University

**John Rachal**  
The University of  
Southern Mississippi  
(retired)

**Stephen Reder**  
Portland State University

**David J. Rosen**  
Newsome Associates

**Elizabeth A. Roumell**  
Texas A & M University

**Leah Katherine Saal**  
Loyola University MD

**John Sabatini**  
IIS/University of Memphis

**Steven W. Schmidt**  
East Carolina University

**Joni Schwartz**  
CUNY La Guardia  
Community College

**Ellen Scully-Russ**  
The George Washington  
University

**Ralf St. Clair**  
University of Victoria

**Norman A. Stahl**  
Northern Illinois  
University

**Karin Sprow Forté**  
Penn State Harrisburg

**Nicole Taylor**  
Spelman College

**Lyn Tett**  
Huddersfield University

**Amy Trawick**  
CALLA

**Jenifer Vanek**  
World Education

**JoAnn Weinberger**  
Center for Literacy  
(retired)

**Jeff Zacharakis**  
Kansas State University

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### Research Articles

- “When I see a sale, I say: ‘Ah! But when will this expire?’”: Pragmatic Relations  
in the Practices of Reading Expiration Dates by Older Women Literacy Students . . . . . 4  
Flávia Cristina Duarte Pôssas Grossi and Maria da Conceição Ferreira Reis Fonseca
- Mass Literacy Campaigns: A Way Back to the Future? . . . . . 20  
Bob Boughton

### Report from the Field

- Australia’s Reading Writing Hotline: An Ongoing Innovation . . . . . 33  
Vanessa Iles, Lindy Cassidy, and Jill Finch

### Forum: Innovation and Adult Literacy

- Problematizing the Imperative to Innovate: An Examination of Innovations in  
Adult Literacy . . . . . 39  
Keiko Yasukawa
- Response to "Problematizing the Imperative to Innovate: An Examination of  
Innovations in Adult Literacy" . . . . . 46  
Huacong Liu
- Innovating in Education: A Response to Keiko Yasukawa's "Problematizing the  
Imperative to Innovate: An Examination of Innovations in Adult Literacy" . . . . . 51  
Maria del C. Lorenzatti and Judy Kalman

### Research Digest

- Translanguaging in Adult Basic Education Worldwide . . . . . 57  
Anna Kaiper-Marquez

### Book Review

- Developing Social Equity in Australian Adult Education: Lessons from the Past* . . . . . 63  
Reviewed by Ralf St. Clair

### Resource Review

- National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorder Website* . . . . . 66  
Reviewed by Michael R. Cruse

### Leveraging Technology to Promote Adult Learning

- ChatGPT: Leveraging AI to Support Personalized Teaching and Learning . . . . . 70  
Sarah Cacicio and Rachel Riggs

# “When I see a sale, I say: ‘Ah! But when will this expire?’”: Pragmatic Relations in the Practices of Reading Expiration Dates by Older Women Literacy Students

Flávia Cristina Duarte Pôssas Grossi, Federal Institute of Minas Gerais

Maria da Conceição Ferreira Reis Fonseca, Federal University of Minas Gerais

## Abstract

This study analyses how older (mostly 60 years or over) women who are literacy students at Youth and Adult Education Program in a small village of Brazil appropriate school numeracy practices during a class about the discursive genre “label” and the information it conveys. We focus on the students’ participation in the discursive interactions that take place in events involving concepts, ideas, procedures, rules, and values related to reading and registering the system used to write expiration dates. Using an example, we discuss how the different modes of this appropriation carried out by the students change the didactical activity and innovatively forge the pedagogical relationship.

**Keywords:** aging women; appropriation of numeracy practices; Young, Adult and Elderly Education (YAE) Program; innovation; pedagogical relationships

Here, we explore the different ways of appropriating discursive and, as such, sociocultural practices in school mathematics by aging women (mostly 60 years or over), students in a literacy class in the Youth and Adult (and Elderly) Education (YAE) program. We seek to understand the different modes of appropriation carried out by students, which are made possible by a school activity. In the event presented here as an example, the teacher planned an activity for students to read label information of a store-bought packaged cake. This reading involves numeracy practices dealing with mathematical representations, criterium, and culture to locate,

read, understand, and decide how to use *expiration date* information and other contents on the label. We want to highlight an innovation that is not in the didactic exploration of the syntactic and semantic dimensions involved in the reading of a code or understanding that it indicates the last day a product must be consumed without risks. The innovation is in how students summon – and the teacher welcomes – pragmatic dimensions of knowledge to forge meaning conditions to the social practice of writing, reading, and using expiration dates on labels.

Indeed, the teacher’s initial proposal was to

develop with the students a metalinguistic analysis of the genre “label,” to explain the syntactic aspects (codes and system functioning) of reading an expiration date, and its semantic aspects (the meaning of the expiration date and the restrictions it imposes on the consumption of products). This proposal, however, is confronted by the narratives of students’ tactics to access the information that the date record conveys, even if not fully understanding the system, and of the use they make of this information. These tactics and uses are incorporated into the meaning processes carried out by students, building a new teaching-learning relationship. This new relationship is established in the discursive positioning of those women that highlights the pragmatic dimension of reading expiration dates and considering their relevance for decision making. This positioning institutes and legitimizes not only other ways of reading labels and acting as consumers, but other practices of reading and naming the world (Freire, 1967), by dealing with its production, consumption, communication, and control relations.

The studies we have carried out or followed indicate that syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic dimensions of numeracy practices coexist and are usually explicitly mobilized by young, adult, and elderly participants in YAE in their efforts to signify school mathematics practices. As in Fonseca (2020), we relate to the syntactic dimension of numeracy practices, the knowledge and consideration of the technical rules that govern the relationships between the mathematical lexicon elements, procedures, and concepts. The semantic dimension approach contemplates – and problematizes – an understanding of the denotative function of (mathematical) language, and considers the relational perspective through which meanings are produced for those elements,

procedures, and concepts. Finally, we refer to the pragmatic dimension when paying attention to the functioning of mathematical language, concepts, and processes, according to the uses and intentions of subjects in the discursive interactions in which these mathematical language, concepts, or processes are mobilized or contemplated. Intentions and uses are not influenced, however, by just personal and fortuitous motivations and actions: they are historical and parameterized by sociocultural conditions and references of the subjects, shaping their ways of relating to the mathematical text.

## Theoretical Perspectives

Social situations involving the use of reading and writing increasingly demand knowledge that involves quantification, measurement, space orientation, and classification practices. These practices make up the ways of using written language and are established by them, not only because mathematical representations are present in written texts, but because written culture itself, which constitutes them, “is also permeated by principles based on the same rationality that forges or parameterizes these [numeracy] practices and which is reinforced by them” (Fonseca, 2020, p. 398). Therefore, this article is in line with Brazilian studies that use the term *numeracy practices*, in a discursive and, as such, in a sociocultural and historical perspective, to contemplate dilemmas, interpretations, valuations, choices, compositions, impositions, confrontations, adaptations or resistances, which permeate social practices that involve dealing with ideas, representations or mathematical criteria, in various instances of social life (Fonseca, 2020).

In this sense, we want to reflect on these aging women’s involvement with school numeracy practices and how it requires and

provides opportunities for the *responsive exercise of understanding* (Volóchinov, 2018) and the production of meanings for and in such practices. To focus on this exercise and this production, we use the concept of *appropriation of social practices* inspired by Ana Luiza Smolka's (2000) approach based on a Vygotskian perspective.

According to Smolka (2000), appropriation, referring to "ways of *making one's own*", or even "*making proper, suitable* to socially established values and norms," could be used "as a perfectly equivalent synonym for internalization, as it also assumes something the individual takes from *outside* (from somewhere) and from someone (another)" (p. 28, author's highlights). However, the author chooses the term *appropriation* to relate the processes through which people take ownership of social practices to the issue of meaning, in a historical-cultural perspective.

In the case of this article, we mobilize this concept to highlight the discursive processes through which aging women, students in literacy process in YAE, deal with school and/or hegemonic numeracy practices and produce their own meanings for them. Because the practices are historical and these women are historical subjects (Freire, 2005), but also because the hegemonic numeracy practices and illiterate women were not always on the same side of history, making these practices *their own* "does not exactly mean, and does not always coincide with *making adequate* to social expectations. There are ways of *making one's own*, which are not *appropriate* or *relevant* to the other" (Smolka, 2000, p. 32, author's highlights). Therefore, it is possible to observe several tensions, in the processes of appropriating numeracy practices, since, in the game of social positions, what is seen as *appropriate* is not always clear, adequate, or transparent (Smolka, 2000).

From this perspective, the appropriation processes are not identified with the idea of learning if it is considered as an exclusively cognitive or even behavioral process. *Appropriation* of school numeracy practices happens even in situations in which the students in literacy process, eventually, do not behave as expected when the teacher undertook the pedagogical interventions. In this sense, we turn our gaze to those aging women, seeking to (re)know them, producing types of learning based on aspects of their relationship with school mathematics, their expectations regarding schooling, their demands, criticisms, and desires. However, we are also aware of the tensions and discomforts these students faced by the need, established by the dynamics of school context and social life beyond the school walls, to adapt themselves to socially valued standards.

Therefore, the use of the *appropriation of social practices* concept is a way to explain the active role these students play in the processes of understanding the world, which are established when these women confront, signify, evaluate, use, narrate, value, or reject numeracy practices in the school context. That is, the mobilization of the concept of appropriation of numeracy practices helps us identify the active role of those aging students when responding to the demands of social interactions in school, responses that are conformed in the different ways in they participate in school practices and attribute meanings to them, informed by their life experiences and sociocultural characteristics.

From this perspective, operationalizing this concept of appropriation allows us to perceive how women in an aging process participate, in different ways, in certain discursive practices – in this case, school numeracy practices – not limiting our analysis to an evaluation of their

learning success, what would transform learning into “a matter of possession, ownership, or even a mastery, individually achieved” (Smolka, 2000, p. 37) of the skills, concepts, and procedures involved in the hegemonic numeracy practices reiterated by the school. By using this concept, we want to see these women in an aging process assuming a social dimension of belonging and participation in (and of) social practices.

Mathematical representation systems give form and communicability, lend arguments and establish powers to interactions that make up various practices of social life. Taking numeracy practices as discursive –and, as such, sociocultural and historical– practices lead us to discuss “the *meanings* of human action, the *sense* of practices, considering that all actions acquire multiple meanings, multiple senses, and become significant practices, depending on the positions and modes of participation of subjects in relationships” (Smolka, 2000, p. 31, author’s highlights).

## Research Context and Methodology

Literacy and education rates among elderly people in Brazil are the lowest among its adult population. The Newsletter-2019 published by the Continuous National Household Sample Survey (PNAD) (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2019) associates illiteracy with age, as illiteracy rate among people aged 60 years and over (18.0%, equivalent to almost 6 million illiterates) is considerably higher than in other age groups, decreasing as age cohorts include younger people. Moreover, it should be noted that illiteracy rates among elderly women had been higher than among men over 60 years in all PNADs prior to 2019, although the gender gap appears to be decreasing (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2019). The situation of elderly and

aging women reflects the intense inequalities between women and men and can be seen from different social markers (ethnic, racial, class, generational, religious, professional, among others), which define the relationship possibilities among people and between them and knowledge and institutions, in various instances of social life, including the school space.

Because they have lived in a context of deprivation, restrictions, and exclusions, elderly illiterate women also see education as a means of overcoming a social condition that, in general, is not favorable to them. Many, having been deprived of school education as children or adolescents, seek school in adulthood or even old age. They see YAE as an important space to seek social and cultural inclusion.

Nevertheless, their presence at classroom, in many ways, changes the pedagogical relation when they summon – and the teacher welcomes – pragmatic dimensions of knowledge to forge meaning conditions to the social practice of writing, reading, and using scholar or hegemonic ideas, concepts, procedures or codes. To show this, in this paper, we submit an event, occurred in 2018, to a discourse analysis in order to exemplify how aged women become protagonists of a learning scene at school. We identified this event on the empirical material produced in a study we developed in a YAE literacy class of an alternative education project, known as ABC Institute, in a small village (Barroso), in the State of Minas Gerais, Brazil. This project, in addition to developing social actions that assist socially-vulnerable woman and men, offers elementary education to youths and adults of all ages, including the elderly. The classes happened in the morning, from 8 am to 10 am, on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. The teacher prepared the activities, considering YAE textbooks, the

Institute's pedagogical proposal, and students' demands and interests.

The research participants were the 12 students (all women) and the teacher. The students intersected vulnerable social markers: women, illiterate, black, poor, surviving from their work as domestic maids or farm workers (and/or donations), most of them were married or widows, with many children, and aging. During the fieldwork, the teacher was 28 years old and the students ranged between 53 and 91 years old. In Brazil, people over 60 years are legally considered elderly. However, because we understand aging as a relational process (involving historical, social, cultural, economic, physical, functional, and mental aspects), we have decided to use the expression *aging women* to all students, who established a non-static relationship (sometimes of belonging, others of denial) with aging, its conditions and restrictions, and ongoing nature.

All the procedures to produce the empirical material of this research were adopted seeking to enable us to consider interpretations, beliefs, and values of the relationships these students establish in (and with) the school context. We wanted to understand classroom events in the broader social, cultural, and historical contexts that restrict or enhance the subjects' production of meanings in their appropriation of school practices.

These contexts, personal relationships, and life experiences allowed us to perceive the creation of this classroom culture through the ways the students dealt with the socialized knowledge. Although, in this article, we analyze one event, our discussion is only possible because we could confront this 51-second interaction to others identified in 164 hours of observation, and considering the 12 one-hour semi-structured interviews with the students in their homes, and

the interviews with the teacher and director in the school. We also consulted the institution's documentation, the teaching materials, and students' written production.

To analyze the event presented in this paper, we adopt Social Analysis of Discourse proposed by Norman Fairclough to understand the discursive dynamics of a YAE mathematics classroom establishing processes of numeracy practices appropriation. Considering discourse as a practice of giving meaning to the world and not just representing it, Fairclough (1992) proposes a three-dimensional analysis that considers the textual, discursive, and social practice dimensions implied in reading practices. It allows reflecting on the constitution of subjects through discourse, and their transformative action in social practices when they produce discursive practices.

Our description of a classroom event considers its historical character, connected to different situations at school and outside, allowing the triangulation of different aspects and data of the empirical material, with theoretical resources and data from other works investigating YAE mathematics classes. In this description, we focus subjects' lexical choice (textual analysis) in their positions and discursive intensions (discursive analysis). However, it also allows us to recognize that these positions interfere in social practice and are constrained by it (social practice analysis).

## In an YAE Classroom

We focus on a literacy classroom event that took place on August 8, 2018, involving eight students: Ana (56 years old), Aparecida (56), Cecília (91), Joana (63), Terezinha (64), Zélia (61), Edilsea (53) and Olga (73). The teacher, Vanessa, who had informed us that she would start working with women's "day-to-day" issues and brought to



the classroom a photo of the label of a packaged banana cake, printed on bond paper (Figure 1). The activity emerged from the pedagogical dynamics, planned, and established by the teacher to carry out a metalinguistic analysis of the discursive genre “label.”

**FIGURE 1: Photo of the banana cake label printed on the sheet distributed by the teacher**



Source: Teaching material produced by the teacher for the August 8th class.

To clarify the set of information this text conveys (as it interests cake producers and consumers and/or to meet legal requirements) the teacher pasted several envelopes on the board: inside each one of them, there was a form with the name of one of the elements on a label students should identify (brand, expiration, ingredients, image, nutritional information, manufacture, bar code, company name, and product name). The teacher named the activity “Reading labels.” The order in which these elements would be considered in the discussion would be random, depending on the blind choice made by a student invited to go to the board to choose an envelope (without knowing which form it contained). The first element of the discursive label genre, drawn by Edilsea for study in that class, was “expiration.” Table 1 below shows the interaction motivated by the draw of this element.

**TABLE 1: “When there is, sometimes, a sale, I say: ‘Ah! But when is this going to expire?’”**

Class on August 8, 2018 Wednesday – 8:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m. – 49th day of class observation Recording time: 01:05:04 to 01:05:55 (Duration: 51s)		
Class time	Participant	Speech
01:05:04	Vanessa	So, look, inside these little cards here... [Points to the envelopes taped to the board.] ... they are the characteristics of the label. So, we'll pick them, each time one will choose, so we can talk about each one, ok? So Edilsea will choose first. [She pushes Edilsea's wheelchair to the blackboard and the student takes out an envelope, takes the paper inside and reads it.]
01:05:15	Edilsea	Expiration
01:05:20	Vanessa	Expiration. So, every product we're going to buy... a food product, right? ... that we eat. All products have an expiration date, ok? So, let's register there in the notebook. Can you identify the expiration of this product? This banana cake? [Each student begins to look up the information on the printed sheet they have received.] What is the expiration?

01:05:21	<b>Edilsea</b>	<i>Eight days.</i>
01:05:22	<b>Vanessa</b>	<p><i>Eight days. Look where the expiration date is written.</i></p> <p>[She lifts the label sheet and points to the word “expiration” to show it to other students who were unable to locate the information.]</p> <p><i>It’s written like this: ‘made in...’ And the ‘expiration: eight days’. This must be a homemade cake, right? Eight days, ok? So, we’re going to register each feature. I’ll put the title there: ‘Reading labels’. Does everyone know what a label is?) [Write the title on the board. Nobody answered the teacher’s question, because they started to copy the title on the board.]</i></p> <p><i>So, the first thing we saw is the expiration. Every food product and even others, have an expiration date. Why is it important to have an “expiration date” on the product?</i></p>
01:05:26	<b>Joana</b>	<i>So we don’t eat something spoiled.</i>
01:05:27	<b>Vanessa</b>	<i>Do you normally check the expiration date of the products you buy?</i>
01:05:28	<b>Terezinha</b>	<i>I do. But, to be honest, I don’t know how to check.</i>
01:05:29	<b>Vanessa</b>	<i>You don’t know, right?</i>
01:05:29	<b>Aparecida</b>	<i>I check.</i>
01:05:30	<b>Terezinha</b>	<i>I ask someone to check it for me.</i>
01:05:31	<b>Vanessa</b>	<p><i>Usually, the expiration comes as a date. This one is different.</i></p> <p>[Points to the expiration period on the banana cake label.]</p> <p><i>Here is the shelf life: eight days. So, I have to look at the manufacturing date. So, let’s assume my product is made today. Today is the eighth. Then, you have to count eight days ahead, which is its expiration date But, generally, expiration comes in number, for example, let’s say I bought the biscuit today and it says: ‘expiration date:...’ let’s assume ‘December two, two thousand and eighteen’.</i></p> <p>[Writes the date on the board: ‘02/12/2018’.]</p> <p><i>Until when can I consume this product? Day two; the twelve here represents which month? Do you know?</i></p>
01:05:34	<b>Aparecida</b>	<i>Two?</i>
01:05:35	<b>Vanessa</b>	<i>Twelve</i>
01:05:36	<b>Aparecida</b>	<i>Ah! December.</i>
01:05:37	<b>Vanessa</b>	<i>It’s the last month.</i>
01:05:37	<b>Aparecida</b>	<i>Yeah!</i>
01:05:38	<b>Vanessa</b>	<i>So, it lasts until December tenth, two thousand and eighteen.</i>
01:05:39	<b>Edilsea</b>	<p><i>Ah! It doesn’t last all that!</i></p> <p>[Says in a playful tone, suggesting that, regardless of the product’s durability, it would be eaten before the official expiration.]</p>

<sup>1</sup> In Brazil, date format is day/month/year.

01:05:40	Vanessa	<i>It doesn't last, right? ...</i> [Seeming to understand Edilsea's joke.] <i>Or it can stay in the supermarket until that date, right? And this is very serious, we really have to be aware of it. When we can't check it, we ask for someone. But soon you will be able to see [meaning understanding it].</i>
01:05:41	Aparecida	<i>I like to check mostly canned food.</i>
01:05:43	Terezinha	<i>When there is sometimes a sale, I say: 'Ah! But when will this expire?</i>
01:05:44	Vanessa	<i>Yeah, you have to keep an eye on it, because the product in sale is almost expiring.</i>
01:05:45	Aparecida	<i>There's milk.</i>
01:05:45	Vanessa	<i>Milk is more perishable. There are products that expire faster, like milk, products that we call perishable, right? They will expire quickly.</i>
01:05:47	Aparecida	<i>Yeah.</i>
01:05:48	Vanessa	<i>So, our product, its expiration is eight days, right? So, we'll write it down there. If the cake had been made today, could I eat it until what day?</i>
01:05:49	Terezinha	<i>Huh?</i>
01:05:50	Vanessa	<i>This cake expires in eight days. So, imagine it was manufactured today. Until what day can I eat it?</i> [Aparecida seems to be thinking about the teacher's question, because she stares at the board; but Joana is the one who answers the question.]
01:05:51	Joana	<i>Until Tuesday.</i>
01:05:52	Vanessa	<i>Eight days ahead, which day? ... The sixteen. Let's see what day it is.</i>
01:05:53	Aparecida	<i>It'll be next Thursday.</i>
01:05:54	Vanessa	<i>Right.</i>
01:05:55	Aparecida	<i>I'm good at sums. It's a piece of cake.</i>

Source: Transcript of the class record-August 08, 2018.

### **“So we don’t eat something spoiled”: Following the Values and Routines of Hegemonic Social Practice**

Vanessa’s first statement about the expiration date (at 01:05:20) emphasizes the relevance and the universality of registering products’ expiration date on their label, especially food. (*Expiration. So, every product we’re going to buy... a food product, right? ... that we eat. All products have an expiration date, ok?*). In Brazil, the label of all food packed in the absence of the consumer and ready for consumption must declare the expiration date.

After establishing expiration date as mandatory on product labels, Vanessa, within her textual analysis project, turns her pedagogical intervention to the ability to locate this information in the text. So, she asks students if they could identify the expiration date on the cake label. Immediately, Edilsea, who was familiar with this date recording system (numerical-verbal: “08 days”), locates the information and gives the expected response (“Eight days”).

Edilsea’s correct and immediate answer could indicate the *appropriation* of this date recording

system, if we were using an *appropriation* concept related with “the idea of performance and well-successful actions carrying out by the individual” (Smolka, 2000, p. 32). The teacher’s concern to allow all students to answer like Edilsea reiterates this perspective.

In fact, realizing that identifying the expiration date on the label and reading it might not be easy for all students, the teacher raises the sheet in front of the class to show the location of the information (“*Look where the expiration date is written.*”). We initially hypothesized that this procedure could have been a consequence of how the label was printed, as the information was written in a small print, making it difficult to be seen by students with visual limitations (due to age or health problems). This hypothesis is related to our concern with the production of teaching materials that meet the needs of people with some visual impairment, as is the case with many aging students.

However, in her intervention to help identify the information, the teacher does not only point out the model sheet, for students to locate it on their own sheets, but she also informs which linguistic resources are used to convey the information. She gives tips on the style of the text: “*It’s written like this: ‘made in...’ And the ‘expiration: eight days’.*”

Afterwards, Vanessa abandons textual analysis and calls on the students to produce an inference, based on the interpretation of information: “*This must be a homemade cake, right? Eight days, ok?*”. The teacher probably refers to the high perishability of homemade products. Vanessa’s comment on the nature of the banana cake suggests that she assumes her interlocutors would be familiar with the cultural practice of making homemade cakes and evaluating how long they would stay fresh and safe. This assumption may have taken into account the teacher’s assessment of students’

social, family, and financial conditions and demands throughout their lives. These women, with grown-up children and grandchildren, probably baked cakes for the family or would seldom buy this type of product. According to Britto da Motta (1999), the vulnerable conditions of elderly women can be directly associated with their social class, family arrangements, and life experiences: “being old can mean living in great poverty, or even in misery, even for those originally from the middle class, because it is a generation with little participation in the labor market and, therefore, with few personal resources for survival” (p. 210). Therefore, Vanessa’s comment mobilizes a knowledge that is supposed to be shared, related to this cultural practice (Pino, 2004) of baking and – eventually – buying cakes.

Students do not agree or disagree with Vanessa’s comment, as their attention was on the technical task of locating the information. Nevertheless, the exercise proposed had met its declared pedagogical purpose: working with something familiar to students’ daily lives (“*from day-to-day*”) or that could contribute to a daily task (“*check the expiration date*”).

However, this purpose succumbs to traditional school practices and the didactic intentions of that literacy activity, which focused on learning the written text structure. These intentions, tacitly agreed between the participants, make everyone focus on the written task proposed (“*So, we’re going to register each feature. I’ll put the title there: ‘Reading labels.’*”), thus, not answering the teachers’ question (*Does everyone know what a label is?*).

Vanessa’s question indicates that she thinks students might not understand the term *label*, its role, or even did not identify it on its original support (since it was presented to them on a printed

copy, not in the product). After establishing the topic of textual analysis (“*So, the first thing we saw is the expiration*”), Vanessa reiterates the discursive practice that establishes the label genre (“*Every food product, and even others, have an expiration date.*”) and seeks to direct the discussion to the need of registering an expiration date on the label (“*Why is it important to have ‘expiration date’ on the product?*”).

If the teacher’s question refers to a requirement of this discursive genre, Joana’s answer assumes the reader as the protagonist, justifying the importance of accessing such information to decide about consuming (or not) a certain product: “*So we don’t eat something spoiled*”. In this sense, Joana appropriates (and reproduces) the discourse, constructed and established by certain cultural groups, against the consumption of products after the expiration date, rather than deciding based on the visual (or olfactory, or taste, for example) characteristics the products.

### **“I do. But, to be honest, I don’t know how to check.”: Pragmatic Relationships in the Practices of Reading Expiration Dates**

In the teacher’s question “*Do you normally check the expiration date of the products you buy?*”, we may listen to the echoes of an adhesion to a social practice (consider the expiration date before buying a product). But when referring to the students’ everyday practices, this question places them as subjects (of the practice and of the sentence) of the verb “*check*,” which, strictly speaking, involves *locating*, *reading*, and *considering* this information.

Nevertheless, Terezinha dissociates these three activities the teacher summarized into the verb “*check*.” She claims to *consider* the expiration date but confesses not knowing how to *read* this information (and perhaps not even *locating* it): “*I do. But, to be honest, I don’t know how to check.*” This dissociation reflects Terezinha’s lifelong interdictions

established by her illiterate condition, due to her economic and cultural exclusion from school when young, as stated in an interview: “*My parents didn’t study and couldn’t read. They wouldn’t let us go to class, because they said we would learn to write letters to our boyfriends, you know? So, only the men studied... But even so, it wasn’t possible to study much, because they worked on the farm.*”

During the interview, Terezinha further elaborated on her extreme poverty, before reaching retirement (when she first had her own money): “*I’ve faced so much hunger that now I eat everything I want to eat. It may be expensive, but if I feel like eating it, I’ll eat it.*” Such deprivations prevented her from developing purchase protocols, as she lived mainly on donations. Among these protocols, the practice of “*normally check the expiration date of the products you buy.*”

From this perspective, the way Terezinha answers Vanessa’s question points out pragmatic relationships with the text, which seem to have escaped the teacher when she asks about their practice of checking expiration dates: some women were not literate in this registration system; others did not make their own purchases, depending on the help of other people, institutions, social programs, trusting that their benefactors would not donate expired products, or renouncing this consumption criterion, or even not worrying about it; others, in turn, depended on family members to buy what they needed, so these relatives established the purchase criteria; other women bought or consumed based on brand, price, appearance, texture, aroma, or need, disregarding the expiration date; and others trusted that shop owners and/or employees would not display products that could not be consumed.

Further, Terezinha reiterates the dissociation between, on one hand, knowing the specific codes and understanding expiration date writing systems, and, on the other, the practice of

reading. In fact, the teacher's answer ("You don't know, right?") suggests that she would not be surprised by the fact that Terezinha (and probably other silent students) did not know how to check the expiration date. Terezinha's reply challenges the possible conclusion that the student would be completely distanced from that reading practice. Terezinha explains her tactic for accessing this information and its pragmatic use: "I ask someone to check it for me."

Terezinha's discursive position also challenges the school logic that assumes the impossibility of participation in the reading practice by those who do not master the writing system used. This reasoning is associated not only to a conception of reading practice, but also to ways of seeing the world and valuing skills, that support this conception and, consequently, the school practices of teaching reading (Soares, 1998). When expressing her willingness to ask someone, Terezinha, despite her inability to "check" the expiration date, reiterates the value she gives to that information, her knowledge that it is in the label, her understanding of what it means, her ability to assess and use it, as well as recognizing her insertion in that social practice.

The teacher, in turn, didactically works to make students appropriate stylistic aspects and the semantics to register expiration dates. This is evident, for example, when explaining how records of these dates could appear on packages, presenting the linguistic resources used ("Usually, the expiration, it comes as a date. This one is different. Here is the shelf life: eight days. So, I have to look at the manufacturing date."); when she proposes examples with a hypothetical cake production date so they could calculate the expiration date ("So, let's assume my product is made today. Today it's the eighth. Then, you have to count eight days ahead, which is its expiration date."); or, still, when she hypothetically proposes the

label of another product, with the expiration date registered differently, to teach them how to decode this record ("But, generally, expiration comes in number, for example, let's say I bought the biscuit today and it says: 'expiration date:...' let's assume 'December two, two thousand and eighteen'. Until when can I consume this product?").

Vanessa's effort to maintain a faithful structure to the principles of school numeracy practice reveals a semantic and syntactic concern, assuming that studying a banana cake label would ease the understanding of typically school aspects related to expiration dates (location, writing, reading and decoding system, calculations, and estimations). On the other hand, there is also a pragmatic dimension that guides her activity proposal – seeking a supposedly familiar situation of identifying and reading labels.

Therefore, even in a traditional school approach to reading (metalinguistic analysis activities, fictitious context exercises), Vanessa acknowledges those students as learning women: "But soon you will be able to see." However, valuing the pragmatic dimension of that reading practice, addressed in the interaction by Joana ("So we don't eat something spoiled."), by Aparecida ("I do."), by Terezinha ("I ask someone to check it for me.") and by Edilsea ("Ah! It doesn't last all that!"), the teacher reiterates the greater importance of using the information in relation to the technique of decoding it ("And this is very serious, we really have to be aware of it. When we can't check it, we ask for someone."), and confirms students' role as interaction protagonists. In addition, in her responses to the students' interventions ("It doesn't last, right?"; "Yeah, you have to keep an eye on it."; "Milk is more perishable."), Vanessa also recognizes them as women who produce knowledge and culture.

Recognizing those students as subjects of knowledge –as they add their tactics, values, and decisions to the practice of reading expiration

dates— refers to Freire’s understanding of creating and transforming knowledge in the constitution of the subject. In his first writings, discussing education as a practice of freedom, Freire already pointed out that people’s relationships with reality “result from being-with it and being-in it, through acts of creation, recreation, and decision” (Freire, 1967, p. 43). This allowed them to streamline their world, dominate their reality, humanizing it. In the pedagogical relationship, the teacher and students value the ways they instantiate the practice of reading expiration dates, though not everyone knows how to “check them.” Each one adds something they do: “It temporalizes geographical spaces. It makes culture” (p. 43)

Considering the research participants as women of learning and knowledge implies recognizing this cultural group of aging women, students of a literacy course in YAE, as a group able to appropriate new knowledge (including school knowledge) by attributing new meanings, confronting them with knowledge they mobilize and produce in the interaction. Appropriation “is not a simple operation that can be reduced to a mere learning process” (Pino, 1993, p. 22); it is related to the problem of meaning and how subjects interpret, participate, and position themselves in a given social situation to make *their own* socially valued criteria, rules, and knowledge (Smolka, 2000).

Students’ replies and interventions show their condition as knowledge-producing women. Positioning themselves in relation to the importance of reading expiration dates and the tactics to access them, these women evoke the knowledge that “already exists in society in form of productions and social practices” (Pino, 2004, p. 448), re-signifying it and making it *their own*. In these processes, they see themselves as women of knowledge: they operate knowledge produced and

used by people from their or other cultural groups. Thus, they place themselves as protagonists of social practices involving reading the expiration dates: “So we don’t eat something spoiled.”; “I check.”; “I ask someone to check for me.”; “I like to see mostly canned food.”; “I say...”; “I’m good at sums.”

**“When there is sometimes a sale, I say: ‘Ah! But when will this expire?’”: Dialectical Relationship Between Pragmatic, Syntactic, and Semantic Aspects of Reading the Expiration Date**

In this school activity, through the teacher’s mediation, the students Aparecida, Joana, Terezinha, and Edilsea seek to understand the semantic and pragmatic meanings attributed to the expiration date of the cake. Based on them, they produce new discourses and/or reiterate already established ones. As indicated by appropriation studies based on the historical-cultural current (Pino, 1993; 2004; Smolka, 2000), the knowledge mobilized and produced by these women, expressed in their discourse, emerges from the dialectical relationship established between them and “another,” parameterizing what they elect to know: in this case, the registration systems for expiration dates defined by the knowledge and the pragmatic intentions of social groups that produce and use them.

These appropriation studies help us to understand that these women’s act of knowing is “an activity of a semiotic nature” (Pino, 2004, p. 450), thus, it is a social production “of many ‘others’, which constitute itself into guides in the activity of knowing” (Pino, 2004, p. 458). In this sense, not only the teacher, but each classmate, objectifying the world in their utterances, contributes to the class knowledge and culture, allowing them to reconnect with each other and with themselves, companions of its small *culture circle* (Freire, 2005).

In this sense, we consider that socially produced knowledge about “*checking*” (locating, reading, and considering) expiration dates is a cultural good that these women appropriate not only in that class, but throughout their lives, in the events they experienced or witnessed, which they summoned up in this interaction. In this appropriation movement, women produce their own meanings in the confrontation of pragmatic values and intentions in which the “dialectical, procedural, contradictory relationship” is forged (Freire, 1992, p. 36) between language, thought, and world.

The students play a leading role in the meaning processes. Edilsea reads the information on the label (“*Eight days.*”), assesses the reasonableness of a hypothetical example (“*Ah! It doesn’t last all that!*”), and adds other variables than just the risk of product deterioration. Joana states the reason for reading labels (“*So we don’t eat something spoiled.*”) and uses the information on the expiration date to calculate until when the cake could be eaten – thus entering into the “order of discourse” established in the proposed numeracy practice (“*Until Tuesday.*”). Aparecida demarcates her relationship with this numeracy practice by affirming its (“*I check.*”). Later she demonstrates her mastering of the system (“*Ah! December.*”; “*Yeah!*”; “*It’ll be next Thursday.*”; “*I’m good at sums. It’s a piece of cake.*”) and share her pragmatic knowledge and assessment of its usage and relevance (“*I like to check mostly canned food.*”; “*There’s milk.*”).

Likewise, Terezinha, when explaining a pragmatic use of reading the expiration date, though she does not know how to do it, once again demarcates this dissociation between mastering the technique and using it. The phrase “*When there is sometimes a sale, I say: Ah! But when will this expire?*” is a strong example of the supremacy of pragmatism over the syntactic and semantic aspects. Terezinha

indicates the “sale” because this is a practice that she (an elderly woman, student at a literacy course of YAE, widow, alone and responsible for her own purchases, after living in extreme poverty) often encounters, when entering shops and seeing eye-catching posters (or images on leaflets) with reduced-price products. In this sense, for Terezinha, not knowing to read the expiration date does not prevent her from recognizing and participating in the commercial practice of prominently displaying products close to their expiration dates as “*on sale*”. When interviewed, Cecília also reiterated her opinion about supermarket operations and the care with expired products: “*because sometimes they put expired things in the supermarket. We have to be smart.*”

If we consider the articulation between discourse and social structure (or, more generally, between social practice and social structure), thus establishing a dialectical relationship (Fairclough, 1992), we can infer that Terezinha, by adopting her tactic and making it explicit in that interaction, provokes and highlights a dissociation from typically school teaching and learning practices, which tend to be restricted to syntactic and, at most, semantic aspects of knowledge. In this sense, Terezinha and her classmates summons knowledge, values, tactics, and skills they produce and appropriate in other social spaces, at different stages of their aging process, living as poor, black, mostly widow women, and YAE students.

Thus, the discourse assumed by Terezinha articulates new meanings to the pedagogical relationship, calling for a dialogue between the school practice of reading expiration dates and the commercial practice with which she is more familiar. Terezinha’s disposition for this articulation reiterates how the discourse contributes to the construction of *social identities* and *subject positions* for *social subjects* and *types of self* as



well as constructing social relationships between people and systems of knowledge and belief. Thus, individual and collective processes of meaning the world are dialectically forged in and through discourse, constituting and constructing the world into meaning (Fairclough, 1992). Among these meaning processes, we highlight those in which we identified the appropriation of numeracy practices, which, as social practices, are produced by the world and by students themselves and have the effect of also producing them and the world.

## Final Remarks

From the perspective of innovation in developing numeracy practices, we do not consider the teachers' didactic strategy as innovative in itself. Although she intended to deal with students' everyday issues, her first proposal was a metalinguistic approach explaining the characteristics of the genre "label." The innovative attitude was how she received students' contributions and criticisms to give meaning to the social practice of recording and reading expiration dates. More than learning the syntactic aspects of a registration system or the semantic translation of mathematical symbols into a piece of information, the students could deal with numeracy by creating tactics to produce meanings in and for it.

By making what was presented to them as their own and signifying it (Smolka, 2000) when participating in a school numeracy practice, students reframe not only the syntactic and semantic dimensions that involve the registration of expiration dates, but also their condition as elderly poor black illiterate women facing date registration system. This relational approach to the process of appropriating school numeracy practices indicates the emergence of aging women, YAE students, who actively position

themselves and (re)structure school practices, not resigning to be positioned, conformed, or inferiorized by those practices. Fairclough (1992) points out this dialectical constitution of the subject, sometimes an active agent in discursive practices, sometimes an ideological effect of social conditions and power relations.

In this sense, the students' and teacher's positions in this pedagogical activity help us see the discourse as socially constituted and socially constitutive, contributing to the constitution of all social structure dimensions which, directly or indirectly, shape and restrict its norms and conventions, underlying relationships, identities, and institutions (Fairclough, 1992).

On one hand, the interaction indicates teacher's efforts to teach students to identify and read expiration dates. On the other hand, student's speeches problematize this intention of acculturation: in their movement of appropriating the practice of reading expiration dates, they call the tactic of asking for the help of others, or the insight that they need to pay more attention to this date when the products are in sale. Indeed, their discursive positioning does not only express individual issues, but is conditioned by broader social structures, in a relationship between discourse and social practice.

Hence, the confrontation between everyday social practices and school practices, in this and other events with aging YAE women in the ABC Institute show us the dialectical dimension of the relationship between social practice and discursive practice. If there is a movement to constrain the discourse imposed by school practice (reading expiration dates), there is also an innovative autonomy of these women to (re)signify this practice based on how life is produced and relationships are established (Fairclough, 1992).

Students and educators (teachers and researchers) innovate the pedagogical relationship beyond or despite the purpose of teaching and learning the date recording system, by instituting a *dialogicity* (Freire, 2005) in that classroom. The students' demands, knowledge, and procedures not aligned with the hegemonic practice of reading expiration dates were summoned by the dialogical disposition of

the educational practice: the educators innovate by looking at what is considered, in general, small, trivial, or despicable; the students, by establishing the possibility of collective production of knowledge, not only on the technique of reading expiration dates, or on the metric information they convey, but as a critical articulation of individual life experiences in the constitution of social practice.

## References

- Britto da Motta, A. (1999). As dimensões de gênero e classe social na análise do envelhecimento. *Cadernos Pangu* (13), 191-221.
- <https://periodicos.sbu.unicamp.br/ojs/index.php/cadpagu/article/view/8635327/3129>
- Fairclough, N. (1992). *Discourse and social change*. (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). Polity.
- Fonseca, M.C. (2020) Numeracy in youth and adult basic education: Syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic dimensions of a discursive practice. *ZDM - The International Journal on Mathematics Education* (52), 395-406. <https://rdcu.be/b3ohk>
- Freire, P. (1967). *Educação como prática da Liberdade*. (1st ed.) Paz e Terra.
- Freire, P. (1992). *Pedagogia da esperança: um reencontro com a pedagogia do oprimido*. (1st ed.) Paz e Terra.
- Freire, P. (2005). *Pedagogy of oppressed*. (30<sup>th</sup> anniversary ed.) Continuum.
- Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística. (2019) *Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicílios Contínua: Educação 2019*. [https://biblioteca.ibge.gov.br/visualizacao/livros/liv101736\\_informativo.pdf](https://biblioteca.ibge.gov.br/visualizacao/livros/liv101736_informativo.pdf)
- Pino, A. (1993) Processos de significação e constituição do sujeito. *Temas em Psicologia*, (1), 17-24. <http://pepsic.bvsalud.org/pdf/tp/v1n1/v1n1ao4.pdf>
- Pino, A. (2004) Ensinar-aprender em situação escolar: perspectiva histórico-cultural. *Contrapontos* (4), 439-460. <https://siaiap32.univali.br/seer/index.php/rc/article/view/793/645>
- Smolka, A.L. (2000) O (im)próprio e o (im)pertinente na apropriação das práticas sociais. *Caderno Cedes* (1) 50, 26-40. <https://www.scielo.br/j/ccedes/a/KNrMXHpm3NdK3SFNycDrHfN/?lang=pt>
- Soares, M. (1998) *Letramento: um tema em três gêneros*. (1<sup>a</sup> ed.) Autêntica.
- Volóchinov, V. (2017) *Marxismo e filosofia da linguagem: problemas fundamentais do método sociológico na ciência da linguagem*. (1<sup>a</sup> ed.). Editora 34.

# Mass Literacy Campaigns: A Way Back to the Future?

Bob Boughton, University of New England, Australia

## Abstract

In the 1960s and 1970s, mass campaigns were the dominant model of adult literacy provision, especially in countries of the Global South. After a long absence, there is now a revival of international interest in this model. This paper looks back on the earlier history of mass campaigns and the geopolitical reasons for their rejection, to help make sense of the problems encountered by more recent attempts to mount literacy campaigns in Timor-Leste and Australia. This analysis problematizes the concept of innovation, by identifying its association with a neo-liberal ideology of economic development which continues to produce adult literacy policy and programs which are ineffective at a national or global level.

**Keywords:** mass literacy campaigns; *Yo, sí puedo*; Cuba; UNESCO; Timor-Leste; First Nations, Australia; adult literacy policy; innovation.

In 1990, the international community's Education for All (EFA) strategy undertook to halve the number of "illiterate" and "semi-literate" adults in the world by 2015. At the end of this period, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2015) concluded the EFA's impact was minimal: "The rate of illiteracy is likely to have dropped slightly from 18% in 2000 to 14% in 2015" (p.135). One of UNESCO's responses was to revisit the mass literacy campaign as a way of increasing the adult literacy rates within a defined period of time. Its study of recent campaigns (Hanemann, 2015) considered several examples, including *Yo, sí puedo* (English: *Yes, I Can!*), a model developed at the end of the last century by Cuban adult literacy specialists. This paper reflects on the experience of participatory action research projects undertaken with

campaigns which used this model, in Timor-Leste (2005-2012), and in First Nations communities in Australia (2012-2020).

The *Yo, sí puedo* (hereafter YSP) campaigns in Timor-Leste and Australia could be said to represent a significant innovation in the field of adult literacy provision, if we apply the definition of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2015), as something which is novel, implementable, and impactful. For example, YSP is a novel, widely implemented expression of "south-south" development co-operation in the field of education (Muhr, 2015). At the same time, it maintains important continuities with the mass adult literacy campaigns of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, including Cuba's own iconic campaign in 1961. The two case studies aim to show that, whatever one might say

about innovation, adult literacy theory, policy, and practice in the 21<sup>st</sup> century remains caught between two long-standing but contradictory models of development, each of which implies its own approach to reducing the number of people in society who have low to no literacy in their country's official languages.

Mass literacy campaigns have been a feature of societies undergoing major change for the last 400 years (Arnove & Graff, 2008). In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they were adopted by many revolutionary and anticolonial independence movements and newly independent countries. In the 1960s and 1970s, the concept of "functional literacy" was proposed by adult education specialists, largely from the United States, as an "innovative" alternative to this mass approach. This model favored small-scale selective and preferably non-government adult literacy programs, focussed on vocational skills which improve economic productivity.

The paper begins with a closer look at this earlier history, when the concept of "innovation" was first deployed in the literacy field. The next sections discuss aspects of the campaigns in Timor-Leste and Australia which show the extent to which the mass campaign model was considered marginal to the "real" literacy work supported by international agencies and their member western governments. In the final section, I return to the concept of innovation, to highlight its continued complicity in the neoliberal project of global capitalism.

## The Historical Context

A mass adult literacy campaign is a coordinated, sustained effort by a community, region, or nation to raise the level of literacy of its least literate adults. It mobilizes local resources, local organizers, and local facilitators to support as

many people as possible to learn very basic literacy, within a relatively short timeframe, using a simple standardized method contextualized to local circumstances, followed by a period of community-run consolidation activities, called post-literacy. According to the Indian scholar H.S. Bhola (1984), campaigns are driven by a passionate commitment to greater social equality and a belief in the possibility of a better future for all. They almost always occur as part of a wider social movement for development, self-determination, and independence. They differ from literacy programs primarily in the degree of popular mobilization and commitment they embody. A campaign is "hot" compared with program, which is "cold." A campaign requires technical expertise, but it is also driven by a specific ideology, most commonly anti-capitalist and anti-colonialist (Bhola, 1984), but not always (Cherewka & Prins, 2022).

By the 1960s, such campaigns were well known, having been an important component of "popular" or "peoples" education in the nation-building projects of many countries, including by post-independence and post-revolutionary governments in the Soviet Union, China, Vietnam and, most recently, Cuba. In 1961, the United Nations General Assembly debated a resolution sponsored by Ukraine, calling for a global campaign to eradicate illiteracy:

The representatives of Czechoslovakia, the Ukrainian SSR (Soviet Socialist Republic) and Venezuela, among others, contended that the colonial powers had held up the development of education in the countries under their rule in order to ensure a supply of cheap labour.... The spokesmen for Australia, Denmark, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and others pointed out that no direct relationship existed between illiteracy and colonialism, since illiteracy was a common factor to all developing countries, whether or not they had been under colonial rule. (United Nations, 1963, p. 352-3)

In the language used at this time by UNESCO, "illiteracy" resulted from a lack of "fundamental education," considered an important foundation

for a more peaceful and prosperous world. Universal primary education provision was one part of achieving this, but the other, equally important component was universal adult literacy (Lind, 2008). Together these two would guarantee a right to education for all, a right enshrined in Article 22 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.

In the Cold War context of the 1960s, however, campaigns which mobilized “the masses” were suspect, from the point of view of western capitalist countries, especially the United States. According to Dorn and Chodsee (2012):

...after the widely recognized success of Cuba's 'mass' literacy campaign in 1961, UNESCO faced increasing pressure from the Johnson administration to redefine its literacy programs as 'functional' (the term used to refer to vocationally oriented literacy) rather than 'mass' (the term used to refer to literacy that was meant to achieve a political or social goal such as consciousness raising), the latter having become associated with Cuba and communism. (p. 375)

In September 1965, a World Conference of Ministers of Education on the Eradication of Illiteracy was held in Tehran, the capital of Iran. It put aside the term “fundamental education,” and adopted instead the new term, “functional literacy.” This signaled the international community’s decision to abandon the universal provision of literacy education to adults, in favor of a selective approach, prioritizing only those sections of the population who, it was believed, would be most likely to contribute to more rapid economic development. The wisdom of this approach was to be tested in the Experimental World Literacy Program (EWLP), “designed to pave the way for the eventual execution of a world campaign” (UNESCO/UNDP 1976, p. 9). The EWLP was not a campaign, though some called it one. Rather, it was a series of discrete projects or programs, designed to test the functional literacy model. It ran from 1966 to 1973, with projects in 11 countries, managed by

UNESCO and funded largely by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and national partner governments.

UNESCO and UNDP’s own evaluation at the end of the program explained the meaning which the EWLP’s planners had given to the concept of “functional literacy.” “Briefly, the idea was to combine literacy and numeracy with a program of education in basic vocational skills directly linked to the occupational needs of participants” (UNESCO/UNDP 1976, p.116). The evaluation makes many references to the “innovations” the EWLP was designed to test. The concept of innovation was being applied at the same time to adult basic education programs in the United States, with prominent adult education scholars undertaking large scale surveys of “Special Experimental Demonstration Projects” funded under the Adult Education Act, which involved the use of innovative methods, systems, materials or programs (Darkenwald, 1977; Mezirow & Irish, 1975).

The EWLP evaluators concluded that the functional approach led to some benefits, but only minor improvements in participants’ literacy. Their words remain relevant today:

In retrospect, it seems unfortunate that, **in their comprehensible haste to act, EWLP’s framers did not assess (or assess with more care) earlier successful mass literacy campaigns.** Had the Cuban, and similar experiences been taken more fully into account, the world program might well have avoided certain pitfalls. (UNESCO & UNDP, 1976. pp.176-7. My emphasis)

This critical tone reflected a shift in the international debates around education and development, as a growing number of newly independent countries questioned the modernization paradigm in which economic growth was said to provide a path out of poverty. Instead, these countries saw poverty in their countries as the product of unequal global economic exchange relations between the north

and the south, and wanted major social change (Youngman, 2000). By 1975, this alternative development approach, known as dependency theory, was underpinning a more radical theory and practice of literacy provision, of which the most famous example was the work of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1972, 1978).

Delegates to an international symposium on literacy held in 1975 in Iran concluded that the selective and intensive approaches of the EWLP were insufficient. In the Declaration of Persepolis, they resolved that literacy should be seen as “not just the process of learning the skills of reading and writing and arithmetic; but a contribution to the liberation of man (sic) and to his full development... (it) creates the conditions for the acquisition of a critical consciousness of the contradictions of society (cited in Bhola, 1984, pp. 12-13).

When UNESCO’s Arthur Gillette revisited the EWLP for Arnove and Graff’s edited collection on literacy campaigns, he wrote:

**Innovativeness was, in fact, a major if largely unstated, element of the EWLP...**

.. the EWLP strategists virtually ignored **the recently completed Cuban Literacy Campaign, which was anything but innovative in technical terms** . . . which indeed violated several basic EWLP precepts (it was massive rather than selective, it was politically rather than vocationally functional, it used a single curriculum and manual rather than a diversified/adapted approach, and it was definitive rather than experimental)—which was nevertheless a resounding success. The Cuban effort demonstrated forcefully that **pedagogically un-innovative literacy action could succeed**. (Gillette, 2008, p 205. My emphasis)

Mass campaigns remained out of favor with international agencies and western governments for the remainder of the century. One of the most cited critics, the World Bank’s Helen Abadzi, justified the bank’s decision not to fund adult literacy at scale because of the low success rate of mass campaigns (Abadzi, 1994). But her data was from the EWLP, for which national campaigns were

ruled ineligible, even where, as in Guinea, this was the government’s priority (Lind, 2008, p. 62).

While UNESCO and western governments turned away from mass literacy campaigns, many countries in the Global South continued to adopt them. In Arnove and Graff’s collection of campaign studies, first published in 1987, the 1980 Nicaraguan campaign is the most recent example. Almost 30 years later, UNESCO identified 29 countries which had run campaigns since 1992, of which only one, the UK’s Skills for Life campaign, was in the so-called developed world (Hanemann, 2015). The continued relevance of this historical and geopolitical context to contemporary practice is illustrated in the next two sections of the paper.

## The Return of the Literacy Campaign in Timor-Leste

Timor-Leste occupies the eastern half of a small island 400 nautical miles off the north coast of Australia, an hour’s flight from Darwin, the capital of Australia’s Northern Territory. From the late 1600s, it was held to be one of Portugal’s external territories, until the Carnation Revolution in Portugal in 1974 initiated a process of decolonization. This was violently interrupted when the Indonesian army invaded in December 1975, beginning a military occupation which lasted 24 years, and resulted in the deaths of 120,000 Timorese, out of a population in 1975 of 600,000. A United Nations-supervised referendum in August 1999 led to the withdrawal of Indonesian troops and officials, and a 2-year period of United Nations transitional administration. United Nations rule ended in May 2002, with the restoration of independence and the inauguration of the First Constitutional government. At that time, the adult population was just over 500,000, of whom more than 40% had been identified by the census as “illiterate.” (World Bank, 2004, p. xvii)

Planning for Timor-Leste's national literacy campaign began at the First National Adult Literacy Conference in the capital, Dili, in 2004. The Prime Minister, Mari Alkatiri, a founding member, in 1974, of the Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor (Portuguese: Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente, abbreviated hereafter as FRETILIN) opened the conference in these words:

Learning to read and write is to liberate. Literacy is a national priority, because Timor-Leste needs all the population to understand the process of development, to consolidate democracy and to have the capacity to intervene in their own life. (Fieldnotes 15/9/04).

The conference heard reports on the 1961 Cuban campaign and the campaign in the state of Kerala in India, which began in 1988. There were also contributions from veterans of a previous campaign in Timor in 1974-75, which was led by university and high school students from FRETILIN and continued for several more years in the FRETILIN-controlled areas in the mountains after the Indonesian army invaded (Da Silva, 2011). The Prime Minister undertook to support a national campaign, and the next year negotiated an agreement with Cuba to send an initial literacy mission to help mount the campaign. The first 11 Cuban advisors arrived at the end of 2005.

In 2006, FRETILIN's Minister of Education, Sra Rosaria Corte-Real, invited me and two other non-Timorese researchers from the University of New England in Australia to conduct a participatory action research (PAR) evaluation of the campaign and its impacts. Our work was funded by the Australian Research Council as part of a study of the contribution of adult education to post-conflict peacebuilding and reconstruction. The evaluation team worked with the National Campaign Secretariat, in offices located in the Ministry of Education's Non-Formal Education Centre in Dili. The Secretariat consisted of the Ministry's

Timorese campaign coordinator, the two Cuban nationals who led the adviser mission, a Cuban adviser responsible for collecting and analysing the campaign statistics, a representative of FRETILIN's women's organization, the Popular Organisation of Timorese Women (OPMT), and two representatives from the Timorese popular education network *Dai Popular*. We worked for 12 months in-country during 2006 and 2007. The campaign was launched by the government in January 2007, and the first classes opened in Dili in June. We made a further 15 trips of 1-3 weeks duration, to continue our study. The campaign finished at the end of 2012, and the last Cuban adviser mission left in February 2013 (Boughton, 2012).

Our PAR approach involved working collaboratively with the Timorese and Cuban educators to document and critically analyze the campaign as it developed, through processes of dialogue and reflection with campaign staff and participants, the campaign leadership at various levels, and with the Minister and other members of the government. Our research methods included analyzing statistical data from the national census; reviewing primary and secondary sources on the history of Timor-Leste and its pre-independence education systems; reviewing international literacy campaigns; interviews with key actors; participant-observation in literacy classes, training sessions, meetings and workshops; and presentation to local adult educators and academic audiences in workshops and conferences. In 2010, we spent 2 weeks in Havana, Cuba, reviewing our findings with staff of the Institute for Pedagogy in Latin America and the Caribbean (IPLAC) and members of the Cuban popular education network (Boughton & Durnan, 2021).

### Why Cuba?

In 2004, when we began work, several United Nations organizations maintained a presence



in the country, along with many donor country aid agencies and international NGOs. Since their arrival in 1999, and in some cases from an earlier period when they worked with the Indonesian occupying authorities, these agencies had developed a variety of responses to the issue of low literacy. The Department of Non-Formal Education included several tertiary-educated international advisers employed as United Nations “volunteers” by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), to work on projects funded, not just by UNDP but also by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the World Bank and by donor country aid agencies from the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Portugal and Brazil. Two adult literacy programs were already underway, one funded by the Brazilian government, and the other by UNICEF, which under the United Nations system had overall responsibility for education.

The FRETILIN government’s Education Sector Investment Plan called for greater coordination:

There is an urgent need to review and revise the policy framework and associated strategy for provision of literacy and adult education programs. The Government wishes to draw on experience of other developing countries in adult education and literacy programs and evaluate the experience to date in Timor-Leste with CFET and donor funded programs. **With an agreed policy framework in place and clearly identified target groups for these programs, the Government would then look to the donor community to support the national program rather than continue with the fragmented and piecemeal approach of the past** (Democratic Republic of Timor Leste, 2005, p. 41; my emphasis)

With this mandate, we began mapping these agencies and their programs, so as to understand better the context in which the system of Timorese-controlled adult education was developing.

As we undertook this work, members of the international adviser community regularly expressed views which were hostile both to the FRETILIN government and the Cuban mission.

It became clear that United Nations agencies followed a pre-planned model of post-conflict development and reconstruction, derived from experience in other countries, especially Afghanistan. The majority of their international staff had little understanding of the specific history of the Timorese independence struggle. Many viewed the legacy of the occupation, including the education system built by the occupying power, as appropriate to the country’s needs, even to the point of challenging the FRETILIN government’s decision to make Portuguese and Tetum the official languages, rather than Indonesian or English, the languages of their previous occupier and its two main regional allies, Australia and the United States.

This was the context in which the international agencies and advisers continued to implement projects in literacy, adult education and capacity-building, often in direct competition with the government’s own national literacy campaign. In the year the literacy campaign was launched, United States Agency for International Development (USAID) funded eight small non-government organizations to mount separate literacy projects, using materials developed by a UNDP adviser with funding from UNICEF. According to USAID’s evaluation:

Seven of the eight projects were linked to business development through the selection of economically active participants. Two of these grants... also engaged these same learners in business development through cooperatives or savings and credit groups (Anis, 2007, p.10).

The report failed to mention the national campaign or the Cuban mission, even though campaign classes were already underway in some of the same locations as these projects. Our analysis of this phenomenon highlighted the contradiction between donor-led reconstruction efforts informed by neoliberal development theory and FRETILIN’s decolonising project, which aimed

to establish an independent development path based on its own history and its roots in the anti-colonial independence movements of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (Boughton, 2009).

What we did not know then, but which subsequent historical research clarified, was that adult literacy education has been caught in this contradiction for over 60 years, and that actions and attitudes of the officials of the United Nations agencies, the World Bank, and of many of the western donor countries were an outcome of this history. Seen through this historical lens, international opposition to Cuba's "south-south" development cooperation effort arose from two sources. The first was hostility of the United States and its western allies to the Cuban revolution of 1959 and its subsequent role in supporting liberation movements in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean. The second was that, by seeking to mobilize the whole population in the process of developing its independence and breaking free of its colonial past, the government's campaign directly contradicted the primary goal of western international aid: to ensure that Timor-Leste and its resources, including the oil fields in the Timor Sea, would be successfully incorporated into its "rightful place" in the so-called international order of globalized capitalism (Cleary, 2007).

In the midst of the campaign preparations, a mutiny among sections of the security forces heightened external and internal opposition to FRETILIN's political program, and the international community exerted pressure on the Prime Minister to stand aside. Prior to new parliamentary elections in 2007, international aid flowed into the country to support multiple new political parties, and the election resulted in a new anti-FRETILIN coalition government. The Cuban literacy mission survived these changes, but the

new Minister of Education abandoned significant elements of the campaign model, dismantling the national campaign structures of national district and sub-district commissions coordinated through the Secretariat and placing the campaign under the direct control of Ministry of Education officials. Basic literacy classes continued, eventually reaching over 200,000 people, but the wider social mobilization was wound down in most communities. The post-literacy phase, to consolidate what was learned in the basic classes, was abandoned altogether. The coordinated national campaign which the Cuban model had envisaged was thus reduced to the status of another one of the numerous literacy programs funded by the international agencies. At the same time, these alternative programs gained increasing support from the World Bank, ILO, and UNESCO.

Our research team drafted a Strategic Plan for Non-Formal Education, which proposed continuing with the Cuban mass campaign model, while deploying the NGO and other internationally-funded programs as a post literacy phase, but this was not adopted. Instead, the Ministry chose the selective approach, focussing its non-formal education efforts and funding—now re-named Recurrent Education—on the more economically active sections of the population which could be absorbed into a slowly emerging private sector labour market. By the time of our final visit in 2015, the original national campaign with its focus on mass mobilization and participation of all sectors was a distant memory, and a new generation of Ministry officials and international advisers with whom we met knew almost nothing of its history. Nevertheless, the activists from the popular education movement continued to work with FRETILIN, advocating for an alternative decolonising model of education for development, based on the theories of Paulo Freire, Che Guevara and Amílcar Cabral

(Boughton, 2013; Urban et al., 2020).

### YSP in Australia

One of our research partners in Timor-Leste was Ngemba man Jack Beetson, a leader in the development of Aboriginal community-controlled adult education in Australia in the 1980s and 1990s. In 2009, the Lowitja Institute, Australia's only national First Nations-controlled health research institute, funded a national roundtable of First Nations health and education leaders to discuss our Timor-Leste research. This meeting decided to seek Australian and Cuban government support to pilot a campaign in Australia. In 2011, the Federal Labor government agreed to fund a trial in Wilcannia, a small remote "outback" town in the state of New South Wales. The Cuban ambassador to Australia, who was a *brigadista* in the 1961 Cuban campaign, helped secure an adviser, an English-speaking lecturer from the José Varona University in Havana, where the Institute that developed YSP was based. The trial began in 2012, and ran for 2 years, with results significantly better than previous adult literacy programs in this community. Observers from local First Nations organizations and government agencies in the town attributed this success to the degree of community ownership and control which the model allowed, and the high level of community mobilization it achieved to support the participants and their locally recruited facilitators. One of these facilitators told our research team:

...this is the best thing that ever could have happened for this little town ... You know, don't stop at one town. Let's keep going. Let's keep it rolling on.... you've got to spread it along, spread the word, take it to other communities, and keep it alive. Keep it alive. (Boughton et al, 2013, p. 28)

Other communities in the state's far west asked to join the campaign and some additional government funding was secured. The First Nations campaign leadership established a

national organization, the Literacy for Life Foundation (LFLF), to lead a roll out of the model across the country, region by region. By then, however, an election had produced a change of government at the Federal level. Now, 9 years later, LFLF has only managed to secure grants of 1-3 years for short-term campaigns in 12 communities, spread across three jurisdictions, Queensland, New South Wales and the Northern Territory. The funding covered the costs of running classes for 1-5 intakes per community with an average 16 students per intake, well short of the number needed to have a significant impact on overall literacy rates in all but the smallest communities. That said, the campaign has employed and trained over 60 local First Nations staff, and achieved retention and completion rates four to five times higher than First Nations students achieve in the formal accredited courses for low literate students run through Australia's vocational education and training system. The Australian Research Council funded a longitudinal study of the impact of the campaign, the published results of which demonstrate that the campaigns not only raised participants literacy levels, but also led to reduced negative justice system interactions, increased engagement in education, and improved community solidarity and empowerment (Beetson et al, 2022; Boughton & Williamson, 2022; Weitzel, 2018; Williamson & Boughton, 2021).

Neither this evidence, nor a recommendation from a parliamentary inquiry into adult literacy (Commonwealth of Australia, 2022, p. 165), has convinced governments to "scale up" to a genuine mass campaign, as happened with YSP in many other countries, or with the Kha Ri Gude campaign in South Africa (McKay, 2015). Meanwhile, the majority of First Nations adults in both rural and urban communities struggle with low to very low English language literacy, with all the associated social and economic problems this

entails (Lin et al, 2021).

Mainstream forms of adult literacy provision in the United States consistently demonstrate their inability to reach the vast majority of their potential clients, and fail the majority of those whom they do reach (Jacobson, 2020). Similarly, in Australia, the only dedicated Federal funding for adult literacy is a foundations skills program, which provides opportunities for eligible jobseekers to undertake formal accredited vocational education system courses with registered training providers. Even the lowest levels of these courses, Certificate One and Two, have proved unable to attract, let alone retain, sufficient First Nations students with low to very low English literacy to keep pace with the number leaving secondary schooling each year with only minimal English literacy. Most people with minimal literacy therefore finish up joining the “surplus population” unable to gain secure long-term employment, or even to comply with the complex bureaucratic procedures involved in maintaining eligibility for government income assistance. Thousands of people are thus condemned to live in relative and absolute poverty, a condition which increases their vulnerability to police harassment and incarceration, and to a range of physical, social and emotional health problems.

## Literacy Policy and Innovation

A country’s adult literacy policy, like its education policy more generally, is subject to international influences, including from international agencies and forums, such as UNESCO and the OECD. The majority of practitioners may be unaware of the influence of this international context on their particular program or project, as indeed may be its donors and funders. But, literacy policy, like literacy itself, has a context. Many writers in recent years have placed the “vocational turn”

in literacy policy in the context of the rise of neoliberalism, whereas this paper shows that the vocational turn originated, not in the years of Reagan and Thatcher, but much earlier, in the 1960s. The appearance of a rightward shift in the 1980s disguised an underlying continuity, only briefly disrupted in the late 1960s and early 1970s by the rise of anti-colonial and anti-racist countries and movements.

The collapse of the USSR in 1989 and the rise of the new economic orthodoxy known as the Washington consensus further reduced the space for radical adult education. This was the context in which UNESCO and the World Bank, supported by other international agencies and donor countries, moved the bulk of education funding for the Global South into basic and vocational education, leaving only small amounts for non-formal mass adult literacy education, to be conducted by NGOs. Some scholars associated with the “new literacy studies” welcomed this, because it offered more scope for the valorisation of local literacy practices (Rogers & Street, 2012). However, the desire to defend and support those practices led them to repeat the World Bank’s inaccurate evaluations of past mass campaigns (Boughton, 2016).

In the wake of the global financial crisis, the OECD nominated innovation as a key concept for policy makers in its member states, reviving this old idea for new times, calling it “a crucial factor in maintaining competitiveness in a globalized economy.” As in its previous incarnations, “innovation” promises the benefits which will flow from applying scientific and technical expertise to economic and social problems. It is now also capable of being measured scientifically, with a range of indicators available to show the extent to which countries adopt policy innovations. As the literature of innovation studies has grown, so too has an emerging critique, which identifies a “pro-

innovation bias” in neoliberal ideology and new public management theory (Godin & Vink, 2017).

Progressive social movements in several countries, of which some have won a measure of state power, meanwhile continue to support the mass campaign approach. Brazil’s Landless Workers Movement used Cuba’s YSP model to build literacy as part of their efforts to develop their own community-controlled education system with its own schools (Tarlau, 2019). In Venezuela and Bolivia, YSP campaign teachers and graduates formed the social base of experiments in participatory democracy supported by reforming national governments (Artaraz, 2012). In South Africa, the African National Congress government commissioned a study of YSP in Cuba and Venezuela, before adapting many of YSPs features in its own version, the Kha Ri Gude campaign, which raised the literacy of over 3 million people (McKay, 2015). The Total Literacy Campaign in India, initiated by the People’s Science Movement in the state of Kerala in 1988, has now expanded to the whole country (Karlekar, 2004), and continues under a new name, the Saakshar Bharat Mission, which aims to reach 70 million people (Hanemann, 2015, pp 63-67). In the advanced capitalist countries of the Global North (including Australia), however, the mass campaign continues to be viewed with suspicion, and the selective, functional vocational model of literacy provision via small-scale accredited formal programs remains dominant.

## What Goes Around, Comes Around

In 1980, Jonathan Kozol wrote an article reflecting his time in Cuba in the 1970s, studying the 1961 campaign and its impacts. When he asked Raul Ferrer, Cuba’s Minister of Education, why Cuba had succeeded where UNESCO’s EWLP projects had not, Ferrer responded:

Why do they fail? They have the money. They have UNESCO. They have the expertise. They have the international promotion. How is it possible then, that they do not succeed? It is because the starting point is antihuman . . . They do not dare to use the words we use. They do not dare to speak of land reform, to speak about the sick and poor . . . the international corporations and banks . . . They do not dare to put these words into the hands of the poor people. And, because they do not dare, therefore they fail—and they will always fail until they do. (Kozol, 1980, p. 29)

Turning his attention to the United States, Kozol (1980) claimed there were “twenty-five million American adults (who) can neither read nor handle basic mathematical computations” (p. 29). This situation could not be overcome with current approaches, which he called:

a piecemeal low-key unprovocative non-controversial and generally ineffective programme, one which is begun in generosity, carried out in condescension, and concluded in benign defeat (p. 34).

He acknowledged the good work being done by Literacy Volunteers of America, Laubach Literacy International, and several other groups, but it was reaching only 2-4% of those in need. His conclusion was this:

For those who have not been reached up to this time, it is apparent that something new is needed. That ‘something new’ is an approach that has never yet been ventured in this country: an all-out effort, a total mobilization, a ‘National Campaign’. (p. 36)

## Conclusion

Until the 1980s, many other western adult literacy practitioners, scholars and advocates likewise promoted the mass campaign approach, seeing it as a novel way for communities, regions and whole nations to mobilize the resources needed to address the legacies of education inequality. Few of these advocates subscribed to “the literacy myth” (Black & Yasukawa, 2014), that simply improving one’s literacy would automatically lead to other benefits. Like Ferrer and Freire, they understood that literacy is only acquired (or indeed, not acquired) in context, through historically-specific social practices. The real target of the new

literacy studies critiques of the “literacy myth” was not mass campaigns, but human capital theory, which has underpinned the promotion of functional literacy, and now vocational literacy, since the 1960s. This theory is ideological, because it implies that people can escape from poverty by raising their education level, without any need to transform the social system which creates the inequality in the first place.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, discussion of innovation must not be allowed to obscure, once again, the “fundamental education” question: What adult literacy education practices are most likely to help people with minimal literacy to participate in movements to overcome their inequality? This is the question which faced the Citizenship and Freedom Schools of the Civil Rights Movement (Levine, 2004), the July 4<sup>th</sup> movement in Cuba around the same time, and the Sandinista literacy crusade in 1980 (Arnové, 1981). The same question faced the newly-independent FRETILIN government in Timor-Leste in 2004 and is now facing many First Nations communities in Australia.

Mass adult literacy campaigns are an important part of the answer to this question, but are not likely to be classified as an appropriate innovation in the policy discourses of neoliberalism. This is not because a campaign is less creative, or because it fails to unleash an urge of change. Rather, it is because its power comes from its history, and the long tradition of popular education from which it arose (Boughton & Durnan, 2021). As argued above, those who sought to suppress this model did so in the name of innovation. Their aim was to promote economic growth, which would lead to greater prosperity for all. After 60 years, this model is totally discredited. In contrast to “trickle down,” we have what Arundhati Roy named “gush up” - a world in which inequality has risen to obscene levels (Roy, 2014).

A key feature of innovation as ideology has always been its emphasis on the application of social science to problems of economic development and growth, in particular the social science practiced in the United States and its allies. However, critical innovation studies demonstrate that this social science has its own ideological underpinnings in neoclassical economic theory and Parsonian sociology (Godin & Vinck 2017). A fundamental assumption is that the western model of capitalist development is universally applicable, and that, given the right scientific and technical advice, all societies can achieve the maximum possible welfare for all their citizens. Human capital theory is central to this approach.

The current fascination with innovation is another episode in a much longer story about conflicting models of development. Innovation, as much now as it did in the EWLP of the 1970s, conceals its underlying political and social program beneath apparently neutral terms, suggesting that economic growth and the innovation said to help drive it, are always and everywhere of benefit to everyone. The missing element, now as previously, is the scientific and technical expertise which originates largely in the “developed” world of western governments and international agencies. The innovations which receive support are those which reflect this view of what constitutes desirable change. In the impoverished communities of Timor-Leste and Indigenous Australia, the mass literacy campaign might well have been seen as innovative, and the refusal of international donors in one case and governments in the other seen as resistance to change. The fact that this did not happen, and that these campaigns struggled to receive support, is a sign of the continuing marginalization of “southern theory” (Connell 2007), and a testament to the enduring hegemony of western capitalist models of development.

## References

- Abadzi, H. (1994). *What we know about the acquisition of adult literacy: Is there hope?* World Bank Discussion Papers, No. 245. World Bank
- Anis, K. (2007). *Assessment of the effectiveness of literacy and numeracy programs in Timor-Leste* USAID Small Grants Program.
- Arnové, R. F. (1981). The Nicaraguan National Literacy Crusade of 1980. *Comparative Education Review*, 25(2), 244-260.
- Arnové, R. F., & Graff, H. J. (Eds.). (2008). *National literacy campaigns and movements. Historical and comparative perspectives*. Transaction Publishers.
- Artaraz, K. (2012). Cuba's internationalism revisited: Exporting literacy, ALBA, and a new paradigm for south-south collaboration. *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 31, 22-37.
- Beetson, J., Anderson, P., Lin, S., Williamson, F., Amazan, R., Boughton, B., Morrell, S., Taylor, R., & Schwartz, M. (2022). Impact of a community-controlled adult literacy campaign on crime and justice outcomes in remote Australian Aboriginal communities. *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*, 11(1). <https://doi.org/10.5204/ijcsd.2201>
- Bhola, H. S. (1984). *Campaigning for literacy: Eight national experiences of the twentieth century, with a memorandum to decision-makers*. UNESCO.
- Black, S., & Yasukawa, K. (2014). The literacy myth continues: Adapting Graff's thesis to contemporary policy discourses on adult "foundation skills" in Australia. *Critical Studies in Education*, 55(2), 213-228. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2014.904809>
- Boughton, B. (2009). Challenging donor agendas in adult & workplace education in Timor-Leste. In L. Cooper & S. Walters (Eds.), *Learning/Work. Turning work and lifelong learning inside out* (pp. 74-87). Human Science Research Council Press.
- Boughton, B. (2012). Adult literacy, popular education and Cuban educational aid in Timor-Leste. In A. Hickling-Hudson, J. C. Gonzalez, & R. Preston (Eds.), *The capacity to share. A study of Cuba's International Cooperation in Educational Development* (pp. 197-216). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Boughton, B. (2013). Timor-Leste: Education, decolonisation and development. In L. Symaco (Ed.), *Education in South East Asia* (pp. 299-321). Continuum.
- Boughton, B., Chee, D. A., Beetson, J., Durnan, D., & Leblanch, J. C. (2013). An Aboriginal adult literacy campaign in Australia using Yes I Can. *Literacy and Numeracy Studies*, 21(1), 5-32.
- Boughton, B. (2016). Popular education and mass adult literacy campaigns. Beyond the "new literacy studies" In K. Yasukawa & S. Black (Eds.), *Beyond economic interests. Critical perspectives in adult literacy & numeracy in a globalised world* (pp. 149-164). Sense.
- Boughton, B., & Durnan, D. (2021). "Our homeland is humanity." The Cuban School of Literacy and Pedagogy of the Oppressed. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 61(3), 355-375.
- Boughton, B., Williamson, F., Lin, S., Taylor, R., Beetson, J., Bartlett, B., Anderson, P., & Morrell, S. (2022). Measuring adult English literacy improvements in First Nations communities in Australia. *International Journal of Training Research*, 20(3), 248-263. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14480220.2022.2032268>
- Cherewka, A., & Prins, E. (2022). "You can't win a cold war with hot weapons": Frank C. Laubach's educational project, adult literacy campaigns, and US foreign policy (1945-1961). *Comparative Education Review*, 66(1), 19-40.
- Cleary, P. (2007). *Shakedown: Australia's grab for Timor oil*. Allen & Unwin.
- Commonwealth of Australia. (2022). *Don't take it as read. Inquiry into adult literacy and its importance*. AGPS.
- Connell, R. (2007). *Southern theory: The global dynamics of knowledge in social science*. Allen & Unwin.
- Darkenwald, G. C. (1977). Innovation in adult education: An organizational analysis. *Adult Education*, XXVII, (3), 156-172.
- Da Silva, A. B. (2011). *FRETILIN popular education 1973-78 and its relevance to Timor-Leste today*. (Ph.D Thesis). University of New England, Armidale Australia.
- Democratic Republic of Timor Leste. (2005). *Ministry of Education, & Secretariat of State for Solidarity and Labour. Education and Training. Priorities and Proposed Sector Investment Program*.
- Dorn, C., & Ghodsee, K. (2012). The cold war politicization of literacy: Communism, UNESCO, and the World Bank. *Diplomatic History*, 36(2), 373-398.
- Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Penguin Education.
- Freire, P. (1978). *Pedagogy in Process. The Letters to Guinea-Bissau*. Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative.
- Gillette, A. (2008). The Experimental World Literacy Program: A unique international effort revisited. In R. F. Arnové & H. J. Graff (Eds.), *National literacy campaigns and movements. Historical and comparative perspectives* (pp. 197-217). Transaction Publishers.

- Godin, B., & Vinck, D. (Eds.). (2017). *Critical studies of innovation: Alternative approaches to the pro-innovation bias*. Edward Elgar.
- Hanemann, U. (2015). *The evolution and impact of literacy campaigns and programmes 2000-2014*. UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning.
- Jacobson, E. (2020). The lessons of the churn: Adult basic education and disciplining the adult learner. *Adult Literacy Education*, 2(2), 4-15. <http://doi.org/10.35847/EJacobson.2.2.4>
- Karlekar, M. (Ed.). (2004). *Paradigms of learning. The Total Literacy Campaign in India*. SAGE.
- Kozol, J. (1980). Literacy and the underdeveloped nations. *The Journal of Education*, 162(3), 27-39.
- Levine, D. P. (2004). The birth of the Citizenship Schools: Entwining the struggles for literacy and freedom. *History of Education Quarterly*, 44(3), 388-414. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1748-5959.2004.tb00015.x>
- Lin, S., Williamson, F., Beetson, J., Bartlett, B., Boughton, B., & Taylor, R. (2021). Quantifying low English literacy in Australian Aboriginal communities: a correlational study. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 48(2), 267-280. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-020-00388-7>
- Lind, A. (2008). *Literacy for all. Making a difference*. UNESCO.
- McKay, V. (2015). Measuring and monitoring in the South African Kha Ri Gude mass literacy campaign. *International Review of Education*, 61(3), 365-397. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-015-9495-8>
- Mezirow, J., & Irish, G. (1975). *Priorities for experimentation and development in adult basic education. Planning for innovation in ABE. Volume 1*. Center for Adult Education Teachers College, Columbia University.
- Muhr, T. (2015). South-South cooperation in education and development: The ¡Yo, Sí Puedo! literacy method. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 43(0), 126-133.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2015). *The innovation imperative in the public sector. Setting an agenda for action*. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264236561-en>
- Rogers, A., & Street, B. (2012). *Adult literacy and development. Stories from the field*. NIACE.
- Roy, A. (2014). *Capitalism. A ghost story*. Haymarket Books.
- Tarlau, R. (2019). *Occupying schools, occupying land: How the Landless Workers Movement transformed Brazilian education*. Oxford University Press.
- UNESCO, & UNDP. (1976). *The Experimental World Literacy Programme: A critical assessment*. The UNESCO Press & UNDP.
- UNESCO. (2015). *Education for All 2000 - 2015. Achievements & Challenges*. UNESCO.
- United Nations. (1963). *Yearbook of the United Nations 1961*. <https://www.unmultimedia.org/searchers/yearbook/page.jsp?volume=1961&page=1>
- Urban, S.P., da Silva, A. B., & von Linsingen, I. (Eds.). (2020). *Popular education in Timor-Leste: Past and present experiences*. Universidade do Estado do Rio Grande do Norte.
- Weitzel, L. (2018). The Cuban “Yes, I Can” adult literacy campaign in Aboriginal Australia: An alternative to commodified education. *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, 16(3), 68-100. <http://www.jceps.com/archives/4917>
- Williamson, F., & Boughton, B. (2021). “I can speak on this here”: Empowerment within an Aboriginal adult literacy campaign. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 50(1), 168-175.
- World Bank. (2004). *Timor-Leste education since independence. From reconstruction to sustainable improvement*. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/15736>
- Youngman, F. (2000). *The political economy of adult education & development*. Zed Books.



# Australia's Reading Writing Hotline: An Ongoing Innovation

Vanessa Iles, Lindy Cassidy, and Jill Finch  
Reading Writing Hotline at TAFE NSW

## Abstract

The Reading Writing Hotline was originally conceived as phone support for viewers of an educational TV series. Celebrating its 30th anniversary next year, it has evolved to become a national referral service for learners, as well as an information and advisory service for industry and community. It recorded a significant increase in call numbers and complexity during the pandemic. Because of its unique connections with learners and program providers, the Hotline's case studies and statistics are a valuable resource for governments and policymakers. The Hotline is trialing several pilot projects to address gaps in adult literacy provision.

**Keywords:** adult literacy, informal learning, online learning, distance learning

This article outlines the history and evolving purpose of Australia's adult literacy phone referral service. The Reading Writing Hotline, Australia's free referral service for adult literacy and numeracy, has operated for almost 30 years. Other adult literacy services and programs have come and gone. By adapting to the needs of our communities, the Hotline has survived the many changes in the field and now has a unique overview of adult literacy needs across the country.

## The Beginnings

The story of the Hotline begins in 1990, UNESCO's International Literacy Year, when the Australian government started to recognize the need for systematic adult literacy services. While some English classes were provided for migrants, there

were few opportunities for the many English-speaking Australians who had had minimal or disrupted education due to remote location or social disadvantage.

A TV series and workbook was developed to support at-home literacy learning. The Hotline was initially funded as a phone support line for this series and workbook and took its first calls in 1994. Media ads were developed to promote the series and the Hotline.

Calls skyrocketed as the previously hidden demand for adult literacy provision was revealed, and learners' fears and embarrassment began to be recognized. The Hotline was a groundbreaking service because phones were answered by experienced teachers, who understood the difficulties of callers and the barriers they faced and could respond sensitively.

Over subsequent years classes and tutor schemes became more widely established, and the Hotline's purpose shifted from supporting the TV series to providing information and referrals to face-to-face services.

## The Hotline Today

The service continues to be funded by government, maintains a national database of numeracy/literacy program providers, and receives more than 4000 phone and email enquiries a year. However, the work of the Hotline has evolved as Australian society has become more complex, and much has changed in the adult literacy sector since 1990. The range of provider and program types and sites has increased, as has the role of technology in everyday life. We have greater understanding of multiple literacies, and the important connected roles of numeracy, literacy and digital literacy. Our national demographic profile is more culturally diverse, and there is recognition of systematic disadvantage of Indigenous Australians. Policies on education and economic development have fluctuated or waned.

The Hotline now provides advice not just to individual callers, but to job agencies, employers, libraries, industry, and government agencies. Our website receives around 66,000 visits a year, in addition to our calls and emails. The Hotline is a reliable source of specialist information in a field where policy, funding, eligibility, and program availability are increasingly volatile.

The Hotline's learner-friendly website has resources for students, tutors, employers, and First Nations learners. Importantly, as a service in direct contact with learners, the Hotline can provide a voice for people who are often not heard, and its statistics shed clear light on gaps in program types, geographical coverage, or learning

resources. For this reason, it is often asked for input into policy reviews by governments.

## COVID-19 Changes

Some of the changes mentioned have been deeply accentuated by the pandemic. The Hotline's call numbers increased significantly. Calls are much more time consuming as caller issues are more complex. It is often the person's first time reaching out for assistance, and their literacy needs have to be unpacked from other needs.

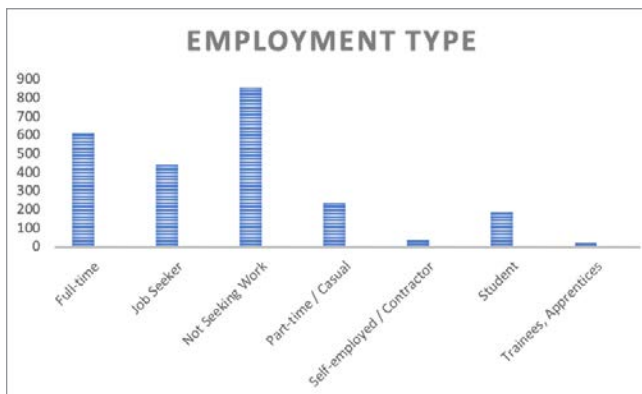
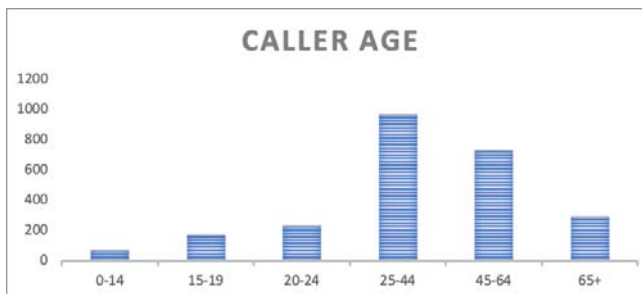
The Hotline has been in a unique position to monitor how COVID-19 affects learners and providers. It is therefore able to report on significant issues for learners, including:

- programs closed or only offering online formats unsuitable for low level learners;
- students dropping out as delivery moved online;
- students who were vulnerable (due to lack of financial, social or learning supports) were first to leave and last to return;
- parents overwhelmed by the demands of supervising at-home online learning when they lacked confidence themselves;
- adults unable to access regular literacy/numeracy supports in the community (such as libraries) due to closures/remote working;
- employees stressed by working from home, as workplace buddies who helped with literacy/digital skills became unavailable;
- fear and shame about complying with health requirements, including changing rules, fake news, QR check-ins and vaccination passports; and,
- complicated health messaging written at a very high level, sometimes translated into community languages but not rewritten to meet the needs of the whole community.

## Who Calls and Why

Analysis of internal call data from the Hotline's caller database makes it clear that callers represent the diversity and complexity of adult literacy needs. It reflects and justifies the broader role of the Hotline since 1990. While the needs of callers have changed over time, the overall profile of our caller population is fairly consistent.

Data for Jan 2021 - Jan 2022 shows that more men than women called the Hotline, 72% were from an English-speaking background and around 10% identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders (who comprise 3% of the overall population). Caller age and employment type are represented in the charts below.



Around half of callers are ringing for themselves, while others ring for a friend or family member, or from community organizations. A smaller percentage of calls are from employers, industry groups, government departments, and health workers. People interested in becoming tutors also call for information on available training.

Here are some of our recent callers:

- **Aboriginal community in negotiations with mining company**

Bruce is a First Nations language speaker and represents his community in negotiations with a mining company. He needed to improve his English literacy to “get a better understanding instead of just blind-signing.” There were no tailored literacy classes available, but the Hotline located a local teacher who agreed to work voluntarily.

- **Worker trying to keep job at remote airport**

An Aboriginal employee called seeking assistance to keep her job. The literacy requirements were increasing and keeping up was becoming an issue. She felt ashamed and was reluctant to ask for help. Barriers for this caller included access to funding, travel to classes, release from work, and cultural appropriateness. The Hotline spent several months following up leads and eventually found a tutor to support her.

- **Worker navigating COVID-19 and unemployment**

Brett rang after seeing a TV series about adult literacy. His fiancée had been helping him with writing but had recently died. Brett needed to complete many forms from the hospital and government, which send him “into a panic attack.” He also struggles with COVID-19 information and requirements. Brett has lost many job opportunities because he was unable to write. He was a concreter and became a foreman but had to give up because the literacy demands were too much. Brett is now unemployed. Physical concreting is hard, and he wants to find other work. He is looking for help to do his resume and forms. “After all these years, I want to do something for myself.”

- **Improving safety for workers**

An agricultural employer rang seeking literacy help for an employee. After a conversation about available programs, the Hotline invited the safety manager to contact us about a larger group who were at significant risk in the workplace due to lower reading skills. A program for this group was subsequently organized.

Calls during the pandemic often amplify existing issues with adult numeracy/literacy:

- A man with a disability had no connection to the internet as he could not afford it. He wanted distance materials to be sent until he was able to access a computer.
- A woman lost her job and now has time to retrain for a new career. She was working as a courier and now wants to study maths to enter the police force. The Hotline helped with practice exams, numeracy class information, and some maths learning resources.
- An essential worker in the health industry needed literacy help. The Hotline provided support, learning resources, and referral information for when face to face classes restarted.
- A woman living alone needed help with computing for social and learning contact, as she had no-one to help her. Crucial forms for financial support were also too difficult, and all online forms were intimidating.

## What The Calls Reveal About Australia's Adult Literacy Provision.

It is clear that the Hotline plays a unique role in collating and reporting these issues to stakeholders. Analysis of calls makes clear some important issues for adult literacy in Australia:

- An unhelpful emphasis on literacy for employment. The main funded literacy program is for job seekers, however around 80% of callers are not eligible for this program, because they are already working, or are not seeking work as they are carers or have chronic health issues.
- A need for more informal community-based learning. Accredited literacy classes in colleges are often intimidating and difficult for adults with beginner literacy levels and there are very few pathways in.
- A gap in literacy programs for people in regional and remote locations. While some online programs are offered, many learners do not have devices, access to the internet, or the digital skills to enroll and participate. A national distance mode literacy scheme with postal and phone support options is needed.

## How The Hotline Has Responded

The core business of the Hotline continues to be answering calls and finding suitable classes. However, a significant change in recent years has been responding to systemwide needs gathered via the phonedlines. Policy does not always respond rapidly to need; therefore, a key part of the Hotline's innovation has been coordinated action with other non-government literacy councils and organizations.

From the needs identified by its core business, a range of projects have emerged. Most of these are in low-budget "pilot" form, trialing practical ways of responding to needs, and demonstrating how learner-centered adult education approaches can be put into practice. Other stakeholders may then be able to implement projects in a systematic way. Some of these projects have a "back-to-the-future" feel about them, mirroring

successful and well-regarded strategies which have been discontinued.

### **Helping Adults Fill in Forms**

The Hotline receives many calls from adults who struggle to fill in forms to access government services. It also receives calls from community workers called on to give face-to-face help to people trying to fill in forms. Even in paper format, these forms are challenging, but the difficulty is amplified as more forms move online and require digital access and digital literacy. The Hotline responded by initiating research with the community and library sectors to capture the amount of staff time being used to support form-filling and if there was a need for literacy tutor training for these staff. The Hotline is also piloting a small teaching project based in a community center, offering form-filling help as a stepping-stone to engaging in a literacy program.

### **Distance Literacy**

Some of our most vulnerable callers are in remote locations with no literacy classes and no transport. There may or may not be reliable internet or libraries. There are many callers who can't afford data plans or laptops, and many more who don't have the skills and confidence to use them, or anyone to help when things go wrong. To take the first steps in literacy these learners need paper-based learning material, with a teacher available to talk regularly by phone.

These options were widely available in the past but have generally been abandoned, with everyone told to "just hop online," assuming that everyone has access to devices and the digital literacy needed to use them. To address this, the Hotline is piloting postal and phone learning for a small number of vulnerable and isolated learners who

have no other options.

### **Volunteer Tutor Programs and Training.**

Australia used to have a vibrant network of volunteer adult literacy tutor schemes based in libraries and further education colleges. While a few states have maintained this excellent option, many groups have closed due to changes in policy, funding cuts, or lack of qualified staff. This has meant a kind of "corporate memory" loss, with few programs for training new tutors, few learning resources, and limited funding for coordinators to train and support volunteers. To address this, the Hotline has produced an updated tutor training package for free distribution to public libraries and community groups.

### **Feedback to Government**

In recent years, the Hotline has played an increasing role as a trusted reference point for governments at both state and national level. This partly reflects its unique overview of what is happening on the ground for both literacy/numeracy providers and for learners. It also reflects changes in the adult literacy landscape over the last two decades, which have seen large scale privatization and marketizing of adult literacy. This has meant that a limited number of public education providers in literacy (who were easily consulted for advice and statistics) have been replaced by a "churn" of private providers unable to develop a cohesive vision or long-term overview of the field.

Consequently, the Hotline stands as a valuable source of up-to-date information on:

- who is offering what, where, and at what level;
- which cohorts and communities are not getting their needs met;
- what difficulties employers are having in addressing literacy/numeracy in the workplace;

- the kind of research that is needed;
- specialist literacy workforce issues (there is currently a major crisis looming); and,
- policy and program development recommendations.

This means that the Hotline's small team of project officers is often tightly stretched preparing submissions and participating in reference groups across multiple jurisdictions.

This goes beyond its recognized role but has become important in order to make a real difference to the opportunities for future learners. For example, in the above project on form-filling needs, the role started with receiving calls from learners and community workers. When it became clear that few options were available to get callers help, the Hotline initiated research to find out what was happening and what was needed. In addition to the pilot program referred to above, the service reached out to government departments

responsible for the forms, to discuss opportunities for working together on a plain English approach to their materials. The Hotline has put together a plain English kit for a broader audience across government and industry, to develop capability in reader-friendly communications.

## Conclusion

For nearly 30 years, the Hotline has significantly expanded its original role and has evolved into a unique resource. It continues to adapt to meet the needs of callers and communities, and to explore solutions to the systemic barriers that adult literacy learners continue to experience. This role has been even more important with the impacts of COVID-19 in Australia. The Hotline provides a voice for people who are often not heard, and its case studies and statistics shed light on gaps in literacy provision. It plays a unique role in ensuring these voices may be heard in policy discussions and program reviews by governments.

# Problematizing the Imperative to Innovate: An Examination of Innovations in Adult Literacy

Keiko Yasukawa, University of Technology Sydney

Innovation is a ubiquitous word in education. It would be unusual not to see some claim of an innovative learning environment or program on websites and other marketing materials of education providers. Awards are given to innovative practitioners. In Australia, for example,

The Excellence in Language, Literacy and Numeracy (LLN) Practice Award recognises **innovation** and excellence by an individual involved in improving LLN skills in an educational, community or workplace context. (Australian Training Awards, n.d.-a, para. 8; emphasis added)

However, if one were unsure about what would be considered an innovation, they would be none the wiser when they read the explanation of the criterion:

Criterion 1: Excellence and innovation in LLN delivery

How have you demonstrated excellence and innovation in your approach to the design and delivery of adult LLN programs? For example, you may consider:

- innovative approaches to training program design, delivery and evaluation
- innovative approaches to deliver LLN training and assessment in flexible and engaging ways
- highly effective or unique methods for improving collaboration between vocational staff and foundation skills specialists
- strategies to integrate and contextualize LLN training
- collaboration and partnerships
- positive outcomes. (Australian Training Awards, n.d.-b, n.p.)

It appears that innovation is something that is self-evident: "you know it when you see it."

In this Forum piece, I argue that innovation in adult literacy (and perhaps in education generally) is a concept that needs to be problematized. While there appears to be a general agreement in the education and wider social science literature about the definition of innovation, expressed for example as: "the application of a better product, idea or method" (Ellis, 2017, p. 41), the problem is the lack of specificity in *what the innovation is better for* when celebrating innovation as if it is inherently good.

Problematizing innovation is not an original idea: critiques of the implied normalization of desiring innovation can be found in the scholarly literature. Drawing on a Marxist critique, some scholars of critical innovation studies argue that there is a pro-innovation bias in contemporary business and government discourses that ignores the reality that the value of some innovations may be at best questionable (Leary, 2019; Walsh, 2021). For example, Leary (2019), who argues that innovation is a "capitalist buzzword," suggests that contemporary references to innovation come with

an implied sense of benevolence; we rarely talk of innovative credit-default swaps or innovative chemical weapons, but innovation they plainly are. The destructive skepticism of the false-prophet innovator has been redeemed as the profit-making insight of the technological visionary. (p. 94)

It should not be difficult to find application of a

“better” product, idea or method in education that may be better from one perspective (for example, in terms of cost and speed) to have questionable or clearly damaging consequences such as on students’ understanding, agency or sense of purpose in what they are supposed to be learning and/ or on teachers’ professionalism and agency.

## Problematizing Innovation in Education

Critical analysis of innovation in the wider social science literature calls for a reflection on how the term is used in education. Here, too, there are scholars who have reflected on the uncritical pursuit of innovation. The philosopher of education Gert Biesta (2020) writes:

Education, world-wide, suffers from an obsession with the new, with renewal, and with the assumption that what is new is better, and hence what is not new, what is old, must be worse or bad. The demand for educational innovation not only puts a relentless pressure on education to constantly keep up, constantly go for the latest fashion, without providing much time for careful judgement about what is on offer and about what is actually needed. (p. 1025)

He argues that like fashion, the obsession with innovation creates a sense of need and therefore demand for the new as well as generating an anxiety of being left behind if one cannot claim to have something innovative to show. Michael Peters (2020), in considering Biesta’s critique, says “innovation in education and pedagogy is largely a reflection and outgrowth of what I call ‘Algorithmic Capitalism in the Epoch of Digital Reason’” (p. 1016). The two concur in the observation that the word innovation is shrouded in a technocratic, economic discourse. They further observe that it is often invoked when an initiative is focused on efficiencies and often tied up with what is measurable: “if you can’t measure it then it doesn’t count” (Peters, 2020, p. 1018).

Biesta and Peters disagree, however, on Peters’

optimism that an alternative view of innovation may help to shift its economic or technocratic focus to one more aligned with educational values such as “fostering international understanding and developing social platforms for enhancing collective intelligence and creativity” (Peters, 2020, p. 1019). Peters refers to this model as that of open and social innovation that is built around the ethics of collective processes of collaboration, co-operation and co-production. He suggests that developing this model can help to realize an educational theory of innovation that is “based squarely on social democracy” (Peters, 2020, p. 1022). Biesta, on the other hand, argues that while openness may lead to the kind of social democracy envisaged by Peters, it would have to be a certain type of openness which is far from guaranteed through the kind of measures outlined by Peters, citing the impact of social media in building clusters of solidarity around undemocratic ideologies such as racism and neo-Nazism (Biesta, 2020).

Importantly, Biesta (2020) argues that one should never lose sight of the question of “the good of education” when considering what is proposed as an innovation. According to him, the good of education has to be considered with regard to “the three-fold ‘remit’ of education – the work of qualification, the work of socialisation, and the work of what I have termed subjectification” (Biesta, 2020, p. 1024, see also Biesta, 2016). Biesta uses the term qualification to refer to the building of human capital through skills development, socialization to refer to learners’ greater engagement in the cultural life and social practices of their communities, and subjectification to refer to their growth as individuals who have greater capacity and capabilities to engage in learning and community life and make choices with reduced dependencies on others. A good education, he argues, should be understood in relation to these three dimensions.



He is particularly concerned about the increasing investment in measurement in education: measurement of the efficiency and effectiveness of achieving outcomes without the same investment in discussions about what outcomes programs should be aiming for.

Another critical perspective on educational innovation can be found in a discussion by Deneen and Prosser (2021) on the possibilities of authentic educational innovations in higher education. They observe that the rhetoric of innovation is rampant in the higher education sector, however the rhetoric is largely a neoliberal rhetoric that positions universities as “commoditized, market-driven business ventures” (p. 1128) which in turn positions learners as customers and therefore, teaching as customer-service. Further they observe that although the neoliberal rhetoric is infused with the word innovation, contemporary universities, including public universities, that are increasingly market-driven and treats students as consumers rather than learners are also risk averse, having in place “controlled and reductive approaches to course design, assessment and evaluation” (p. 1134) that affords little agency for academics to innovate to enhance learning.

These critiques of the uncritical pursuit of innovation in education suggest some common themes, the most salient one being the lack of articulation of how innovation serves a pedagogically defensible purpose. Founded on a neoliberal ideology, innovation is justified on the basis of making processes more economically efficient and more effective in achieving outcomes that are limited to what is measurable. It also supports the trend towards standardization of outcomes and curricula to enable comparisons of program effectiveness easier and encouraging competition between education providers. As Deneen and Prosser (2021) have shown, this in

turn reduces professional agency and autonomy from the teachers, the people who are closest to the students’ educational experiences.

## **Problematizing Innovation in Adult Literacy Education**

Adult literacy has not escaped the impact of neoliberalism either. In Australia, as well as in other English-speaking countries, this impact has been supported by neoliberal education policy initiatives of transnational organizations, particularly the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). With reference to Biesta’s framework on the three domains of education, Larson and Cort (2022) have analyzed the lifelong policies of UNESCO, the OECD and the European Union. They conclude that OECD’s focus has come to dominate, and “the main purpose of adult education has become qualification, subordinating other purpose to neoliberal ideals of expanding the market economy and creating subjects who are entrepreneurial, competitive and adaptable to labour market needs” (Larson & Cort, 2022, p. 103). The OECD’s influence has then been reflected in local education policies such as in Australia (Yasukawa & Black, 2016).

At the national levels, the focus on qualification as the main purpose of adult literacy has been translated into forms such as the standardization of curricula and introduction of standardized assessment frameworks (Osmond, 2021; Tett & Hamilton, 2019; Yasukawa & Black, 2016). Studies have found that adult literacy learning outcomes and assessments are increasingly externally determined, prescriptive and heavily biased towards employability related outcomes at the expense of other authentic goals and needs of their learners (Allatt & Tett, 2019; Taylor & Trumppower, 2021): trends consistent with the human capital

conceptualization of literacy. They have also noted the loss of the teachers' ability to cater to the needs of their learners using their professional judgement. These observations resonate with the observations of Deneen and Prosser (2021) in the loss of teacher agency and autonomy to which externally determined outcomes can lead.

The implication of the type of policy innovation that the adult literacy field has seen is that teachers' working environment is not particularly conducive to innovation that ought to privilege the pedagogical needs of and benefits for their learners. This suggests the need for reflection about what we mean by innovation in our own field of adult literacy: what kinds of innovation are being reported; do they reflect the neoliberal goals of the institution or the government, or goals related to the experiences and outcomes of the learners; are innovations argued on educational or on other grounds?

Despite the constrained policy environment within which many adult literacy programs operate, some examples of innovations in adult literacy education that are grounded in principled pedagogical grounds can be found in the recent research literature. I select a few for interrogating: what is the innovation being discussed and to what extent is the innovation argued on pedagogical grounds.

Among publications in the last decade, Rosen and Vanek (2017) call for the teaching of digital skills of adult basic education students as an innovation and challenge for the field. Although the word innovation appears only in the title and is not specifically used within the article, the authors argue that centering digital skills development of adult learners would be both an innovation (a significant shift to existing practices at the time of their study) and a challenge. Their rationale for

the need for this innovation is based on the view that adult basic education is lifewide: that is, it has a mandate to prepare adults for a wide range of social practices in the technology-saturated and changing world. They also point to the way digital skills are part of being literate in the sense of the multimodal literacies that interact with people's personal, community and work life; not having the digital skills for the new literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011) would limit their access to employment, government services and social networks, including any overseas family networks with whom it is now much easier to stay in contact using digital technologies.

When the world was hit by COVID-19, the necessity of the innovation highlighted as a priority by Rosen and Vanek (2017) was nothing less than prophetic. Belzer et al. (2022) document the rapid emergency responses made by adult literacy providers to the pivot away from face-to-face classes. Their study shows that the changes such as remote teaching necessitated by the shutdown had been a response to the emergency "using whatever combination of old and new technologies was necessary including anything from mail and telephones, to texting apps and shared photos, to online learning platforms and video meeting tools" to reach and help the students stay connected (Belzer et al., 2022, p. 83). What is salient in Belzer et al.'s (2022) account is the care for the learners as "whole" persons that underlined the range of innovations on which the teachers embarked. The innovations they cited include locating places, including the local bus depot which was a hotspot, where students could access the internet for free digital resources, and sourcing information on food banks, mental health and other services that some of the students needed to get through the period of shutdown financially and emotionally. These initiatives suggest more than being innovative in

their “duties” as teachers who would teach literacy skills, but a deeper commitment to be responsive to their students’ lifeworld challenges such as social isolation and poverty.

Both Rosen and Vanek’s (2017) and Belzer et al.’s (2022) studies discuss innovations in adult literacy that are in part or in whole related to the use of digital technologies. However, they are not driven by technologies, rather they are driven by the need to ensure adult learners’ participation in education as well as in other domains of life are not limited by their lack of the necessary digital skills. Belzer et al.’s (2022) study shows how the pandemic created a situation where students and their teachers were compelled to build their digital skills so the students could continue to study and perhaps more importantly, stay connected.

Innovation studies in the adult literacy research, moreover, is not all related to technology. A study by Coxhead et al. (2019) report on the development and incorporation of a specialized technical word list in a Fabrication course for apprentices as a pedagogical innovation to help the students navigate through the large amount of technical vocabulary. In this study the innovation related to a pedagogical tool that benefited the apprentices to take greater control over their learning.

In the studies reported in this issue on the theme of innovation, technology does not feature strongly. In fact, in his research in Timor Leste and remote Australian Aboriginal communities where the Cuban mass literacy campaign *Yo, sí puedo* based on Freirean adult education principles was implemented, Boughton (2023) rejects the notion that the mass campaign model was an innovation, despite the model offering a radical alternative to the more common human-capital based approach. Instead, he argues that it was the capitalist notion of innovation imbued with

the ideology of marketisation and competition, that has contributed to the marginalization of mass literacy campaigns which is ideologically incompatible with the neoliberal ideals. While not wanting to impose a characterization that the author rejects, if one were to rescue the word innovation from the stranglehold of neoliberalism the initiatives to bring the campaign model of literacy to Timor Leste and remote Australian Aboriginal communities are innovations; they shift and widen the program focus from literacy as a human capital, to literacy as a resource for community empowerment, and to that end, transforming literacy education from something that is externally designed to something that is led and owned by the community. It is an innovation that is founded in its historical successes, and on the strengths of those successes, introduced into and adapted to the needs and aspirations of the people in new contexts.

## Conclusion

Innovation is a ubiquitous term, and its use to promote neoliberal values such as competition, efficiency and its privileging of technology driven initiatives has been critiqued by educational researchers, including adult literacy researchers. The field of adult literacy has not been immune to innovations aligned to neoliberal values. As found in other areas of education, the neoliberal context constrains teacher agency and professional judgment for pedagogical innovation by attending to qualification alone, that is, only one of what Biesta (2020) identifies as the purpose of education.

Despite the constraints posed by the neoliberal policy contexts that are not aligned with the purpose of adult literacy education as seen by many of the practitioners, innovations driven by educational aims have also emerged, a few of which I have described. These innovations

are varied and while the focus of some includes the purpose of qualification, they also include the other purposes of what Biesta (2020) calls socialization and subjectification.

While the examples of adult literacy innovations embrace all three purposes of “good education,” these innovations are taking place within a larger neoliberal policy landscape. The policy rhetoric that supports innovation for economic growth alone and practitioner-based innovation co-exist

in our field. The policy rhetoric cannot be ignored because policy compliance is required for funding. Thus, the challenge for us is to mobilize a shift from a solely economic-driven adult literacy policy to an educationally driven adult literacy policy: this is the innovation challenge for our field. In the meantime, claims of innovation in adult literacy must be examined critically: who is making the claims and what are the educational consequences of these innovations for the learners?

## References

- Alamprese, J. A., Cheng, I.-F., Manhattan Strategy Group, & Abt Associates, I. (2021). *Compendium of innovative practices: Adult education bridge programs and integrated education and training (IET) Programs*. Abt Associates. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED613476>
- Allatt, G., & Tett, L. (2019). The employability skills discourse and literacy practitioners. In L. Tett & M. Hamilton (Eds.) *Resisting Neoliberalism in Education* (pp. 41-54). Policy Press.
- Australian Training Awards. (n.d. -a). *Award categories*. <https://www.australiantrainingawards.gov.au/award-categories>
- Australian Training Awards. (n.d. -b). *Excellence in Language, Literacy and Numeracy Practice Award*. <https://www.australiantrainingawards.gov.au/award/excellence-language-literacy-and-numeracy-practice-award>
- Belzer, A., Leon, T., Patterson, M., Salas-Isnardi, F., Vanek, J., & Webb, C. (2022). From rapid emergency response to scaling and sustaining innovation: Adult foundational education in the time of COVID-19. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 2022, 81-91. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.20454>
- Biesta, G. (2016). *Good education in an age of measurement*. Routledge.
- Biesta, G. (2020). What constitutes the good of education? Reflections on the possibility of educational critique. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 52(10), 1023-1027. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1723468>
- Coxhead, A., McLaughlin, E., & Reid, A. (2019). The development and application of a specialised word list: the case of Fabrication. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 71(2), 175-200. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2018.1471094>
- Deneen, C. C., & Prosser, M. (2021). Freedom to innovate. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 53(11), 1127-1135. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1783244>
- Ellis, A. K. (2017). The nature of educational innovation. In A. M. Sidorkin, & M. K. Warford (Eds.), *Reforms and Innovation in Education* (pp. 37-51). Springer Cham.
- Lankshear, C., & Knobel, M. (2011). *New Literacies: Everyday practices and social learning* (3rd ed.). Open University Press.
- Larson, A., & Cort, P. (2022). Qualification, socialisation and/or subjectification—three international organisations' prioritisation of the purposes of adult education and learning from the 1970s to the 2010s. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 41(1), 91-106. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2022.2030422>
- Leary, J. P. (2019). *Keywords: The new language of capitalism*. Haymarket Books.
- Osmond, P. (2021). *Developing social equity in Australian adult education: Lessons from the past*. Routledge.
- Peters, M. A. (2020). An educational theory of innovation: What constitutes the educational good?. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 52(10), 1016-1022. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2019.1699992>
- Rosen, D. J., & Vanek, J. B. (2017). Technology for innovation and change in adult basic skills education. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 155, 51-60. <http://doi.org/10.1002/ace.20240>
- Taylor, M., & Trumpower, D. (2021). A portrait of the adult learner: Pluralistic interpretations of literacy learning outcomes over the years. *Adult Literacy Education*, 3(1), 4-17. <http://doi.org/10.35847/MTaylor.DTrumpower.3.1.4>
- Tett, L. & Hamilton, M. (Eds.). (2019). *Resisting neo-liberalism in education*. Policy Press.
- Walsh, S. (2021). Marx, subsumption and the critique of innovation. *Organization*, 30(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/13505084211015377>
- Yasukawa, K., & Black, S. (2016). Policy making at a distance: A critical perspective on Australia's national Foundation Skills Strategy for Adults. In K. Yasukawa & S. Black (Eds.). *Beyond economic interests: Critical perspectives on literacy and numeracy in a globalised world* (pp. 19-39). Sense.

# Response to "Problematizing the Imperative to Innovate: An Examination of Innovations in Adult Literacy"

Huacong Liu, Shanghai Jiao Tong University

I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to Yasukawa's essay that problematizes the imperative for innovation. Yasukawa started the essay by providing an extensive review of various scholars' critiques on the so-called innovations in education. In particular, she refers to the education philosopher Gert Biesta (2020) on his reflection on the uncritical pursuit of innovation in education in general:

Education, world-wide, suffers from an obsession with the new, with renewal, and with the assumption that what is new is better, and hence what is not new, what is old, must be worse or bad. The demand for educational innovation not only puts a relentless pressure on education to constantly keep up, constantly go for the latest fashion, without providing much time for careful judgement about what is on offer and about what is actually needed. (p. 1025)

It is worth noting that in the last sentence of this quotation, Biesta (2020) points out that it is the lack of judgement about what is on offer and about what is actually needed – both concerning *the means to achieving educational goals* – that renders the so-called innovation failing to deliver its promises.

Regarding the ends of education, Yasukawa also refers to Biesta's (2020) work and emphasizes that the good of education has to be considered with regard to three dimensions, including qualification, socialization, and subjectification. In particular, subjectification refers to "their growth as individuals who have greater capacity

and capabilities to engage in learning and community life and make choices with reduced dependencies on others." Using Biesta's (2020) framework to examine the examples Yasukawa gives at the beginning of the essay regarding the criterion of the Excellence in Language, Literacy and Numeracy Practice Award in Australia, it is clear that the criterion exclusively focuses on the means of education, without any mention of the characteristics of the good of education.

In the second part of the essay, Yasukawa delves into the field of adult literacy and reviews studies that investigate the overall policy environment of adult education as well as recent five case studies documenting adult literacy programs with elements of innovation. These studies include centering digital skills development of adult learners in Rosen and Vanek (2017), combining old and new technologies after the outbreak of COVID-19 (Vanek & Webb, 2022; Belzer et al., 2022), developing and incorporating a specialized technical word list (Coxhead et al., 2019), and the Cuban mass literacy campaign *Yo, sí puedo* (Boughton, 2023). Yasukawa is positive about the innovative parts of these programs, yet if we were to apply Biesta's (2020) framework to examine these programs, they don't go beyond the earlier defined three domains of "the good of education."

As a matter of fact, in the concluding paragraph, Yasukawa points out that achieving more broad educational aims and incorporating the goals of “socialization” and “subjectification” in adult literacy education remain a challenging task.

In short, I agree with Yasukawa’s critique that innovations in education often fail to deliver their promises, especially when lacking a careful judgement about what is on offer and about what is actually needed (Biesta, 2020). However, I have different views about skills assessment and collecting information on adults’ engagement with skills, especially when examining various issues on a global scale.

Before discussing the usefulness of skills assessment and skills engagement data, I first want to emphasize similar doubts about the effectiveness of innovation in adult education from a slightly different angle. For the sake of discussion, let’s focus on one of the three dimensions of “the good of education”: qualification. Technological innovation has not led to much improvement in adult literacy on a global scale. The global literacy trend data estimated by UNESCO (2022) shows that from a global perspective, progress of adult literacy rates has been very slow over the past decades. In particular, the 2021 Global Education Monitoring Report tracks changes of adult literacy rates from 2015 to 2020. The report demonstrates that globally, among adults aged 15 and above, 83% of women and 90% of men are literate in 2020, with corresponding numbers being 82% and 89% in 2015 (UNESCO, 2021). The slow progress is also evident when using absolute terms; the number of adults aged 15 and above with no or low literacy skills, especially women, has hardly changed between 1999 and 2019 (UNESCO, 2021). What is more upsetting are the causes of the observed gains. An earlier study examines changes in literacy rates

of adults aged 15 and above over four decades – between 1970 and 2010 – among 30 low-income countries (Barakat, 2016). It demonstrates that the observed gains in overall adult literacy is largely driven by the cohort effect; that is, literate youth becoming adults, rather than of adult literacy acquisition (Barakat, 2016). There is no doubt that with various technological innovations over the past decades, especially those relating to online or remote learning platforms, learning resources for learners at all ages have become more abundant and accessible than ever before. Yet, the above-mentioned trend analysis and quantitative studies indicate that we cannot take for granted that technological innovation and expansion of online learning resources would directly lead to improvement in adult literacy. At least this is not the case on a global scale.

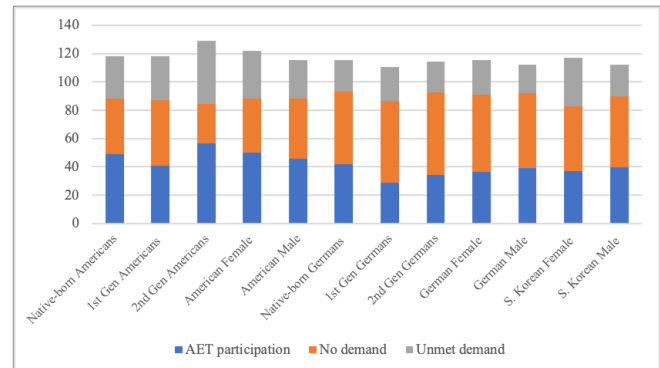
While agreeing with Yasukawa’s concerns about innovations in education, I don’t fully agree with her critiques on skills assessment. While qualitative case studies provide in-depth understanding of how individual adult literacy programs are operating, quantitative data could demonstrate the overall trend of adult literacy, as demonstrated in the above-mentioned analyses, how prevalent various challenges adult learners face, and what types of programs would facilitate authentic learning.

To illustrate, on a global scale, large-scale skills assessment data and corresponding background information illuminate the fact that countries with different cultural backgrounds and at different stages of development need to tackle adult learning issues differently. Comparing patterns of adult education participation between middle-income and high-income countries, Liu et al. (2019) finds that participation in adult education and training (AET) has been stagnant, albeit at a high level, among learners in high-

income countries and AET participation has remained very low among adults in middle-income countries. For instance, in Germany and the United States, over 50% of youth and adults claim that they have participated in either formal or non-formal education in the past 12 months, whereas the participation rate is only 5% and 10% in Vietnam and Yunnan respectively.

Skills assessment data and corresponding information provide further messages into understanding varying participation rates across countries. Figure 1 comes from Liu (2020), which plots the AET participation rate, the extent of unmet demand, and the extent of stated “no demand” for AET across subgroups of low-numerate adults in three advanced adult learning systems – Germany, the United States, and South Korea. A distinct pattern of low-participation-low-demand-low-unmet-demand emerges: adults with low AET participation rates also have low unmet AET demand and are also more likely to claim no demand for AET. Specifically, first generation American immigrants, American males, first generation immigrants in Germany, and females in Germany are more likely to exhibit this pattern compared to their respective peers. Findings of this study indicate that in relatively mature adult learning systems, supply-based approaches to adult education have their limits in further reaching to the disadvantaged groups. To redress inequalities in AET participation, the challenge is to innovatively design policies that can make AET reach a wider population. Desjardins (2013; 2017) points out that innovative policy design may consider providing target subsidies directly to individuals rather than providers. Policymakers may consider stimulating demand for AET through tax credits, training vouchers, unpaid educational leave combined study loan or grants and individual learning accounts.

**FIGURE 1: AET participation, unmet demand rates by gender, immigration status among adults with low numeracy proficiency in the United States, Germany and South Korea**



**Note:** No demand refers to adults who did not participate and did not want to participate. Unmet demand refers to adults who participated and wanted to participate more but did not because of barriers. (Liu, 2020, p. 428)

Compared to high-income countries, middle- and low-income countries only recently started to have policy and legal frameworks relating to adult education. Skill assessment data and accompanying information shows that the challenge lies in how to innovatively tackle the supply side of adult education. For instance, utilizing the Skills Toward Employment and Productivity data (STEP), Liang and Chen (2013) find that the majority of enterprises in China provided training only to fewer than 10% of their employees, and trainings are often carried out by internal personnel rather than external training providers.

In addition to providing contextual information on underlying issues concerning the demand and supply side of adult education across countries, skills assessment and information on practices of skills illuminate similar challenges that adult learners face. The Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning (LSAL) led by Reder (2009a, 2009b) follows a randomly sampled high school dropout population over 9 years and investigates the extent to which adults’ literacy abilities continue to develop after they are out of school. The study



offers a rich picture of adult literacy development through a relatively long period of time and through information not limited to program settings or short follow-up intervals (Reder, 2012). Contrary to previously thought, the study finds that although literacy continues to develop in adult life after leaving school, there seems to be no significant relationship between participation in adult basic skills program and immediate literacy proficiency change (Reder, 2009a, 2012). Instead, there are significant relationships between participation in adult education programs and increased engagement with literacy, such as reading books, and numeracy, such as using math at home (Reder, 2009a, 2012). The study further shows that over an approximately 5-6 years period, more frequent reading and writing activities eventually lead to greater literacy proficiency (Reder, 2009b). With these findings, Reder (2012) suggests that effective adult literacy programs should be able to help students change their literacy practices, choose the best path as

they leave the program and provides them with the resources and supports to become persistent lifelong learners.

With findings from these studies, I would like to come back to Biesta's (2020) point that "a lack of judgement about what is on offer and about what is actually needed" would make innovation in education only stay as a buzzword without substantial improvement in learning (p. 1025). If we are really careful about "what is actually needed" and "what is on offer," perhaps we don't need much innovation. Instead, we would only need to focus on solving those "old problems," which are reaching the traditionally left-out subgroups in relatively more advanced adult learning systems, incentivizing employees or the government to provide more adult learning opportunities in middle- and low-income countries, and in all contexts, effectively enhancing learners' practice of literacy and numeracy, and supporting them to become persistent lifelong learners.

## References

- Barakat, B. (2016). Improving adult literacy without improving the literacy of adults? A cross-national cohort analysis. *World Development*, 87, 242-257. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2016.06.015>
- Belzer, A., Leon, T., Patterson, M., Salas-Isnardi, F., Vanek, J., & Webb, C. (2022). From rapid emergency response to scaling and sustaining innovation: Adult foundational education in the time of COVID-19. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 2022, 81-91. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.20454>
- Biesta, G. (2020). What constitutes the good of education? Reflections on the possibility of educational critique. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 52(10), 1023-1027. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1723468>
- Boughton, B. (2023). Mass literacy campaigns: A way back to the future? *Adult Literacy Education*, 5(2), 20-32. <http://doi.org/10.35847/BBoughton.5.2.20>
- Coxhead, A., McLaughlin, E., & Reid, A. (2019). The development and application of a specialised word list: The case of fabrication. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 71(2), 175-200. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2018.1471094>
- Desjardins, R. (2013). The economics of adult education: A critical assessment of the state of investment in adult education. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 2013(138), 81-90. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.20056>
- Desjardins, R. (2017). *Political economy of adult learning systems: Comparative study of strategies, policies and constraints*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Larson, A., & Cort, P. (2022). Qualification, socialisation and/or subjectification—three international organisations' prioritisation of the purposes of adult education and learning from the 1970s to the 2010s. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 41(1), 91-106. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2022.2030422>
- Liang, X., & Chen, S. (2013). *Developing skills for economic transformation and social harmony in China: A study of Yunnan Province*. World Bank Publications.
- Liu, H., Fernandez, F., & Grotlüschen, A. (2019). Examining self-directedness and its relationships with lifelong learning and earnings in Yunnan, Vietnam, Germany, and the United States. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 70, 102088.
- Liu, H. (2020). Low-numerate adults, motivational factors in learning, and their employment, education and training status in Germany, the US, and South Korea. *ZDM*, 52(3), 419-431. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11858-019-01108-x>
- Reder, S. (2009a). The development of literacy and numeracy in adult life. In S. Reder & J. Bynner, (Eds.), *Tracking adult literacy and numeracy skills: Findings from longitudinal research*. (pp. 59-84). Routledge.
- Reder, S. (2009b). Scaling up and moving in: Connecting social practices views to policies and programs in adult education. *Literacy and Numeracy Studies*, 16(2), 35-50.
- Reder, S. (2012). *The longitudinal study of adult learning: Challenging assumptions*. Centre for Literacy.
- Rosen, D. J., & Vanek, J. B. (2017). Technology for innovation and change in adult basic skills education. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 155, 51-60. <http://doi.org/10.1002/ace.20240>
- UNESCO. (2021). *Global Education Monitoring Report 2021/2: Non-state actors in education: Who chooses? Who loses?* <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000379875>
- UNESCO. (2022). *Background information on education statistics in the UIS Database*. [https://apimgmtstzgjpfq2u763lag.blob.core.windows.net/content/MediaLibrary/bdds/UIS%20Education%20Database\\_Background%20Information\\_EN.pdf](https://apimgmtstzgjpfq2u763lag.blob.core.windows.net/content/MediaLibrary/bdds/UIS%20Education%20Database_Background%20Information_EN.pdf)

# Innovating in Education: A Response to Keiko Yasukawa's "Problematizing the Imperative to Innovate: An Examination of Innovations in Adult Literacy"

Maria del C. Lorenzatti, Universidad Nacional de Córdoba - Universidad Nacional de Chilecito (Argentina)  
Judy Kalman, Centro de Investigación y Estudios Avanzados del IPN (CINVESTAV), México

In her text *Problematizing the Imperative to Innovate: An Examination of Innovations in Adult Literacy*, Keiko Yasukawa argues that there is a need to discuss the notion of *innovation/s* in education and educational research. She begins by noting, along with several other authors, that this concept is often set in a neoliberal framework, associated with a technocratic and economic discourse focused on efficiency and continuous change (Biesta, 2020; Peter, 2020; Deneen & Prosser, 2021). Innovation is associated with improvement, although it is unclear *what innovation is better or what improvement it offers*.

Yasukawa calls this out as a lack of specificity in discussions about innovation and what innovations would be pedagogically justifiable. She presents evidence that innovation is often void of meaning or defined parameters and that the general approach to identifying innovation is “you know it when you see it.”

Keiko Yasukawa’s opening discussion leans heavily on a critique of neoliberal ideology and policies. She reviews a discussion by Leary (2019) and Walsh (2021), who share the view that a premise of innovation is “an implied sense of

benevolence” and the risks of new inventions or discoveries are rarely revealed to the public or included in “pro-innovation bias in contemporary business and government discourses.” We coincide with her here; innovation is a critical component of the progress discourse of western thinking, the idea that development comes through change, advancement, and new inventions. The idea that progress is continuous improvement and benefits for all reaches back to the scientific and technological advances of the Renaissance, comes to age in the Enlightenment, and provides Europe with an ideological justification for its expansion to and domination of the Americas, Africa, and Asia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Yasukawa notes that critical analysis of innovation calls for a reflection on how the term is used in education. In the next sections, we look at how we understand innovation in adult literacy and then explore the pedagogical basis of innovation in adult literacy experiences. We finalize our comments with a look at the *Yo, sí puedo* program, a recent literacy campaign in Latin America.

## What Do We Understand by Innovation in Education, and More Specifically, Adult Literacy?

The word *innovation* refers to something new, novelty, and what is different from what previously existed and is usually done. Blanchard and Muzás (2018) argue that any innovation aims to bring about modifications that improve teaching and learning processes and generate a collaborative effort in response to students' educational needs.

There are different ways of looking at innovations in education and, in this case, in adult literacy. We are interested in exploring two: those proposed by governmental bodies and those that arise in literacy teaching practices. In the case of government-sponsored innovations, it is crucial to analyze their philosophical, epistemological, and pedagogical foundations and how innovations are recontextualized until they reach the educational space where literacy educators interact with their students. In other words, it is essential to examine how a given innovation is conceived and elaborated by those who “know” (experts, curricular designers, and public officials) and then transformed into a concrete experience in the classroom.

Towards the end of the last century, policymakers, international agencies, and national education authorities tried one innovation after another. Knobel and Kalman (2016) summarize these continuous efforts to make education more efficient with improved outcomes. Innovation in the 1970s promoted the “rationalization of teaching and learning” (Novoa, 2008, p. 49), and “teachers were ‘trained’ to teach by developing lesson plans based on very specific learning objectives” (Knobel & Kalman, 2016, p. 1). Then, during the 1980s, curricular reform became the

center of attention, while in the 1990s, all eyes turned toward school (re)organization (Novoa, 2008). Knobel and Kalman (2016) note that international agencies such as UNESCO and the World Bank “persuaded national governments to invest time and resources in curriculum reform and school reorganization efforts” (p. 1). It seemed government bodies assumed promoting innovative curricula or school organization would “necessarily result in improvements in student learning and this, in turn, would ultimately contribute directly to social benefits like “poverty alleviation,” economic development, and social equality” (Knobel & Kalman, 2016, p. 2). With the rise of information and communication technologies in the 2000s, getting computers and connectivity into schools became the new hot-button effort aimed at improving education. These reforms and innovations were directed at education systems in general and usually included adult education departments and programs.

The other way of looking at innovation is to focus on the new, creative actions that teachers—including literacy educators—develop in their work by recognizing what can be done within the limits of their situated activities with groups of adult learners. From this perspective, the prime interest is the analysis of what happens in the educators' teaching practices, adult learners' relationship to knowledge, and the meanings that teachers and learners construct in that space. We propose to move away from the pedagogical prescriptions of official dispositions such as strict planning according to preset objectives and analyze what the literacy teachers do with students.

Innovations are interwoven with already established practices. This means that innovations do not occur once and for all; instead, actions and meanings are re-signified in each context, in each institution where they are developed,

and according to the educational trajectories of students and teachers.

Along these lines, Williams's (2009) contributions help us understand the re-contextualization of innovative proposals and the practices that seek to introduce some changes. The author proposes making visible those residual elements that have been formed in the past but are expressed as an element of the present. In other words, some meanings and experiences remain visible in renewed practices but are part of "some previous social and cultural formation or institution" (Williams, 2009, p. 144). He also points to "emergent" elements as a category that reveals new meanings and values, new relationships, and new types of relationships. These categories (residual and emergent elements) make it possible to unravel what is new, what already existed, what relationships were previously established, what meanings participants (teachers and learners) sustain, and what elements innovate teaching practices. In particular, these categories offer tools to disaggregate what is specifically pedagogical from other innovative dimensions. Because innovations are inseparable from the institutional contexts and processes in which they are developed (Ezpeleta, 2004), they are not only instrumental or technical changes but also political.

## What Is the Pedagogical Basis of Innovation Processes in Adult Literacy Experiences?

Historically, adult education and literacy have occupied a secondary place in the educational policies of Latin American countries. Since the 1960s, democratic governments, under the auspices of UNESCO, have developed literacy plans or programs to "eradicate illiteracy." Yasukawa notes that behind these programs is a commitment to the neoliberal agenda, linked

to the quantitative dimension of literacy and the need to improve the statistics related to the number of inhabitants who read and write. Similarly, the analysis of adult literacy programs reveals educational models centered on linear work with the written code. Using primers and videos, these teaching approaches conceive adult students as if they were a *tabula rasa*. They work from the assumption that these adults have no knowledge of reading or writing. In these proposals, adult literacy is understood as acquiring skills and abilities to decode written language.

In our experience of working with literacy educators for over thirty years, we can identify some of the issues related to the development of programs that do not take teaching practice into account. First, literacy educators receive pre-designed primers and documents and are expected to use them with their groups of learners. The concept of teaching here is to simply implement predetermined tasks. This points to the loss of teacher agency and autonomy, an observation made by Deneen and Prosser (2021). Second, literacy educators do not receive pedagogical preparation to work with those materials or adult learners.

Thus, we are faced with groups of literacy educators who have little possibility of discovering who their students are, their previous experiences with schooling, or what they might know. At the same time, because there is little or no teacher development, instructors do not engage with critical theoretical perspectives that would allow them to think and "create" their teaching materials or approaches.

Saleme (1997) argues that innovations will improve teaching if, at the same time, there is a search for conceptual tools that allow teachers to deepen their analysis of the theoretical and practical challenges they meet. One such framework is New

Literacy Studies, a sociocultural perspective that understands literacy as a social practice framed within broader social activities, which occur in the framework of power relations, and that subjects that know their social and legal consequences (Bloome et al., 2019; Kalman, 2004, 2018; Street, 1993, 2005; Zavala et al., 2004).

Additionally, adult educators' work contexts tend to be precarious, not only in terms of salaries but also because, in many cases, educators operate in spaces that are not their own, in remote locations, and without Internet connections. Here, we coincide with Yasukawa's points about the fact that teachers' work environments are not particularly conducive to implementing innovations that privilege students' pedagogical needs.

The ways instructors recognize their students, acknowledge their literacy practices, and their experience and understandings constitute the pedagogical basis of any innovation in adult education programs. This is the starting point for teaching proposals that make it possible to develop authentic reading and writing practices with specific communicative purposes. In other words, innovations in adult literacy do not lie within a particular method for teaching reading and writing but in the didactic approaches that include the adult learners' knowledge and incorporate their use and understanding of written culture present in their community and their daily life. The challenge is integrating adult learners' practices in other social spaces (church, market, work) into the literacy program. Through these practices, they appropriate knowledge. They learn to read and write with other readers and writers. This is the only way to understand the appropriation processes in social terms and is in no way centered on learners' individual cognitive processes.

## When New Is Old Hat: *Yo, sí puedo*

Given the above, we were surprised by Yasukawa's conclusion that *Yo, sí puedo*, a recent literacy program created in Cuba and widely used in Latin America and Africa, is innovative. We consider that it is one of the programs that best illustrates the limitations of canned literacy programs based on the implementation of predetermined sequences and tasks. This curriculum promotes a syllabic and phonemic analysis of Spanish. As a teaching strategy, it assigns a number to each letter arguing that adults with little or no schooling know numbers better than letters because of their recognized ability to do math and deal with calculations in everyday life. However, numbers correspond to ideographic representation (they represent a concept), while letters are alphabetic representations (each represents a sound). This means that learners confront letters and numbers simultaneously in writing—as if they represent the same thing.

Moreover, the numbers are not for counting or ordering but for (re)naming the letters. As if this were not enough, the texts written for the adults to read are artificial and controlled (in the syllables they employ), the adult learner is conceived as a big child who must obey the teacher, and the teacher is practically the only person who speaks in the videos. The pre-recorded classes represent some of the worst practices found in teaching children to read and write and *Yo, sí puedo* recreates them for adults. Therefore, the most serious problems with this program are not ideological. Its most serious shortcomings are in its conceptualization of how learning to read and write takes place. Although Yasukawa's position on what it is to read and write, how one learns, and how one teaches might be linked to ideological discussions, this is not the most relevant issue here. What is relevant are

the pedagogical misconceptions and a lack of a complex understanding of literacy beyond the mechanical acquisition of the written code. In the case of those countries that declared the end of illiteracy—the white flag of illiteracy—after the implementation of *Yo, sí puedo*, it would be imperative to find out the criteria for declaring illiteracy eradicated and if other literacy education strategies were developed. *Yo, sí puedo* per se presents a restricted vision of literacy and bases its evaluation of literacy on learners' acquisition of letter/sound equivalencies by measuring their ability to decipher and produce limited texts.

## Conclusions

Our contribution to the Forum discusses the notion of innovations as a concept that acquires a political character but also its pedagogical underpinnings. We are concerned explicitly with adult learners, who, for different reasons, did not learn to read and write fluently when they were young. This challenges us, as educational researchers, to recognize the active condition of adults in their learning process because, in their everyday life, they participate in institutions, fight for their rights, plan, anticipate situations, make conjectures, and develop procedures, among other actions. These practices, mediated by written culture, are produced in social contexts and within the framework of social relations (always power relations).

We proposed two ways of approaching the study of pedagogical/educational innovations: from the official reforms and the literacy educators' practice in their work context with their students. These two ways could refer to the two types of innovations that the author identifies in her article: the neoliberal type focused on efficiency, which pursues quantitative evaluation, and the educational/pedagogical type that goes beyond that purpose and seeks to advance with pedagogical strategies that seek the autonomy of adults, even when it is also developed within the framework of neoliberal policies.

We cannot fail to mention the complexity of adult literacy processes. It is necessary to overcome the dichotomous vision of literate-illiterate, and to state that we are dealing with people who have appropriated different aspects and uses of written culture through practice, often in ways different by those offered by school. For this reason, innovations in the field of education demand the recognition of inherent political positions: literacy is neither a linear process nor just an acquired skill. It is a social practice situated in ongoing social relations, materialities, and purposes. For this reason, the challenge for adult literacy educators is the construction of pedagogical proposals that recognize the written objects that adults interact with, and their knowledge constructed through their continuous use of reading and writing.

## References

- Blanchard, M., & Muzás, D. (2018). *Equipos docentes innovadores. Formar y formarse colaborativamente*. Narcea
- Bloome, D., Kalman, J., & Seymour, M. (2019). Fashioning literacy as social. In D. Bloome, M. Castanheira, C. Leung, & J. Rowsell (Eds.), *Re-theorizing literacy practices. Complex social and cultural contexts* (pp. 15-29). Routledge.
- Ezpeleta Moyano, J. (2004). Innovaciones educativas. Reflexiones sobre los contextos en su implementación. *Revista Mexicana de Investigación Educativa*, 9(21), 403-424.
- Kalman, J. (2018). *Leer y escribir en el mundo social. Obras Escogidas*. Paideia Latinoamericana 5 - Centro de Cooperación Regional de Educación de Adultos de América Latina y el Caribe -
- Kalman, J. (2004). *Saber lo que es la letra - Una experiencia de lectoescritura con mujeres de Mixquic - Siglo XXI*
- Knobel, M., & Kalman, J. (2016). *New literacies and teacher learning*. Peter Lang.
- Novoa, A. (2008). Profesores: ¿el futuro aún tardará mucho tiempo? In C. de Medrano and D. Vailant (Eds.), *Aprendizaje y desarrollo profesional docente* (pp. 49-56). Organización de Estados Iberoamericanos
- Saleme, M. (1997). *Decires* - Vaca Narvaja Editor -
- Street, B. (1993). *Cross-cultural approaches to literacy*. Cambridge University Press.
- Street, B. (2005). Recent applications of new literacy studies in educational contexts. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 39(4), 417-423.
- Williams, R. (2009). *Marxismo y literatura*. Las Cuarenta.
- Zavala, V., Niño Murcia, M., & Ames, P. (Eds.). (2004). *Escritura y sociedad. Nuevas perspectivas teóricas y etnográficas*. Red para el Desarrollo de las Ciencias Sociales en el Perú.



# Translanguaging in Adult Basic Education Worldwide

Anna Kaiper-Marquez, National Center for Families Learning

There is an abundance of adult language learners worldwide, including an estimated 1.5 billion English language learners alone (British Council Statistics as cited in Beare, 2019). For adult immigrants in particular, acquisition of the language/s spoken in their host countries is expected for integration into the social and economic fabric of the country (Haznedar et al., 2018). For example, 37.5 million people living in the European Union (EU) were born outside of EU countries (European Commission, 2021) and at least 10 of these 41 member countries require that immigrants demonstrate a level of language proficiency of the host country before entering (Rocca et al., 2020). In the United States, adult English language learners (ELLs), most of whom are immigrants, make up 40% of learners in federally-funded adult basic education (ABE) programs (American Institutes for Research, 2016) and are expected to learn English “to be productive workers, family members, and citizens” (U.S. Department of Education, para. 1). Adult language policies worldwide propound the necessity of adults learning the language of the country in which they have resettled, and yet, this often comes “at the expense of these migrants’ home language or other languages they speak” (Haznedar et al., 2018, p. 156). Moreover, within policy and public discourse, the native languages of adult learners begin to become viewed as a barrier to their integration

into the country as opposed to an intellectual and personal strength (Polezzi et al., 2019). This inevitably leads adult language and literacy programs to view learners’ native languages from a similar deficit perspective (Haznedar et al., 2018).

As a response to global monolingual language policies, concepts have been developed to promote the importance, and even the necessity, of drawing on learners’ native languages to support the learning of an additional language. One concept that is particularly gaining notoriety in scholarship and practice within K-12 classrooms is the notion of “translanguaging.” This concept refers to the fluidity of language practices employed by multilingual speakers (García & Wei, 2014) and has grown significantly in recognition as it views one’s native language/s as an asset to their learning rather than a barrier (García & Leiva, 2014). This concept, however, remains largely unrecognized in educational policies and in instructional practices for adult language learners. It is similarly rare in scholarship exploring adult basic education and language classrooms globally. In the following review of research, I describe in more detail the concept of translanguaging and review the nascent literature connecting translanguaging to adult language and literacy learning worldwide. Additionally, I conclude by arguing for more work on translanguaging in adult language classrooms and policy globally.

## What Is Translanguaging?

Translanguaging, or “the act performed by bilinguals of accessing different linguistic features or various modes of what are described as autonomous languages, in order to maximize communicative potential” (García, 2009, p. 140) has become a vital concept in language and literacy theories and pedagogies. The term was originally coined by Welsh educator Cen Williams in the 1980s to promote the systematic use of two or more languages for teaching and learning (Lewis et al., 2012) and gained popularity in more recent books by Baker (2001) and García (2009). While “code switching,” a process where speakers go back and forth between languages, is a concept still used by numerous scholars and educators (Auere, 2010; Balam & de Prada Perez, 2017; Dobao, 2018), this connotes a monoglossic view of language in which each language has separate systems and uses in a multilingual person’s repertoire. Conversely, translanguaging suggests a heteroglossic notion of language speakers where multilingual speakers are concurrently drawing from numerous linguistic repertoires in a fluid fashion rather than switching from one linguistic “code” to another.

Translanguaging practices are more than a description of individual learner’s language practices, however. Translanguaging instructional practices can encourage learners to draw from their multiple linguistic backgrounds to legitimize these backgrounds and even serve as a form of decolonization of linguistic practices within and outside of the classroom (Hurst & Mona, 2017; Makalela, 2015). This focus on legitimization of adult learners’ linguistic repertoires is vital in deepening multilingual learners’ understanding of texts, fostering critical metalinguistic awareness, and expanding language learners’ confidence (García & Kleifgen, 2020). Even

more, multilingual abilities have become key in increasing human capital and earning potential for learners as knowing multiple languages has become an important asset in the global job market (Agirdag, 2014; Callahan & Gándara, 2014; Grin et al., 2011). Thus, multilingualism broadly, and translanguaging specifically, can and should be implemented into adult language programs to create spaces of democracy and social justice for all learners (Jurmo, 2021).

Translanguaging practices can be observed in numerous ways in ABE classrooms. In my own adult ELL classrooms, for example, when learning new vocabulary words, we compare the English translation of these words to those in the learners’ home languages to explore similarities in prefixes, suffixes and roots of multiple languages. I also recommend that learners who speak similar home languages discuss assignments in these languages to support the acquisition of English while also drawing on knowledge of their native languages. In another example, educators suggest encouraging online translation tools in class, promoting multilingual written and oral responses to class assignments, and supporting multilingual research on topics to gain information on the research topic while concurrently developing the language of focus (Hesson et al., 2014). These examples are fairly easy to implement but can lead to multiple linguistic, social, and individual benefits for learners.

And yet, although numerous scholars and practitioners agree on the importance of translanguaging practices in increasing learners’ literacy skills, empowerment, and language legitimation, almost all translanguaging research and practice centers on K-12 learners who are utilizing translanguaging in school (Creese & Blackledge, 2010; García et al., 2017; Reyes & Klein, 2010). The minimal translanguaging

research that goes beyond grade 12 is often situated in higher education contexts that center on the language practices of learners of “traditional” university ages (Canagarajah, 2011; Makalela, 2017; Mazak & Carroll, 2016

## Global Translanguaging Research

In a North American context, some scholars have explored the ways the translanguaging practices can be vital for supporting emerging readers and writers with their English literacy skills (Knowles, 2020), while others have reflected on instructors’ views and use of translanguaging practices in their adult language classrooms (Burton & Rajendram, 2019; DeMott-Quigley, 2018). DeMott-Quigley (2018), for example, argues that translanguaging practices within the classroom act as a cross-cultural exchange in which teachers and learners are learning from each other. Other U.S. scholarship on translanguaging in adult education spaces connects translanguaging to social justice and empowerment to reveal how translanguaging practices can be incorporated into culturally sustaining pedagogies for community-based ESL programs (Emerick, et al., 2020) and disrupt deficit views of multilingualism, particularly for older adults and refugees (Park & Valdez, 2018). These papers all support Auerbach’s (1993) contention that contemporary English Only political movements (as opposed to immersion models) impact adult English language classes and reinforce broader inequities linked to language and power. Moreover, they strengthen Flores’s (2014) contention that translanguaging can be a political act that directly pushes back against practices such as “English-only” policies enforcing language separatism.

Outside of North America, the majority of adult translanguaging scholarship is centered in

Europe, and particularly in Nordic countries. There is growing research, for example, situated in Swedish adult language and literacy programs that explores the use of translanguaging in both Swedish and English language instruction. Some of this research centers on the speech actions of Swedish immigrant language learners and argues that more explicit support for learners’ using their multiple linguistic repertoires would further strengthen their acquisition of Swedish (Wedin & Shaswar, 2022). Other research within a Swedish adult education context focuses explicitly on the translanguaging practices of teachers in the adult language classroom (Dahlburg, 2017; Rosén & Lungren, 2021; Shaswar, 2022). This research explores teachers’ various recognition and negotiation of translanguaging within their classrooms.

In a Norwegian adult education context, Dewilde’s (2019) and Beiler and Dewilde’s (2020) explore both Norwegian and English language learning within these adult language classroom spaces. Using the term “translingual” (often associated with Kellman, 2000, and Canagarajah, 2012) instead of translanguaging, authors examine the practices of translingualism in learners’ writing practices. Dewilde (2019) finds that the use of translingual approaches to writing and literacy “transcend individual languages and involve diverse semiotic resources in situated meaning construction” (p. 942). Beiler and Dewilde (2020) argue that by using translingual orientations to translate writing from one language to another, adult English language learners can leverage their linguistic repertoires in ways that teachers might not be able to support, thus leading to further learner agency.

Beyond a North American and European context, there is a scarcity of scholarship surrounding translanguaging in adult language and literacy within other global regions—particularly outside

of higher education institutions. Marino and Dolan's (2021) work on a language course for adult refugees in Uganda finds that by teachers enacting translanguaging pedagogies, adult language learners can develop both language skills and increased empowerment. Wimalasiri and Seals (2022) explore translanguaging in an online English language classroom in New Zealand and argue that although translanguaging is an effective teaching strategy, the instructor's use of this practice is not always aligned with social justice pedagogies. Turnbull (2019) looks at adult EFL learners' learning practices in Japan and finds that by removing notions of multilingualism as a barrier and enacting translanguaging practices, learners scored higher on language exams and produced more concise and well-formed essays. This research emphasizes the numerous ways in which translanguaging is and can be used in adult basic education and English language classrooms worldwide, while also highlighting the dearth of literature that still exists connecting adult language education and translanguaging practices globally.

## Moving Forward

As this review of literature emphasizes, the use of translanguaging in adult basic education and language classrooms can be a vital practice for numerous adult education outcomes.

Translanguaging within adult language classrooms can be used to support learners' speaking, reading, and writing practices; connect teachers and learners; and dismantle inequitable power dynamics between the teacher and learner. Further, translanguaging approaches to teaching and learning can empower adult learners to think of their diverse linguistic repertoires as assets to learning and even have the potential to contradict monolingual language policies reinforcing language separatism and language hierarchies. And yet, this review also highlights the need for more research on translanguaging practices worldwide.

Jurmo (2021), in a recent white paper on adult education and social justice, argues that adult education can and should be a tool to support democracy and social justice. Moreover, he contends that adult education classrooms should be a space where educators and learners alike can "mitigate the impacts of social injustices, navigate around those impacts, eliminate unjust policies and social practices, and create alternative ways of doing things that support social justice" (p. 6). By expanding research on the use of and possibilities for translanguaging practices in adult language classrooms worldwide, we as researchers, educators, administrators, and policy makers can potentially use this framework to further work toward these goals of democracy and social justice, both within adult language classrooms in the U.S. and language classrooms globally.

## References

- Agirdag, O. (2014). The long-term effects of bilingualism on children of immigration: student bilingualism and future earnings. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 17(4), 449-464. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2013.816264>
- American Institutes for Research (2016). *English language proficiency standards for adult education: With correspondences to college and career readiness standards for English language arts and literacy, and mathematical and science practices*. <https://lincs.ed.gov/publications/pdf/elp-standards-adult-ed.pdf>
- Auer, P. (2010). Code-switching/mixing. In R. Wodak, B. Johnstone, & P. E. Kerswill, *The SAGE handbook of sociolinguistics* (pp. 460-478). SAGE.
- Auerbach, E. R. (1993). Reexamining English only in the ESL classroom. *TESOL Quarterly*, 27(1), 9-32. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3586949>
- Baker, C. (2001). *Foundations of bilingual education and bilingualism* (3rd ed.). Multilingual Matters.
- Balam, O., & de Prada Pérez, A. (2017). Attitudes toward Spanish and code-switching in Belize: Stigmatization and innovation in the Spanish classroom. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*, 16(1), 17-31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2016.1260455>
- Beare, K. (2019, November 18). *How many people learn English?* ThoughtCo. <https://www.thoughtco.com/how-many-people-learn-english-globally-1210367>
- Beiler, I. R., & Dewilde, J. (2020). Translation as translanguaging writing practice in English as an additional language. *The Modern Language Journal*, 104(3), 533-549. <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12660>
- Burton, J., & Rajendram, S. (2019). Translanguaging-as-resource: University ESL instructors' language orientations and attitudes toward translanguaging. *TESL Canada Journal*, 36(1), 21-47. <https://doi.org/10.18806/tesl.v36i1.1301>
- Callahan, R. M., & Gándara, P. C. (Eds.). (2014). *The bilingual advantage: Language, literacy and the US labor market*. Multilingual Matters.
- Canagarajah, S. (2012). *Translingual practice: Global Englishes and cosmopolitan relations*. Routledge.
- Creese, A., & Blackledge, A. (2010). Translanguaging in the bilingual classroom: A pedagogy for learning and teaching? *The Modern Language Journal*, 94(1), 103-115. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2009.00986.x>
- Dahlberg, A. (2017). *Translanguaging as a scaffolding structure in a multilingual group studying English in Sweden*. <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1083686/FULLTEXT01.pdf>
- DeMott-Quigley, M. (2018). *The classroom as contact Zone: Translanguaging and critical literacy development in a beginning ESOL class for adults*. [Master's Thesis, SIT Graduate Institute]. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED582279.pdf>
- Dewilde, J. (2019). Translation and translanguaging remixing: A young person developing as a writer. *International Journal of Bilingualism*, 23(5), 942-953. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367006917740975>
- Dobao, A. F. (2018). Code-switching in the Spanish heritage language classroom. In R. A. Alonso (Ed.), *Speaking in a Second Language* (pp. 175-196). John Benjamins Publishing.
- Emerick, M. R., Hoffman, B. Y., & Kanno, Y. (2020). Teaching Hispanic restaurant workers: Translanguaging as culturally sustaining pedagogy. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 51(3), 304-321. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aeq.12340>
- European Commission (2021) *Overall figures of immigrants in European society*. [https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/promoting-our-european-way-life/statistics-migration-europe\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/promoting-our-european-way-life/statistics-migration-europe_en)
- Flores, N. (2014). *Let's not forget that translanguaging is a political act*. The Educational Linguist. <https://educationalinguist.wordpress.com/2014/07/19/lets-not-forget-that-translanguaging-is-a-political-act/>
- García, O. (2009). *Bilingual education in the 21st century: A global perspective*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- García, O., Johnson, S. I., Seltzer, K., & Valdés, G. (2017). *The translanguaging classroom: Leveraging student bilingualism for learning*. Caslon.
- García, O., & Kleifgen, J. A. (2020). Translanguaging and literacies. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 55(4), 553-571. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.286>
- García, O., & Leiva, C. (2014). Theorizing and enacting translanguaging for social justice. In A. Blackledge, & A. Creese (Eds.), *Heteroglossia as practice and pedagogy* (pp. 199-216). Springer, Dordrecht.
- García, O., & Wei, L. (2014). Translanguaging and education. In O. García, A. M.Y. Lin, & S. May (Eds.), *Translanguaging: Language, bilingualism and education* (pp. 63-77). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Grin, F., Sfreddo, C., & Vaillancourt, F. (2011). *The economics of the multilingual workplace*. Routledge.
- Hasan, M., Islam, A. S., & Shuchi, I. J. (2020). Translanguaging as an instructional strategy in adult ESL classrooms. *ELT Echo: The Journal of English Language Teaching in Foreign Language Context*, 5(2), 93-107.

- Haznedar, B., Peyton, J. K., & Young-Scholten, M. (2018). Teaching adult migrants: A focus on the languages they speak. *Critical Multilingualism Studies*, 6(1), 155-183. <https://cms.arizona.edu/index.php/multilingual/article/view/146>
- Hesson, S., Seltzer, K., & Woodley, H. H. (2014). *Translanguaging in curriculum and instruction: A CUNY-NYSIEB guide for educators*. CUNY-NYSIEB. <https://www.cuny-nysieb.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Translanguaging-Guide-Curr-Inst-Final-December-2014.pdf>
- Hurst, E., & Mona, M. (2017). "Translanguaging" as a socially just pedagogy. *Education as Change*, 21(2), 126-148.
- Jurmo, P. (2021). *A different way: Reorienting adult education toward democracy and social justice* [White Paper]. ProLiteracy. <https://www.immigrationresearch.org/system/files/ProLiteracy-WhitePaper-ADifferentWay-AdultEducationandSocialJustice.pdf>
- Kellman, S. G. (2000). *The translanguaging imagination*. University of Nebraska Press.
- Knowles, S. Y. (2020). Translingual practices in an adult ESL literacy class in the US. In P. Vinogradova, & J. Kang Shin (Eds.), *Contemporary foundations for teaching English as an additional language: Pedagogical approaches and classroom applications* (pp. 135-138). Routledge.
- Lewis, G., Jones, B., & Baker, C. (2012). Translanguaging: Origins and development from school to street and beyond. *Educational Research and Evaluation*, 18(7), 641-654. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13803611.2012.718488>
- Makalela, L. (2015) Translanguaging as a vehicle for epistemic access: Cases for reading comprehension and multilingual interactions." *PerLinguam*, 31(1): 15-29. <https://doi.org/10.5785/31-1-628>
- Makalela, L. (2017). Translanguaging practices in a South African institution of higher learning: A case of Ubuntu multilingual return. In C. M. Mazak, & K. S. Carroll (Eds.), *Translanguaging in higher education: Beyond monolingual ideologies*. Multilingual Matters.
- Marino, J., & Dolan, C. (2021). Speaking rights: Translanguaging and integration in a language course for adult refugees in Uganda. In D. S. Warriner (Ed.), *Refugee education across the lifespan: Mapping experiences of language learning and use* (pp. 429-447). Springer, Cham.
- Mazak, C. M., & Carroll, K. S. (Eds.). (2016). *Translanguaging in higher education: Beyond monolingual ideologies*. Multilingual Matters.
- Park, K., & Valdez, V. E. (2018). Translanguaging pedagogy to support the language learning of older Nepali-Bhutanese Adults. In M. J. Curry, R. Farrelly, & S. Shapiro (Eds.), *Educating refugee-background students: Critical issues and dynamic contexts* (pp. 49-65). Multilingual Matters.
- Polezzi, L., Angouri, J., & Wilson, R., (2019, February 21). *Language has become a tool for social exclusion*. The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/language-has-become-a-tool-for-social-exclusion-112028>
- Reyes, S. A., & Kleyn, T. (2010). *Teaching in two languages: A guide for K-12 bilingual educators*. Corwin Press.
- Rocca, L., Carlsen, C. H., & Deygers, B. (2020). *Linguistic integration of adult migrants: Requirements and learning opportunities*. Council of Europe Publication.
- Rosén, J., & Lundgren, B. (2021). Challenging monolingual norms through pedagogical translanguaging in adult education for immigrants in Sweden? In P. Juvonen & M. Källkvist (Eds.), *Pedagogical translanguaging: Theoretical, methodological and empirical perspectives*. Multilingual Matters.
- Shaswar, A. N. (2022). Language norms in L2 education for adult migrants—translanguaging pedagogy in the age of mobility. *Multilingua*, 41(3), 341-358. <https://doi.org/10.1515/multi-2021-0123>
- Turnbull, B. (2019). Translanguaging in the planning of academic and creative writing: A case of adult Japanese EFL learners. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 42(2), 232-251. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15235882.2019.1589603>
- U.S. Department of Education. (2021). *Adult education and literacy*. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/AdultEd/index.html>
- Wimalasiri, A., & Seals, C. A. (2022). Translanguaging in online language teaching: A case study of a multilingual English language teacher in New Zealand. *Journal of Multilingual Theories and Practices*, 3(1), 127-145. <https://doi.org/10.1558/jmtp.20849>
- Wedin, Å., & Norlund Shaswar, A. (2022). Interaction and meaning making in basic adult education for immigrants the case of Swedish for immigrants in Sweden (SFI). *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02660830.2022.2065786>

# Review of *Developing Social Equity in Australian Adult Education: Lessons from the Past*

Ralf St. Clair, University of Victoria

It is always a pleasure to spend some time with a text devoted to a deep dive into our field, and this book does not disappoint. Pamela Osmond's experience as a long-time literacy organizer and tutor lends the book an air of authenticity. The author focused on the rise and fall of social justice values in adult literacy programs in New South Wales for her doctoral research, and this book is one of the results. It offers a rich and entirely partial account of a fascinating period in adult literacy education and will resonate with the experiences of many of us who have been involved in the field for a while.

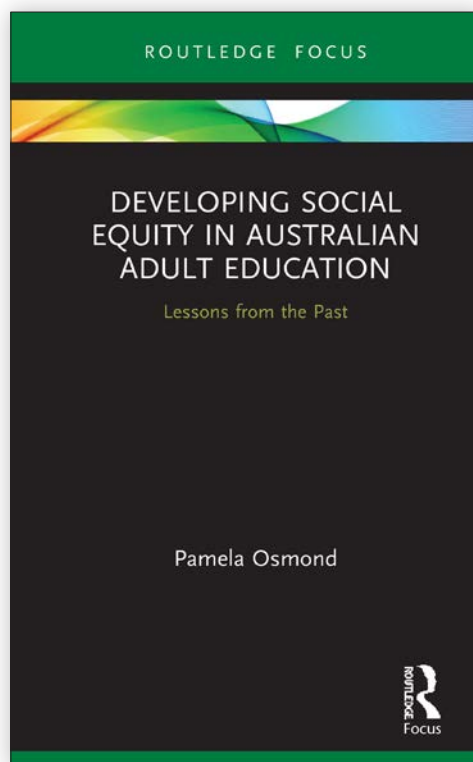
Osmond's aim with this text is to offer an account of the "drivers or actors that were responsible for the emergence of the initial adult literacy programs, and those that were responsible for their transformation" (p. 3). When literacy programs began to gain some structure, about 50 years ago, they were

volunteer-driven and inspired by commitments to social justice and helping the silenced to gain a voice. By the late 1980s, adult literacy and numeracy provision was being incorporated into

vocational education, albeit with some preservation of the original commitments, and by the 2000s, it had become an accountability driven aspect of work readiness training. Literacy educators gained some level of professionalization as vocational instructors but lost the centrality of social justice values. The question driving Osmond's work is "how did that happen?"

The book is relatively short and takes a chronological approach with three sections: one on pre-consolidation literacy, one

on the foundation years and one on the emergent neoliberal discourse. This structure works well and is easy to navigate. Osmond's text is interspersed with quotations from interviews, adding a variety



Osmond, P. (2021). *Developing Social Equity in Australian Adult Education: Lessons from the Past*. Routledge. 132 pages. \$69.95, hardcover. ISBN: 978-0-367-68984-1 (hardcover)

of voices and positionalities to the book. Overall, this is a strong account of the coalescence of ad-hoc literacy instruction into a field and a system, and their subsequent colonization by a set of actors with different value commitments.

The author could have chosen to engage with the changes in the field from a more theoretical perspective. Two broad areas of theory are mentioned, particularly early in the book, but are not returned to later in the discussion. The first is actor-network theory (Latour, 1996), an emerging form of social enquiry treating non-human actors as if they have agency in social networks. The potential of this approach in a historical review is the ability to bring documents and policies alongside humans in detailed analyses of decisions and actions. This book does not fully exploit the potential of actor-network theory, though the need for books to be less methodology heavy than dissertations and theses is important to acknowledge.

The second theoretical area is more central to the argument as it relates directly to the “why” of these changes. Osmond tends to refer to “neoliberalism” as the impetus behind the change from social justice to employability as the rationale for literacy instruction, as well as the move towards testing and accountability. This could have benefitted from being laid out more clearly; there are many forms of neoliberalism, and the need for the specific Australian form to colonize and undermine existing values and practices is not made clear. I do see this as a bit of a lost opportunity despite the difficulty of bringing together a strong account of lived experience and high-level analysis.

In many ways, the story recounted in this book is reminiscent of developments in other parts of the world: a rise of social activist literacy in the 1970s followed by incorporation and vocationalization by the turn of the century. I am not aware of too many other broad accounts of this history, though an excellent Canadian overview by Elfert and Walker (2020) exists. The Canadian article created some pushback from stakeholders (Hayes, 2020) so it will be interesting to see if the same thing happens in the Australian case. I can't help thinking of the aphorism “who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past” (Orwell, 1950, p. 44). More histories of our field with attention to the lived experiences of those involved would be very welcome.

I believe this book will be of interest to people who have been around the literacy field for long enough to recognize the story it tells, but also to people who are interested in how the work developed from church basements to private training providers. There are some strong cautionary elements here, such as the need to be careful about the unintended consequences of stabilization and professionalization, as well as the double-edged sword of accountability. On the one hand it allows programs to demonstrate their value, but on the other it can interrupt and influence the work we are trying to do. Showing what we do makes a difference, and why that difference is a good thing, remains a central problem in all forms of community-based education. The book ends with some reasons to be optimistic about the future and standing out among them is the importance of humanist commitments, working with and for people. It is a privilege to enter into that work, even by proxy, and share the stories of a unique and important period in the early years of our field.



## References

Elfert, M. & Walker, J. (2020). The rise and fall of adult literacy. Policy Lessons from Canada. *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults*, 11(1), 109-125. <https://doi.org/10.25656/01:18847>

Hayes, B. (2020). An “*alternative analysis*” to Elfert and Walker. As I was saying... <https://brigidhayes.wordpress.com/2020/02/24/an-alternative-analysis-to-elfert-and-walker/>

Latour, B. (1996). On actor-network theory. A few clarifications plus more than a few complications. *Soziale Welt*, 47, 369-381. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40878163>

Orwell, G. (1950). 1984. Signet Classic.

# Review of the *National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorder Website*

Michael R. Cruse, University of Massachusetts Boston



## The National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorder

National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorder, Evidence-Based Practices, <https://autismpdc.fpg.unc.edu/evidence-based-practices>

According to Dietz et al. (2020), 2.21% of the general U.S. population, or approximately 5,437,988 individuals, are on the autism spectrum. This data comes at a time when adult educators are seeing more learners either diagnosed or suspected of being on the autism spectrum. As practitioners seek to understand and identify the needs of adult learners on the autism spectrum, it is essential to learn how to best support these learners in adult education programs. While more research focused on the experience and instructional best practices of adults with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is needed, there is evidence regarding what works in K-12 and mental health settings that can be applied to practices in adult education.

### Evaluation

The National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorder reviewed literature published from 1990-2014 and identified 27 evidence-based practices for persons with ASD, from birth to age 22. The resulting website features

autism focused intervention resources and modules (AFIRM) for each evidence-based practice. These modules offer excellent professional development featuring practical, evidence-based instructional strategies that adult educators can implement in their programs. Each module provides an overview, step-by-step instructions, an implementation checklist, and references as well as case examples demonstrating the practice through audio and video demonstrations. Individuals completing the AFIRM modules earn a professional development certificate.

The first module every adult educator working with learners with ASD should take is the “Introduction to Autism.” This module takes between 2-3 hours and contains information about the characteristics of autism, its impacts on social communication, and examples of representative behaviors including those related to thinking and learning (Steinbrenner et al., 2019). With 27 evidence-based practices, it is critical for practitioners to select the most appropriate ones

for the learners in their program. The “Selecting an Evidence-Based Practice” module is designed to support practitioners in choosing effective instructional practices. This module, which takes 1-2 hours to complete, explains the steps for identifying a learner’s goal and highlights specific techniques to effectively address the goal.

The practice-focused modules follow a four-step process. First, users identify the behavior or concern to address. Next is developing an observable and measurable goal. Using the National Clearinghouse on Autism Evidence and Practice Domain Matrix, users then identify potential instructional practices. Finally, considering the goal and any learner and team characteristics, users select the strategy they plan to implement (Waters et al., 2022).

Not every AFIRM module will be applicable to adults, but several of the modules can be especially useful for adult educators working with learners with ASD. The module focused on “Functional Communication” is one practice that could prove helpful. “Functional Communication” is the language used to elicit a desired outcome. For example, if a teacher is working with an adult learner with ASD who has difficulty asking for a bathroom break during class. Instead of using functional communication to ask for a break, the individual may speak out or behave in an unexpected way. The “Functional Communication” training module supports the user in systematically identifying the function of the unexpected behavior and finding a replacement behavior, such as raising their hand, appropriately communicating their plan, or following another class norm to excuse themselves.

The “Scripting” module focuses on an adult learner who does not respond to oral prompts or questions. An individual may not be responding

for a variety of reasons ranging from anxiety to processing speed. “Scripting” is an evidence-based practice for providing specific models for language and social behavior in a highly structured manner which supports a learner’s planning and processing for engaging in oral responses.

The “Social Narratives” module features a practice that educators can develop to support learners to better understand and respond to social situations. The narratives are a way to describe the social interaction for learners using relevant cues, explanations of others’ feelings and thoughts, and descriptions of appropriate behavior expectations. This module demonstrates how to support both classroom interpersonal dynamics and comprehension of narrative texts that can prove challenging for some learners with ASD to understand.

The “Task Analysis” module illustrates a technique that some learners with ASD may benefit from when asked to complete multi-step tasks. Using “Task Analysis” to teach a learner the individual steps in a multi-step process can help them become more independent and also supports a learner in using more complex target skills and behaviors that promote full inclusion in small group and whole class activities.

The National Professional Development Center’s set of “Timely Toolkits” is another valuable resource featured on the site. These toolkits are designed to support navigation through disruptions in learners’ routines. Changes in routine can be especially challenging for individuals living with ASD, and the resource also includes practical steps for supporting online learning for this population.

## Recommendations

The scope of this online resource is what makes it valuable for any educator new to working with

the spectrum of neurodivergent learners. Due to a lack of research with older adult learners with ASD, the upper age limit for the suggested practices is 22. However, it seems likely that the recommendations can be effectively applied to a broader age range of adult learners.

Adult educators are especially resourceful when it comes to meeting learners where they are. The evidence-based practices outlined on the site offers a useful menu of options. Involving the adult learner in the decision-making process

around behavior and goal selection is highly recommended. Learners may present with complex profiles, but focusing on a behavior that impacts their educational access or performance allows practitioners to identify and understand some simple practices that can make a significant difference in learner outcomes. Striving for consistency is important when applying an evidence-based practice, so keeping the focus narrow and manageable will support learners to develop routines for success.

## References

Dietz, P. M., Rose, C. E., McArthur, D., & Maenner, M. (2020). National and state estimates of adults with autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 50(12), 4258-4266. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-020-04494-4>

Steinbrenner, J., Sam, A., Chin, J., Morgan, W., & AFIRM for Paras Team. (2019). *Introduction to ASD*. FPG Child Development Institute, University of North Carolina. <https://afirm.fpg.unc.edu/introduction-asd>

Waters, V., Sam, A., Dees, R., & AFIRM Team. (2022). *IEP to EBP Tool*. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute. <https://afirm.fpg.unc.edu/selecting-ebp>

## Leveraging Technology to Promote Adult Learning

# ChatGPT: Leveraging AI to Support Personalized Teaching and Learning

Sarah Cacicio, Adult Literacy & Learning Impact Network

Rachel Riggs, World Education

### *About This New Column*

Some adult learners are self-directed, but most benefit from ongoing guidance and support from educators—even more so in technology-rich environments. The purpose of this column is to explore ways to leverage digital tools to enhance collaborative learning experiences among adult educators and learners. Rather than aim for mastery of a digital tool before use, educators are encouraged to consider learning new technologies alongside their students, modeling the reality of ongoing skill development as our way of life.

## ChatGPT

ChatGPT, a chatbot powered by artificial intelligence (AI), is generating a pointed debate in education and beyond. ChatGPT is an online tool that creates human-like written responses to any prompt imaginable. Since its launch by OpenAI in late 2022, several of the country's largest K-12 school districts have banned the site with concerns that students could use ChatGPT to cheat or plagiarize essay responses (Jimenez, 2023). While some educators view ChatGPT as a platform for perpetuating misinformation and biases inherent to AI systems, others see opportunities to improve teaching, learning, and professional practice (Atlas, 2023). In adult learning contexts, AI has the potential to automate administrative tasks, providing more time for educators to create more participatory, data-driven, learning experiences (Goodell & Kolodner, 2023).

Educators across learning contexts are considering the implications of using generative artificial

intelligence technology, such as higher education (Rudolph et al. 2023), academia and libraries (Lund & Wang, 2023), journalism and media education (Pavlik et al. 2023), and medical education, including clinical decision-making (Kung et al. 2023). ChatGPT can be used to generate emails and reports as well as to simulate real-life scenarios for training and practice (Atlas, 2023). While ChatGPT cannot replace a teacher, it can help maximize their limited time by automating assessment development, grading, and selection of learning materials (Zhai, 2023). As Barr et al. (2023) make clear in the emerging body of work related to learning engineering, for feedback to be most effective, “it must be frequent, fast, and rich” (p. 140). Technology can improve our capacity to assess, respond, and meet learners' needs in real time. ChatGPT creates an opportunity to learn about and experiment with emerging AI technologies, and to understand their limitations, in and outside of the learning experience.

## What Is ChatGPT?

ChatGPT is a chatbot powered by AI developed by OpenAI, an AI research and deployment company. The app is designed to sound conversational and generate written responses to typed prompts. The language model is based on a kind of machine learning that allows it to process information from a diverse range of texts, from online articles to spoken conversations. It can be used for a variety of natural language processing tasks, including language translation, text creation, and summarization.

ChatGPT is a large language model (LLM). Applied linguists may be familiar with a related concept known as corpora, which helps linguists, researchers, and educators develop authentic guidance and resources, such as dictionaries and curricula, based on how language is really used (Thornbury, 2006). In a similar way, ChatGPT draws from massive amounts of existing texts but with the added layer of machine learning. Just as corpora has proven itself to be very impactful in language instruction, ChatGPT can have a similar impact on language learning and literacy-building. The research preview of ChatGPT is free to use and encourages users to provide feedback on the generated responses. The platform outlines high-level examples, capabilities, and frequently asked questions as well as limitations for its use.

## Limitations of ChatGPT

The main limitation of ChatGPT is that it is only as good as the data it's trained on (Stephen, 2023). In some cases, responses may be off topic or nonsensical (Majumder, 2022). Moreover, limited or incomplete datasets can result in the producing and sharing of misleading, offensive, or biased content. The data for ChatGPT is believed

to include most or all of Wikipedia, pages in Reddit, and a billion words from the internet, most of which was produced by wealthy, White men (Weil, 2023). While there is some effort to filter obscene content, the internet is replete with content that perpetuates racism, sexism, homophobia, White supremacy, and neo-Nazism. Still the model learns from its users. If adult educators and learners are not using the tool, they are in essence not contributing to its development and improvement either.

Several concerns have been raised related to individual data privacy and security. OpenAI offers no procedures for individuals to check whether ChatGPT stores their personal information or a way to delete it (Gal, 2023). Another limitation is the literacy level needed to access content which tends to generate text at a level equivalent to that of a highly educated speaker. It is important to note, however, that educators can request for information to be generated in plain language, at a specific grade level, or even for English learners.

## Opportunities to Strengthen Adult Learning Through ChatGPT

ChatGPT presents a unique opportunity for adult educators to explore AI as a mechanism for skill-building across multiple literacies. Research shows that information literacy, the skills and abilities to navigate and find information online that is accurate and verified (American Library Association, n.d.), is significantly associated with the ability to identify fake news (Jones-Jang et al., 2021). While banning AI technology for a time might mitigate the risks of spreading misinformation, an arguably more dire risk is the missed opportunity to introduce AI tools in an educational environment and facilitate critical

conversations around their use and credibility. Rather than block access to AI technology, which may generate false and biased information, educators should use it to support adult learners in developing the literacy skills and digital resilience needed to find, interpret, and make meaning (World Education, 2022).

ChatGPT provides ample opportunities for experiential learning, where learners participate in concrete experiences, reflect on their knowledge, and connect ideas to existing knowledge (Digital Promise, n.d.). See below for six examples of how ChatGPT can be leveraged to support adult learning.

### Create Activities to Support Learner Variability

Within a single lesson, teachers might be simultaneously teaching grammar, writing skills, workforce skills, and more! Different learners might need different practice opportunities, depending on their proficiency in various skill areas. Learners can be divided into groups or work individually to prompt ChatGPT for the kind of practice they need. For example:

- **Grammar Group** - Ask ChatGPT for 10 sentences with an object in each sentence. Work together to change the objects to object pronouns. In the same thread, ask ChatGPT to rewrite those sentences with object pronouns to check work.
- **Writing Group** - Brainstorm workplace problems that learners might share with their supervisor in a memo, along with some recommended solutions. Ask ChatGPT to write a memo with that content, and then use the rubric (provided by the teacher) to grade ChatGPT's work.
- **Work Skills** - Ask ChatGPT to produce step-by-step instructions for a typical workforce

process, like clocking in. Then, work together to write five follow-up questions that you would ask on your first day of training. Ask ChatGPT your questions. Repeat with another typical workplace process.

### Debate

Instead of a debate between classmates, learners can debate the chatbot on a topic relevant to the subject area. Learners can ask ChatGPT an open-ended question like, "Is artificial intelligence good for society?" or "Does the United States have a secure and fair voting system?" The AI-powered piece becomes a central point of discussion to build subject-area knowledge and critical thinking skills. Keep in mind that ChatGPT is programmed not to give opinions or beliefs but it will draw from its dataset to produce information and common perspectives.

### Develop Critical Thinking Skills

ChatGPT itself is good fodder for critical thinking. It's a simple, tangible tool powered by a complex, controversial technology. In addition to any academic activity that you use ChatGPT for, you could engage learners in critical thinking on the topic of using AI-powered tools in general. Having learners make predictions about the impact of AI on various societal systems or using a *Six Thinking Hats* activity are two ways to facilitate this learning (Kivunja, 2015).

### Fact Check the Bot

Because ChatGPT is manipulating language from existing datasets (and not necessarily citing facts), the output is not always accurate or verified. To assist learners in developing information literacy, it's important to have a conversation about this drawback in the many contexts in which misinformation is spread. Learners can practice fact checking by asking ChatGPT to



share information on a specific topic and then going through the process of distinguishing facts from opinions in the text, searching for credible sources that will either confirm or dispute the facts presented, and rewriting the passage with accurate information.

### **Produce Examples**

As a teaching tool, ChatGPT can be used to produce examples of a target language output. A teacher can prompt ChatGPT with the same parameters that they are giving in an assignment to learners and the chatbot will give them a sample for learners to follow. ChatGPT can even write texts in a certain tone or style. To develop workforce readiness skills and digital literacy, have ChatGPT write an email to a supervisor both in a formal and informal tone for learners to compare.

### **Promote Contextualized Vocabulary Development and Use**

ChatGPT can develop endless amounts of text to be analyzed. Learners could identify key vocabulary or look for parts of speech in sentences from an informative essay that ChatGPT writes. For English learners, ChatGPT can also be used to explain idioms or phrases, such as “this is a high bar to clear.” When using ChatGPT to develop language skills in the classroom, consider how you might also foster learner agency. Pair all of the preceding activities with a conversation about ChatGPT so that learners know what the tool is, its benefits and drawbacks, and how they can use it independently to continue learning and practicing their language skills.

## **Conclusion**

Leveraging AI technology to increase learner support could be particularly impactful in adult education, where 78% of educators funded under the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act are employed part-time (Bergson-Shilcock, 2020). For example, the National AI Institute for Adult Learning and Education (AI-ALOE) is exploring the use of AI-powered virtual teaching assistants to answer basic questions for learners in adult and continuing education. Their research-based approach uses data-driven feedback loops to improve the ability to provide personalized support. AI-ALOE also works to mitigate risks of AI, such as privacy, security, and bias, by including adult educators and learners in the design and improvement of AI technologies (Ruiz, 2022).

As adult educators, our role is to work alongside adult learners, assisting them in the development of the multiple literacies that they need to succeed in work, education, and life. ChatGPT is useful in many aspects of this goal including as an instructional design tool for teachers, a learning tool that assists in the development of academic and cognitive skills, and a tangible application of AI technology. When we incorporate these tools into instruction, we extend learning beyond a single academic focus and into a deeper understanding of the advances in technology and its impacts. Undoubtedly ChatGPT and other AI-powered tools will continue to develop and permeate systems that impact adult educators and learners. Introducing AI to the classroom—both as a learning tool and as a topic of discussion—sooner rather than later is one way to keep pace with the rapidly changing landscape of technology.

## References

- American Library Association. (n.d.). *Information Literacy*. <https://literacy.ala.org/information-literacy>
- Atlas, S. (2023). ChatGPT for higher education and professional development: A guide to conversational AI. [https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/cba\\_facpubs/548](https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/cba_facpubs/548)
- Barr, A., Dargue, B., Goodell, J., & Redd, B. (2023). Learning engineering is engineering. In J. Goodell & J. Kolodner (Eds.), *Learning engineering toolkit: Evidence-based practices from the learning sciences, instructional design, and beyond* (pp. 125-152). Routledge & CRC Press.
- Bergson-Shilcock, A. (2020). *The new landscape of digital literacy: How workers' uneven digital skills affect economic mobility and business competitiveness, and what policymakers can do about it*. National Skills Coalition. <https://nationalskillscoalition.org/resource/publications/the-new-landscape-of-digital-literacy/>
- Digital Promise. (n.d.). *Experiential learning*. <https://lvp.digitalpromiseglobal.org/content-area/adult-learner/strategies/experiential-learning-adult-learner/summary>
- Gal, U. (2023, February 14). CHATGPT is a data privacy nightmare. If you've ever posted online, you ought to be concerned. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/chatgpt-is-a-data-privacy-nightmare-if-youve-ever-posted-online-you-ought-to-be-concerned-199283>
- Goodell, J., & Kolodner, J. (Eds.) (2023). *Learning engineering toolkit: Evidence-based practices from the Learning Sciences, Instructional Design, and beyond*. Routledge & CRC Press.
- Jimenez, K. (2023). "This shouldn't be a surprise": The education community shares mixed reactions to ChatGPT. *USA TODAY*. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/education/2023/01/30/chatgpt-going-banned-teachers-sound-alarm-new-ai-tech/11069593002/>
- Jones-Jang, S. M., Mortensen, T., & Liu, J. (2021). Does media literacy help identification of fake news? Information literacy helps, but other literacies don't. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 65(2), 371-388. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764219869406>
- Kivunja, C. (2015). Using De Bono's six thinking hats model to teach critical thinking and problem solving skills essential for success in the 21st century economy. *Creative Education*, 6(03), 380-391. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ce.2015.63037>
- Kung, T. H., Cheatham, M., Medenilla, A., Sillos, C., De Leon, L., Elepaño, C., ... & Tseng, V. (2023). Performance of ChatGPT on USMLE: Potential for AI-assisted medical education using large language models. *PLOS Digital Health*, 2(2), e0000198. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pdig.0000198>
- Lund, B. D., & Wang, T. (2023). Chatting about ChatGPT: how may AI and GPT impact academia and libraries?. *Library Hi Tech News*. <https://doi.org/10.1108/LHTN-01-2023-0009>
- Majumder, E. (2022, December 18). *Chatgpt-what is it and how does it work exactly?* Medium. <https://medium.com/geekculture/chatgpt-what-is-it-and-how-does-it-work-exactly-62e7010524d3>
- Ruiz, P. (2022, August 25). CIRCLS: *The NSF AI Institute for Adult Learning and Online Education (AI-ALOE)*. CIRCLS. <https://circls.org/project-spotlight/alo>
- Pavlik, J. V. (2023). Collaborating with ChatGPT: Considering the implications of generative artificial intelligence for journalism and media education. *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*, 78(1), 84-93. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10776958221149577>
- Roschelle, J., Ruiz, P., & Fusco, J. (2021, March 15). *AI or intelligence augmentation for education?* Communications of the ACM. <https://cacm.acm.org/blogs/blog-cacm/251188-ai-or-intelligence-augmentation-for-education/fulltext>
- Rudolph, J., Tan, S., & Tan, S. (2023). ChatGPT: Bullshit spewer or the end of traditional assessments in higher education? *Journal of Applied Learning & Teaching*, 6(1), 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.37074/jalt.2023.6.1.9>
- Thornbury, S. (2006). *An AZ of ELT: A dictionary of terms and concepts used in English language teaching*. Macmillan.
- Weil, E. (2023, March 1). You are not a parrot and a chatbot is not a human. And a linguist named Emily M. Bender is very worried what will happen when we forget this. *New York Magazine*. <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/article/ai-artificial-intelligence-chatbots-emily-m-bender.html>
- World Education. (2022, December 23). *Digital resilience in the American workforce: Findings from a national landscape scan on adult digital literacy instruction*. <https://worlded.org/resource/digital-resilience-in-the-american-workforce-findings-from-a-national-landscape-scan-on-adult-digital-literacy-instruction/>
- Zhai, X. (2023, January 20). *ChatGPT for next generation science learning*. SSRN. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4331313>



# JOIN THE ALLIANCE

that is creating a more literate world.

ProLiteracy members are adult literacy and basic education programs, professionals, and advocates changing lives across the globe through the power of literacy.

- **Instructional Tools**
- **Advocacy**
- **Professional Development**
- **Administrative Resources**
- **Discounts**

## *Join ProLiteracy!*

Learn more or join online at  
[ProLiteracy.org/Membership](https://www.proliteracy.org/membership)



# VISIT THE Education Network



A comprehensive collection of online courses and resources for adult literacy and ESL instructors, program staff, trainers and adult learners.

*Any time* and *any place* that fits your schedule.

Education Network is a website created by ProLiteracy, the largest membership organization dedicated to advancing adult literacy and basic education in the United States.



*Self-paced  
courses*

that help you learn about teaching, citizenship, reading, writing, and much more



*A video  
library*

that allows you to watch demonstrations of effective teaching strategies



*Downloadable,  
printable  
resources*

such as lesson plans, classroom exercises, and tip sheets



*Online  
activities*

you can use with students



*Online forums*

where you can network with others, ask questions, and share resources about specific topics

## ProLiteracyEdNet.org

Also the home of **Member Central** a repository of information and resources exclusively for ProLiteracy members.

 **ProLiteracy**  
Education Network