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Report from the Field

Navigating Power, Voice, and Equity in Community Adult Education: Lessons from The Welcome Table

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Abstract

This article explores approaches and related challenges to designing adult education programming that is authentically learner-centered through the lens of The Welcome Table (TWT), a community resource center in a low-income community in Philadelphia. As part of a social justice-oriented, Episcopal middle school, TWT's adult education program is influenced by Freirean approaches to being community-directed and led. By providing ongoing opportunities to understand adult learners' needs, we describe how the program strives to create equitable learning opportunities that reflect the voices of the community. We then offer a nuanced perspective on the challenges of community-based adult education that is genuinely learner-centered by reflecting on emergent tensions. These tensions include the power dynamics that exist when White and/or middle-class outsiders design and teach programs in marginalized communities of color, and our expansion from a more materially-based program distributing food to lifelong learning. The article concludes with recommendations for adult education programs interested in adopting more learner-centered approaches.

Keywords: adult education, community engagement, adult literacy, Freire, social justice

The Welcome Table (TWT) is a school-based community resource center located in North Philadelphia in the neighborhood of Allegheny West. Our core mission involves building a community of sharing where community members participate in programs, and we share our resources with neighbors. By fostering this spirit of community between program participants and staff, at our best, we are neighbors helping neighbors as opposed to practitioners helping clients. This commitment to a community of sharing is further enacted through our core value of "Reflection and Response," which centers on active listening and ongoing reflection:

> We strive to be active listeners within our community as we grow. Building community is beautiful but challenging work that happens when all who participate in its formation are open to learning and adjusting to better serve the needs of the whole. We foster an environment where reflection and growth are encouraged and built into all aspects of what we do.

Whether we are conducting a formal survey or talking to a participant after a class ends, we are constantly looking to learn more about our neighbors and how they experience our programs. As part of our orientation to this work, we acknowledge that in adult education programs like TWT, racialized power dynamics are often present (Sheared et al., 2010). White educators and others in positions of authority may cause harm to participants of color by not reflecting on power dynamics or reinforcing barriers through program policies that make it difficult for learners to participate. Critical reflection and open dialogue are key to disrupting these forms of bias. However, educators may feel uncomfortable, avoid complicity, and/or deny that a problem exists (Matias et al., 2017). Therefore, it is critical that we as educators and program leaders take time to engage in a process of reflexivity (Klein, 2024). A core part of this process is continually reflecting on our assumptions about the community we serve, day-

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to-day interactions with community members, and our approaches to program development.

The purpose of this article is to share our reflections on our efforts to understand learners' needs and how race, class, and other forms of privilege often get in the way of this process. We hope our experiences can spark dialogue for other adult education practitioners. To write this article, we each reflected as individuals on racialized and other power dynamics at TWT and met several times to discuss as a group.

Positionalities

Paul is a Black male non-profit professional currently serving as the Director of TWT. Before arriving at TWT, Paul lived and worked in New York City for several years, working in various nonprofit programs and before that as a high school teacher.

John is a White, middle-class queer man working in the non-profit sector who currently serves as TWT Adult Education Coordinator. He previously taught foundational writing at a New Jersey community college, working primarily with disadvantaged and overlooked students of all ages and backgrounds. John's experiences in the classroom stoked a passion for lifelong learning and advocacy for nontraditional modes of education.

Jen is a White female assistant professor of adult education, serving as Special Advisor to TWT. She has previously worked in Adult Foundational Education (AFE), providing technical assistance to programs. While this experience provided insights into the challenges and opportunities of community-based programs, she also recognizes that her identity as White and middle-class may lead to bias.

As a whole, our experiences and identities shape our views on community-engaged adult education, driving our desire to enact equitable programming based on the needs and interests of community members. Given our positionalities, we also seek to challenge ourselves to understand the historical legacies of marginalization and embrace critical perspectives. One of the most valuable lessons we've learned is that we may not know as much as we think. The act of receiving and processing feedback has taught us as much about what our community wants and needs as any class we could have taken on nonprofit programming. Throughout this article, we continue to reflect on how our positionalities might shape our efforts to build a community of sharing at TWT.

Background and Context

TWT operates as part of St. James School (SJS), a free private faith-based middle school. As part of the Episcopal church, SJS welcomes and celebrates diversity as related to race, gender, sexual orientation, dis/ability, etc. TWT began as a ministry of the school's chaplaincy in 2019 with an initial focus on providing quality food at no cost for school families and other neighbors in our community through its Saturday farmer's market.

After two years of focusing almost exclusively on food access, we expanded to include adult education classes, starting with a needs assessment in 2021. This expansion sparked a new way of thinking about the power dynamics of serving a working-class Black community by a Predominantly White Institution (PWI). For example, the transition to adult education made us reflect on whether the farmer's market was truly progressive or in name only (i.e., by calling it a 'farmer's market' rather than a food pantry), especially when TWT was the giver, and community members were recipients.

To acknowledge these power dynamics and strive toward a more truly learner-centric adult education program model, we began the TWT program expansion by creating a vision for the program that reflected this goal. TWT's adult education program vision recognizes and celebrates literacies in all forms as reading the word, reading the world, and reading life. We aim to equip adults with the ability to decipher, interpret, and communicate information that is necessary to navigate and positively impact the different spaces they encounter in their lives. In the spirit of Paulo Freire and other progressive educators, our approach to adult learning is intended to be expansive and empowering (Freire, 2014). We also maintain a commitment to seeing neighbors hold the positions of learner and teacher and have ownership of the scope of our program offerings.

Rather than focusing on academics like GED classes (offered through a variety of other nearby organizations in Philadelphia), our adult education program provides a

range of offerings. These include digital literacy and senior activities meeting weekly, courses focused on physical fitness such as line dancing and meditation meeting monthly, and one-time workshops or enrichment-type classes such as cooking and visual arts. Most of these programs are offered year-round on a variety of days and times to support adults' diverse schedules. Our program design also aims to be community-engaged while supporting adults holistically. For example, line dancing, one of our most popular offerings, is a historically Black, culturally relevant activity that incorporates social engagement, learning new dance steps, and physical fitness. Attendance varies, but our more popular offerings like line dancing attract about 15 people per session, while other offerings might attract 5-10 people.

In realizing this program vision, we have encountered many challenges. In the sections below, we provide examples of how these challenges manifested and our learnings so far as we continue to work towards building an adult learning program that enacts a community of sharing.

Challenges

Replace with - Understanding the needs and interests of adults in Allegheny West has been critical to the adult education program design, especially building well-attended programs.

Initially, we saw the farmer's market, which is well-attended with approximately 100 adults weekly, as both a primary recruitment tool and an ideal space/time to get feedback from adults in the community regarding adult education classes by talking to adults informally, handing out paper surveys, distributing flyers, and passing out registration forms. However, this approach has been challenging. Adults at the market seem enthusiastic about classes and will even register to attend. However, we have noticed over time that these same adults will often "no-show" to the adult education classes. When we continue to ask, "what types of classes do you want more of" and/or "what can we do better," a common response is: "nothing, you do so much already." Although some classes are well attended, many have low retention and drop-offs.

We also try to get feedback through satisfaction surveys for class attendees and phone calls to participants who drop out. Despite this variety of ways we ask the community about their needs, we rarely receive feedback that will help us improve. Some of this might be related to access. While we intentionally used a paper survey in recognition that many of our adults may not have digital skills or access to technology, we could strengthen the ways we adjust the reading level of the survey for adults with low literacy.

Another key reflection for us relates to the racialized and class-based dynamics of a predominantly White school/program in a Black neighborhood. As White, highly educated, and/or middle-class practitioners, we initially assumed that people in the community would just tell us what they wanted if we asked in the right ways. Over time, we learned to pay attention to the silences (not answering certain survey questions) and outward politeness (signing up for a program in person and then not showing up) as their own form of communication. First, we wonder whether participants feel a sense of obligation to fill out the survey at the farmer's market because the market provides them with material resources, yet are hesitant to openly critique this program. In other words, if people say something negative, they worry the food will go away. If we put this hesitancy to offer criticism in the context of a city where residents of color have a justifiable mistrust of White-led institutions and authorities, this hesitancy makes sense. In Paul's words: "this big White-led institution that gives all this stuff for free...to me it's how do we help foster different orientations to this place than they are used to having."

We also wonder whether adults in the community have had prior negative experiences with K-12 education that cause them to feel hesitant about a program using academic language like "class" or "skills learning." Even though we try to avoid using this kind of school-based language, it often comes out, like during our digital skills classes. Coming to classes frequently taught by White and/or middle-class volunteers may also make participants feel othered, condescended to, and patronized. Previous experiences with White authority figures may keep POC learners from putting themselves in a potentially adverse or unfriendly situation.

Finally, we wonder about our initial assumptions that people coming to the farmer's market will also want to attend classes. At times, our positionalities as middle-class

outsiders have served as lenses through which we framed low-income communities as a monolith. In reality, people living here are very diverse. They represent different interests, generations, levels of free time given other responsibilities, etc. However, John and Paul differ on whether it is worth continuing to recruit from the farmer's market. While John feels that "the market people…come to the market," Paul feels that it may just take time, and that people are increasingly "making the transition over." These different perspectives show there is not one reality, and we may have different observations and conclusions, further complicating the process of understanding adult learners' needs.

Opportunities and Moving Ahead

One way we are meeting these challenges is by destabilizing the notion of education and moving away from lecture-style or rigidly planned curricula. For example, several months ago we launched digital skills learning circles led by peer facilitators rather than instructors, which run in eight-week cycles meeting weekly for one hour. Facilitators lend their expertise where necessary and guide class meetings, but the bulk of sessions focus on peers sharing their knowledge, experiences, and interests. We specifically recruited circle leaders from the community through flyers at the local library and senior center and at neighborhood coffee shops, so that neighbors would be leading neighbors.

While the learning circles are still new, we are noticing early indications of success. 80% of the attendees were there for the first time, meeting our goal of recruiting more individuals from the local community. One participant, who had contemplated attending over two years prior but never did, said, "I was always so scared to do this [computer class], and now I don't even know what I was scared of." We attribute this early success to having a peer leader who is from the community, not necessarily an expert on digital skills, and who can meet participants where they are.

TWT also prioritizes hiring instructors of color and/or with similar backgrounds to our neighbors. A digital literacy instructor on staff is bilingual; a graduate of SJS taught a course on using social media; other workshops are led by neighbors, from cooking classes to poetry workshops to lessons on how to use chopsticks. We want our neighbors to take ownership of the adult education program, to understand that this is *for them*, so topics should be things they want to know, learn, and share.

We are also expanding our offerings to more social enrichment opportunities, to reinforce the idea that any time spent listening to others, sharing ideas, and/or engaging in critical thinking is adult education. We have introduced a book club, where neighbors guide the discussion by first sharing their feelings and then addressing one element of the book they want to discuss. Paul led a workshop we called "Culture Dive," sharing elements of his Jamaican heritage, and that led to neighbors offering to lead sessions on *their* ethnic backgrounds and histories. Finally, we continue to seek ways to incorporate more community voice as an ongoing goal and part of our strategic planning, which includes listening both to what community members say directly and to the silences.

Conclusion and Future Recommendations

The experience of launching and implementing TWT's adult education program over the past three years has nuanced our understanding of what it means to implement an adult education program that is rooted in community members' needs and interests. In this section, we offer recommendations for programs wishing to implement a more learner-centered approach.

First, truly including adult learners as collaborators, sharers, and engaged participants must involve rethinking practitioners' assumptions about adult education. As noted above, understanding community members' needs is a complex process that begins through reflexive practice (Klein, 2024). Being willing to grapple with how our positionalities and broader racialized power dynamics shape this localized context has allowed us to better understand community members' needs. Being learner-centered also must happen in an ongoing way and at all levels of program design and organizational structure: through visioning and strategic planning, individual staff reflection and dialogue, design of program offerings, and in everyday informal interactions with community members. As we learned, passing out a feedback survey

is not enough; gaining community input requires multiple opportunities for participation and gaining trust over time. Finally, we encourage practitioners to network with local organizations and seek out national adult education resources like the Open Door Collective, Skillblox, and CrowdED Learning. We offer these reflections as an invitation for adult educators to see learner-centered practice not as a static goal, but as an ongoing, relational process shaped by power, positionality, and the everyday work of building trust within communities.

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