

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

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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 19th century and half of the 20th 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.

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