

Forum: What's in a Name?*(Part 1 of 3)*

Adult Foundational Education: Why a New Name and Definition Is Needed

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What name do you use to describe our field? Adult literacy? Adult education? Adult education and literacy? Adult basic education? Adult ESL or ESOL? Which name best describes our work? Which name do you think is preferred, and why? Which of these is not sometimes interpreted to mean something else? Which, if any, best distinguishes our work from that of those who work in credit-bearing post-secondary education or PreK-12 education? Which, if any, best captures the full range of education services the field offers?

The answer to most of those questions, other than that they all distinguish education for adults from PreK-12, is “none of the above.” For example, the name “adult education,” while it has the advantage of including the fullest range of our field’s services, often confuses policy makers and the general public who assume we are referring to higher education, or to non-credit courses offered in higher education or by local community education centers, often for enrollees’ personal development.

“Adult basic education,” which is the name used by most practitioners in my state for example, has the advantage of distinguishing the field from higher education and PreK-12, but it has two meanings, one referring to the full range of education services, the other referring only to the (non-ESOL) services ranging up to pre-high school equivalency. Similarly, adult literacy is confusing

to policy makers and the general public because sometimes it refers to the full range of services, often including ESL (or ESOL). However, at other times it means specifically beginning reading; beginning reading and writing; beginning reading, writing and numeracy, and recently I have seen adult literacy mean reading, writing, numeracy and digital literacy.

“Adult education and family literacy” is the name used in the current major piece of federal funding for our field, the Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act, Title II. This is complicated as a name for the field. While few would argue that helping adults prepare for jobs and careers is unnecessary – indeed it is a major reason that many adults seek our services – some have argued, and I am one, that family literacy does not get equal emphasis in the act and in its implementation. The way the act is interpreted by states and programs, and the program incentives currently in place, make it difficult for adult education programs and adult schools to serve learners at the lowest levels. Both to those within our field and to the general public, this name also does not communicate well what services are and are not offered.

It is likely, despite our best efforts, that none of these names, and possibly no new name, will perfectly communicate what we do. That is because most in the general public do not know

our field exists. Most people have a pretty good idea what PreK-12 education does, and what higher education (sometimes with the simple added explanation of “you know, college or university”) does. But our work is largely invisible to most people, and often to legislators. It is further complicated because we address beginning levels through preparation for post-secondary education. This education is offered by different kinds of organizations and institutions. Sometimes when I address groups of people I ask, “What are the three major kinds of education in your state, and in the country. I always get PreK-12 and higher education, but unless adult basic education or another of the names above is in the presentation title, rarely can anyone name the third field. Of course, just changing and defining a name will not in itself change that lack of awareness. It would need to be accompanied by a major, multi-year, multi-partner media campaign.

Toward the end of last year, my colleagues and I on the Steering Committee of the Open Door Collective thought we could come up with a new name that might – with its accompanying definition – make it clear what we do and what kinds of education organizations and institutions do it. With it as a starting point, and perhaps, with a media campaign, we could bring attention to the populations served that could have a memorable and persistent impact.

You may wonder what the Open Door Collective is. Founded nearly 8 years ago as a national group of volunteers, and now one of two national programs of Literacy Minnesota, its mission is to work with other agencies and organizations to reduce poverty and income inequality in the United States. Because it was founded by adult educators, the great majority of its members are from our field; however, there are a significant number of people who work in other fields. They work in health

care, employment and training, and in public libraries. They work with older adults. They are advocates and/or provide services of many kinds for immigrants and refugees. They are advocates for digital equity and for digital inclusion. If the Open Door Collective interests you, you can learn more at <http://www.opendoorcollective.org>.

As the Open Door Collective Steering Committee considered the name and accompanying definition, I opened two public discussions about these to those in our field. I also thought it would be useful to create a list of the criteria I had considered for a good name for our field and for its definition. Here are the criteria I used:

The name should be clear. It should distinguish our field from preK-12 and credit-bearing higher education. The definition of the name should:

- Make clear the breadth and boundaries of the field’s education services to adults;
- Describe the field in a way that is worthy of serious and sustained public investment and research;
- Be short enough to include in a footnote;
- Be written in plain language that most people can understand, spelling out acronyms and avoiding jargon;
- Allow the inclusion of emerging or newly recognized areas and services, such as digital literacy skills, integrated education and training, and digital navigation services;
- Avoid excluding types of providers of those services; and,
- Avoid descriptions of the differing approaches used in the field, the different kinds of supportive services needed, history, major contributing organizations and other aspects that would make the definition long or complicated. However, a link to a document

with these longer descriptions could be provided with the definition.

The Open Door Collective Steering Committee considered several names, all of which included “adult” and “skills.” For some time, the Open Door Collective had used adult basic skills, but we were concerned that “basic” might be interpreted too narrowly, and some of us were aware from a survey that had been carried out by the Florida Literacy Coalition, that some adults interpreted that to mean “a minimum level of quality or service” as in the basic model of a product or service, not top of the line. We were also interested in finding a name that while used and defined differently in other parts of the world, could be freshly defined in the United States. We settled on the name “adult foundational skills” because it distinguishes what we do from credit-bearing higher education, and PreK-12 education. Also, foundational suggests the kinds of learning that might, once acquired, be built upon for post-secondary education, an apprenticeship or occupational training; it might, we thought, gain the respect of adult learners and it might be clearer to policy makers and the general public.

We also discussed and drafted a definition that we thought might meet the criteria I set out.

I wanted to know what members of our field thought about the name and our proposed definition so in January this year I opened two discussions, one in the LINCS Community’s Teaching and Learning group, and the other in the AAACE-NLA Google group. I received many thoughtful comments from these discussions. One, from the LINCS discussion, influenced our changing our proposed name to “adult foundational education,” the name the Steering Committee has since agreed on and which we now use. There were also suggestions for the

definition, many of which we have incorporated in our current version below, which has not yet been approved by the Steering Committee.

Adult foundational education refers to core skills and knowledge that adults need for work, further education, helping their families, functioning effectively in their communities, and as citizens in a democracy. It includes:

- English language skills for immigrants and refugees (ESL/ESOL);
- Beginning literacy for adults who cannot read and write well, or at all;
- Numeracy;
- Adult basic education;
- Adult secondary education leading to an adult high school diploma or high school equivalency certificate;
- U.S. citizenship preparation;
- Preparation for post-secondary education, and occupational training, or apprenticeships;
- Employability skills/Work readiness skills;
- Family/intergenerational literacy;
- Integrated education and training; and,
- Other foundational education and skills that are needed throughout the adult life span but are not necessarily related to work or career, such as digital literacy, financial literacy, health literacy, native language literacy, and literacy for self-advocacy, civic engagement, and social justice.

Adult foundational education may be offered by community-based programs, public schools, community colleges, volunteer tutoring programs, public libraries, corrections institutions, adult public charter schools, employers, labor unions, faith-based organizations and other kinds of organizations and institutions.

It's important to correct a misunderstanding that has come up in several of these discussions. This is a name proposed for the field, not necessarily as a name for individual education providers. Adult foundational education might be used, for example, in journal articles such as this or in other publications, in research, professional development, discussions with policy makers, and in some cases with the general public. You might, for example, if someone you meet casually asks, "What you do?" reply, "I teach in adult foundational education," quickly followed by "that's what our field is now called." This might prompt questions about what you teach or otherwise do in this field, what kinds of students the field serves, where classes are offered, how it is funded and more. As I try this out with my grant writing friends, I can't wait for "Are you telling me your job is to teach foundations how to raise or distribute funds?" As I wrote, there is no perfect name for our field.

One might wonder – I certainly do – if this name

and definition will catch on in our field and broadly in the United States. So far, no one has vigorously opposed the new name or definition, although one colleague commented, "...not partial to it" and another liked the name they were currently using. Comments from ODC members and from the two public discussions have been very positive. These include: "I love the name," "We like this!," "I certainly notice the term catching on," "I've recently started using adult foundational skills, as well," "Basic has always felt condescending and no other term included the full umbrella of skills, which resulted in a rattling off a laundry list of categories. I happily sign on to the change!," "Lots of good points," and "This name could be debated indefinitely, especially amongst a bunch of educators. But this terminology seems functional enough to steer educational efforts."

If the name does catch on, it will be because enough people in our field like it and its definition well enough to use it. To be widely used by the general public will take a much greater effort.