

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

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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.

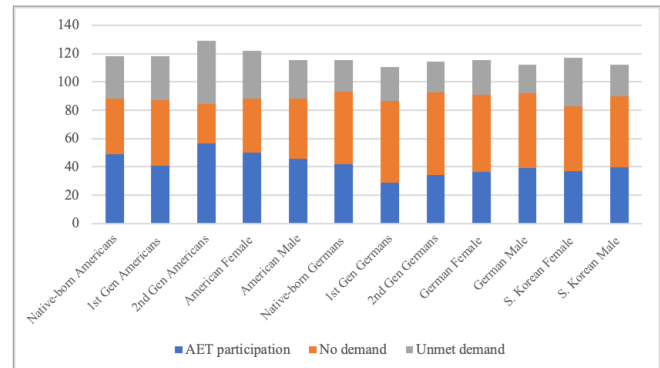
While agreeing with Yasukawa’s concerns about innovations in education, I don’t fully agree with her critiques on skills assessment. While qualitative case studies provide in-depth understanding of how individual adult literacy programs are operating, quantitative data could demonstrate the overall trend 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.

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