

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

# Demystifying a Field: Wonderings on Classifying for Clarity in Adult Education

Leah Katherine Saal, Loyola University Maryland

Last December, I participated in a series of conversations at the Literacy Research Association's annual conference about changing the name of the Adult Literacy Study Group. The Adult Literacy Study Group, originally facilitated by Erik Jacobson, develops and supports diverse collaborations among scholars and raises awareness of the acute need for adult literacy research. Group members didn't believe that the current name represented the full range of topics and questions explored by the body. After some discussion and debate, the name was modified to the Adult, Family, and Community Literacies Study Group. The name change is not succinct, but the group wanted to better articulate the "big tent" or "multiplicity of foci" for potential participants. The purpose of this name change is to highlight for those studying adults' literacy learning, in its broadest conceptualization across locales, that there is a home and potential collaborators for their work within the group. So, I come to this response to David J. Rosen's article, "Adult Foundational Education: Why a New Name and Definition Is Needed," with these recent conversations in mind, my own need to provide explanation for my areas of practice and research to former and current employers, and as an advocate for adult learners and continued support of adult learning contexts the United States and beyond.

To begin, I applaud the efforts of the Open Door Collective (ODC) to move this long overdue conversation around classifying and categorizing the work of the field of adult education forward. They, including David, are correct in the assertion that, "the general public do not know our field exists." Raising awareness for adult education in the public sphere and securing ongoing funding certainly require clarity and boundaries for any field of study and practice. As a practitioner and researcher of "adult basic education," the term used in Maryland for programs and classes focused on teaching adults' text-based literacy skills, I have struggled to define the field in ways that were helpful to possible funding entities, my employers, and, especially, the adults who I am privileged to learn with and from.

The names and associated definitions we use for the field of adult education have very high stakes. First, as David well-articulated, terminology and associated definitions can matter a great deal for policy-making and associated financing mechanisms. The right or wrong word or turn of phrase can open or close funding streams. College and career readiness, 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, digital citizenship, STEM education, upskilling, and workforce development are all recent exemplars that come to mind as associated with different initiatives and priorities for federal and state departments and/or non-governmental funders.

Second, since the field of education is highly siloed, understanding where people, programs, and initiatives fit within these silos, is often key to outlining job expectations and corresponding accountability structures. Therefore, terminology and associated definitions also can matter a great deal to researchers and practitioners whose contracts, performance reviews, and annual evaluations are often tied to operationalized definitions of these terms. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, chosen terminology and associated definitions can matter a great deal to adult learners themselves. Terms and associated definitions often have the high stakes repercussion of helping adult learners initially identify and locate needed or desired educational services and programs. Correspondingly, unfortunately in practice, terms for the field are also often used as a proxy to label learners themselves.

Considering these high stakes contexts, I have a few wonderings related to the proposed name change from adult education to adult foundational education.

Specifically, I wonder if a term like “foundational,” defined by Merriam-Webster (n.d.) as “related to or forming or serving as a base or foundation” is framed in or connotes deficit understandings of adults’ existing skills or their goals for their educational experiences? For example, names like “adult basic” or “functional education” already denotatively and/or connotatively promote deficitized frameworks of adult learners’ skills. These names/terms define adults’ skills in deficient positions (when compared with other adults) and often fail to capture the educational assets of adults with lower text-based skills. In fact, adults often labeled as “basic learners” have amazing existing compensatory skills and funds of knowledge

which allow them to effectively navigate their environment and be highly competent and functional in many settings (González et al., 2005, Perry et al., 2017; Saal & Sulentic Dowell, 2014). Additionally, I wonder if the term leaves space for those who study or work with adults whose skills and practice are diverse (from those with burgeoning levels of skill in an area to those with advanced skillsets seeking continuing education)? In short, I wonder, *Does labeling the field with the descriptor of “adult foundational education” capture our understandings of who adult learners are?*

Further, terms like “foundations” or “foundational studies” of education are already used to describe an area of study in education which focuses on policy analysis, curriculum theory, and the application of other fields like anthropology, history, law, philosophy, and sociology to the examination of education (Canestrari & Marlowe, 2020). Typically, foundational education studies are often devoted to the critical studies of power within intersecting systems of society, culture, and law and carry a special emphasis on problems of race, gender, sexual diversity, social class, and multiculturalism. Given this context, I wonder, *Does the descriptor of “foundational” and its associated defined and existing area of study and practice capture the varying perspectives of study and practice of the field of adult education?*

Finally, I am curious about how renaming can fully address the problem articulated by Rosen and the Open Door Collective. Yes, raising the visibility and understanding of the field of Adult Education is both necessary and vital to maintaining public goodwill, funding, and services. But, I wonder, *Could efforts towards increasing visibility and understanding the field of adult education be additionally or alternatively approached?*

These wonderings bring me back to the recent conversations of the LRA Study Group, and Rosen's frame for the name change in the article. He states:

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 of post-secondary education. This education is offered by different kinds of organizations and institutions.

Again, I concur with Rosen and the ODC that classification of what we do is a central challenge of the field of adult education. However, my recent experiences, the quote above, and Rosen's further assertion that "there is no perfect name for our field" highlights for me how classifying the field with one term has inherent limitations. In the article proposing the name change, the ODC Steering Committee has also attempted to account for this challenge by outlining some initial categories of educational services provided and possible locations for the services of the field. But, I wonder, *Along with conversations around qualifiers, definitions, and other naming conventions, is there another way to supplement the renaming efforts initiated by the ODC?*

As one possible addition, Bennett and George (2005) showcase how typological theories and associated typologies are useful to map and classify a comprehensive inventory of cases with a goal of addressing complex phenomenon

without oversimplification. Outlining the **locales** (adult schools, community colleges, four-year universities, community-based non-profit settings, prisons, etc.), the **delivery** method (online, hybrid, face-to-face), the **duration** (short or long-term), the **disciplinary** focus (literacy, language, numeracy/math, workplace skills, citizenship, health, financial, and so on), and the **demographic** focus (specific sub-populations like young adults, older adults, parents, immigrants, etc.) for the field's programs or services would significantly assist in explaining not only what we do (disciplinary focus) but also the contexts (locale, delivery, demographics, duration) of what we do as a field. Creating a flexible system, a typology, for classifying and outlining the field of adult education as it continues to evolve and highlights and celebrates the strengths of our diversity could also lead to additional clarifications and critical questions of the field for those of us inside. Particularly, I would love to see a collaboration across researchers, practitioners, and adult learners to create a comprehensive typology of our field to provide classifications and demystify the field.

While additional mapping or framing may be necessary to achieve all the aims of the ODC, I look forward to seeing how these important conversations and initiatives move our field forward toward increased clarity for all.

## References

- Canestrari, A. S., & Marlowe, B. A. (Eds.). (2020). *Educational foundations: An anthology of critical readings*. SAGE.
- González, N., Moll, L., & Amanti, C. (2005). *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households, communities, and classrooms*. Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Perry, K. H., Shaw, D. M., Ivanyuk, L., & Tham, Y. S. S. (2017). Adult functional literacy: Prominent themes, glaring omissions, and future directions. *Journal of Language & Literacy Education*, 13(2). [http://jolle.coe.uga.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Perry\\_JoLLE2017.pdf](http://jolle.coe.uga.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Perry_JoLLE2017.pdf)
- Saal, L. K., & Sulentic Dowell, M. M. (2014). A literacy lesson from an adult “burgeoning” reader. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 58(2), 135-145. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.325>
- Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Foundational. In *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*. Retrieved July 19, 2022, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/foundational>