

Forum: Social Justice, Creativity, and Adult Literacy*(Part 1 of 4)*

Visions of the Possible

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We are living in a time when right-wing forces are seeking to silence any voices, eliminate any narratives, and negate any identities that threaten white supremacy, patriarchy, cis-heteronormativity, and our country's prevailing economic order. These forces are working to ban the reading and teaching of the stories, histories, and movements of Black, Brown, and Indigenous peoples, who have been resisting systemic oppression, exploitation, and dispossession on this land for over 400 years. They are attempting to roll back civil rights, suppress democracy, and deny human rights and bodily autonomy to women, those who are LGBTQ+, and migrants. And they are fighting to undermine efforts to promote greater diversity, equity, and inclusion in our social, political, economic, academic, and cultural institutions.

Yet, rather than seeing it as a primary goal and responsibility of adult literacy education to counter these forces and align ourselves with movements for racial, social, gender, and economic justice, our field continues to operate largely within a neoliberal educational paradigm that sees our students primarily in their capacity as workers (or potential workers) and consumers and calls on us to justify the value of our own work in terms of its economic return on investment. Our discussions about "accountability" compel us to focus on what we owe and must provide to our funders rather than on what our funders and our country owe to our students and their communities.

Within this context, the three articles you are about to read give me hope. They offer visions of what is possible in our classrooms and programs. They uplift and describe practices that are rooted in the humanistic, progressive, and liberatory educational traditions that have long histories in our field, but which have largely been sidelined over the past 25 years. These three articles introduce concrete ways of centering students' identities, lived experience, languages, socio-cultural linguistic practices, and agency through storytelling, shared decision-making, and engaging in critical literacy and popular education practices. They interrogate power and authority in both the classroom and society at large, and they challenge adult literacy educators to be reflective practitioners mindful of our own identities and positionalities. These articles are grounded in theory, but they are ultimately a guide to practice.

It is said that the people closest to the problem are the people closest to the solution but the furthest from power and resources. These three articles describe ways of using the classroom as a resource to build students' collective power and amplify their voices and ideas. They call on adult literacy educators to see our students as producers, not just consumers of knowledge, and to work to transform classrooms from spaces of hierarchy, submission, conformity, and, in some cases, trauma, to spaces of healing, creativity, self-expression, democracy, and political action.

The question of whose truth, whose representation of reality, gets seen, heard, elevated, and acted upon has always been a political question, not just an epistemological one. At a moment when right-wing forces seek to silence our students and communities, marginalize and make them invisible, and control the narratives and discourse about them, providing space – as two of these articles describe – for Black mothers and immigrants to tell their stories and share their truths in their own words can be seen as a radical political act.

In 2019, my organization, the Literacy Assistance Center, launched the [Literacy & Justice Initiative](#) to explicitly align adult literacy education in New York City with broader movements for racial,

social, and economic justice. As a longtime professional development organization, we are often asked how adult literacy teachers can do this in the context of curriculum and instruction. These three authors identify ways that adult literacy classrooms can serve as spaces to uplift students' voices and leadership, engage students in critically interrogating the root causes of the inequities and injustices their communities confront, and amplify their personal stories and their collective histories of resilience and resistance. Ultimately, these articles demonstrate how adult literacy classrooms can serve as catalysts for building both individual and community power. I am grateful to the authors for providing all of us in the field with such concrete direction and clarity of vision.